

Chapter 16

Examining Student Behaviors in and Perceptions of Traditional Field-Based and Virtual Models of Early Field Experiences

Hyo-Jeong So

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Emily Hixon

Purdue University Calumet, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore preservice teachers' behaviors in and perceptions of traditional field-based and virtual models of early field experiences. Specifically, this study examined some of the strengths and limitations associated with each model. Fifty undergraduate students participated in either a traditional field-based or a virtual field experience and completed an online questionnaire that examines various behaviors and student perspectives related to each model of early field experiences. The virtual field experiences include activities in the Inquiry Learning Forum (ILF), a web-based environment where students can observe and discuss diverse pedagogical practices and conceptual issues captured in a collection of video-based classrooms. The results of this study suggest that a virtual field experience which utilizes video-based cases may promote reflective practices which could be especially valuable to students early in their teacher education program. In addition, this study suggests that the strengths and limitations of each format need to be considered in relation to the goals and objectives of the early field experience, and discusses the possibility of a hybrid model of field experiences.

INTRODUCTION

A typical component of most teacher education programs are *early field experiences* where pre-service teachers are placed in local schools to observe for a set amount of time over the course of

a semester. Since there may be multiple classes that include field-based components and all preservice teachers must also be placed for student teaching, many universities and colleges find that the local schools are becoming overwhelmed with the number of preservice teachers in their buildings. To alleviate some of this burden, some universities have begun exploring alternatives to the traditional

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format of early field experiences. One such option is a technology-enhanced or virtual field experience that utilizes various technological tools such as online discussion forums, video-based cases and virtual simulations.

Before universities adopt such a program, it is important to understand how the experience of the student completing the technology-enhanced field experience compares with that of the student completing the traditional field-based experience. This study is designed to explore students' experiences in and perceptions of the different field experience settings and attempt to understand some of the mechanisms underlying student views.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Role and Format of Technology-Enhanced Field Experiences

Field experiences have played a prominent role in teacher preparation. The importance of university-school collaborations to provide structured and beneficial experiences has been a focus for Schools of Education. Field experiences in teacher preparation programs can serve a variety of purposes and may take on many different formats. There has been much discussion regarding the purpose of field experiences. Aiken and Day (1999) identify objectives for field experiences including to "decide if teaching is an appropriate career choice, decide upon certification area; understand school and classroom differences; and better understand the process of educating students beyond the scope of a particular subject area or grade level" (p. 9). Another common goal in field experiences is to help students understand various theoretical concepts and issues learned in teacher training courses and link theoretical knowledge to practice (Frey, 2008; Moore, 2003). These are desirable goals that emphasize the importance of field experiences in teacher education.

Field experiences can take many different formats, especially with the application of various Web, video, and communication technologies. Drawing on the classification scheme of field experience formats by Paese (1996), Hixon and So (2009) present three types of technology-enhanced field experiences according to the degree of reality and virtuality: (a) Type I - concrete direct experience in reality, (b) Type II - vicarious indirect experience with reality, and (c) Type III - abstract experience with model of reality. Blended approaches are also possible by using different types of field experiences in conjunction with one another.

Type I experiences refer to a field experience where student teachers are placed in real classrooms for observations. Concrete experiences take place at school sites where students observe an actual live classroom and/or actively participate in the instructional process (student teaching is the capstone concrete experience). In Type I, technologies are often used for flexible communication among university supervisors, school mentors and student teachers. Also technologies can be used to provide opportunities for sharing experiences and reflection. For instance, Wu and Kao (2008) discuss a web-based system that allows student teachers placed in different schools to view field-teaching sessions and share constructive feedback for improvement.

Type II experiences utilize various technologies for gaining vicarious experiences with real classrooms. Type II examples include student teachers observing real classrooms by video-conferencing or watching pre-recorded video cases, sometimes with the possibility of also being able to interact with the teacher remotely. In particular, Type II field experiences are useful for accessing teaching and learning situations that are not readily available to student teachers. For example, Lehman and Richardson (2003) report positive outcomes of virtual field experiences where student teachers were able to observe

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