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## Learning to Adapt: Redesigning ELA Instruction While Student Teaching During COVID-19

### Cover Page Footnote

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# Learning to Adapt: Redesigning ELA Instruction While Student Teaching During COVID-19

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*“I am looking forward to student teaching and working with the students on a daily basis.”*

This is a common sentiment I hear from preservice teachers in the months before they student teach. There is typically excitement and anticipation as the preservice teachers prepare to work and learn in the classroom. In teacher education programs, student teaching is seen as an invaluable experience because it is the time when preservice teachers get to do the day-to-day work while learning the knowledge and skills necessary to teach (Cuenca 118). Preservice teachers who began student teaching in the Spring 2020 semester were presented with new challenges to navigate when schools closed down due to COVID-19. For many student teachers, they were beginning to take on more teaching responsibilities in the classroom, just as schools closed in mid-March.

While there were many hardships, COVID-19 presented student teachers with opportunities to learn how to adapt ELA instruction, and this new knowledge will be applied to the ELA instruction they plan and implement in their future teaching careers. This article addresses perspectives from two student teachers’ teaching of ELA to elementary students during COVID-19 and how the experience of moving to remote instruction shaped their knowledge, conceptions, and ideas about teaching ELA as they enter into the profession.

## **Opportunities to Learn**

During student teaching, preservice teachers need Opportunities to Learn (OTL) to design, plan, and teach ELA lessons to students. Preservice teachers, therefore, need occasions to make instructional decisions about teaching reading, and writing to students while receiving guidance from the cooperating classroom teacher and the university supervisor (Cohen and Berlin 2–3). This article is framed by the concept of OTL, a situated perspective that is dependent on how a particular setting facilitates a preservice teacher’s development and learning (Cohen and Berlin 2). Specifically, OTL can be focused on the development and growth of the preservice teacher’s teaching processes, including the methods of instruction utilized, how the curriculum is implemented, and the assessment of student understanding (Floden 261). Therefore, OTL can be a specific event or moment when the preservice teacher is exposed to new content or teaching.

The outbreak of COVID-19 presented the student teachers featured in this article with many OTL. They learned the importance of addressing students’ social and emotional needs, modifying an ELA curriculum intended to be taught through face-to-face instruction, and delivering material through new digital platforms for ELA instruction.

## **Student Teaching During COVID-19**

Melissa and Jordyn are the student teachers featured in this article. They were

student teaching at different elementary schools in the same school district, and both were placed in general education second grade classrooms during the Spring 2020 semester. The district where they completed their student teaching served approximately 6,000 students in grades K–12, and about 50% of the students were White, 30% were Hispanic, 10% were Black, 5% were Asian, and 5% were two or more races.

Approximately 25% of the students received free or reduced-price lunch.

Melissa and Jordyn taught ELA lessons to the students in their classrooms prior to the schools closing, so they were familiar with the ELA curriculum, as well as how to implement reading and writing instruction. Melissa taught whole group lessons focused on characters and how they may change throughout a book or series. Jordyn planned and implemented daily read-alouds, and she learned how to support students' comprehension through interactions such as think-alouds and turn-and-talks. Their teaching prior to COVID-19 involved more physical materials rather than technology. They both used physical books rather than digital books, and students completed writing in their journals rather than on Google Slides. Both commented that the elementary schools did not use much technology prior to COVID-19. When the schools closed, Melissa and Jordyn were disappointed, however, they both viewed this moment as an opportunity to learn new and different ways of teaching. Below, I describe the adaptations Melissa and Jordyn made to their ELA instruction during COVID-19.

### *Prioritizing Students' Needs*

When planning distance ELA lessons, Melissa and Jordyn considered how they could address the students' social and emotional well-being before they planned the ELA content. Parents shared that

children were having meltdowns due to frustrations with distance learning.

Melissa shifted her teaching and began “checking-in on the students emotionally during each session before beginning any ELA instruction.” One strategy was to begin class sessions with a Morning Meeting. Examples of questions that generated discussion and put the students at ease were: *What did you do yesterday after school? Who played with a brother or sister yesterday and what did you do? What would you like to share with us today? What do you want to do after school today?*

Melissa also left time after lessons for the students to share a favorite toy. This was a key moment for Melissa because she included a new strategy into her teaching practices—she focused more on student talk and sharing in her online teaching than she had in her physical classroom teaching. In addition, Melissa allowed the students to briefly introduce their siblings and pets during online sessions, which benefited many of the students and made them feel more comfortable. By including these moments into her ELA teaching, Melissa learned more about the students and helped them feel more comfortable in the new remote classroom. She also learned that students who were reluctant to speak in the physical classroom were not nearly as shy online; they actively participated, shared what they knew, and learned about the books they were reading. There was one student in particular who Melissa described as painfully quiet in the classroom, but when learning over Google Meet, “she would raise her hand constantly to be called on, and she would talk at length about the books we were reading.” Melissa learned some of the students thrived in the online learning setting. Teaching remotely taught Melissa the importance of taking the time to hear from students and facilitate conversations between them.

COVID-19 highlighted the connection between ELA instruction and the social-emotional well-being of the students. Melissa learned students could not focus on the content if they were frustrated, scared, or nervous about the pandemic and the new classroom format. Building in time for the students to talk about all of the changes and focusing on student talk was a new teaching strategy; this helped the elementary students feel cared for and supported, and enabled Melissa to continue teaching the ELA content. This was an opportunity for Melissa to address the needs of the students while also meeting the expectations of the curriculum.

### *Shifting the Focus and Reimagining ELA Instruction*

COVID-19 allowed Melissa and Jordyn to critically examine the ELA instruction that they were teaching. Melissa explained:

Teaching during COVID-19 definitely made me think about different sides of teaching reading and writing and how to best support students. If I had just been in the classroom, I would not have questioned the curriculum nearly as much. I would have continued following what I was told to do [by the curriculum]. But in this situation, I really had to make my own rules and figure out the best type of instruction for my students. I tried out so many different ways of teaching. I never would have done that in the classroom.

Therefore, COVID-19 allowed Melissa to examine the content and how it was delivered to students rather than blindly follow the curriculum guides.

There was a shift in the reading curriculum after the schools closed, and from Jordyn's perspective, "This whole experience brought more enjoyment to

reading." Jordyn conducted daily read-alouds with the second graders prior to the schools closing, and she included turn-and-talks to support comprehension and build the students' vocabulary. From her face-to-face lessons, Jordyn learned how important routine is to the students and how they depend on a consistent schedule. Jordyn wanted to keep some consistency for the second graders, so she created pre-recorded read-alouds every day for the children to watch at a time that worked for them. For the digital read-alouds, Jordyn shifted her focus from planning read-alouds to support the skills targeted in the reading curriculum to planning read-alouds allowing the second graders to "enjoy the story and enjoy the read-aloud." Rather than plan turn-and-talks the students would not be able to do with a partner, she spent time planning and practicing how she would deliver the book to the students. For example, she read the books in fun voices and made facial expressions at particular points in the book. She wanted the students to "have a moment in the day that they could look forward to." Jordyn received positive feedback from the students and their parents; she noted the majority of the class watched the read-alouds each day to keep the routine.

COVID-19 gave Jordyn the opportunity to look at read-alouds from a different angle, and rather than focus solely on skills or strategies, she decided to use read-alouds to engage the students with stories and build positive relationships with reading. Her goal was for the read-alouds to be a positive and happy time for the second graders during the pandemic.

Melissa learned how small group instruction benefited students. After teaching a few whole class reading lessons, Melissa revised her teaching and planned small group book clubs as the format for reading instruction. Working with her cooperating teacher, Melissa developed a

non-fiction reading curriculum using books on PebbleGo and Epic for students to access and read. Using Google Slides, the students completed targeted assignments, and used that work for the discussion with their group. In order to manage the book clubs, Melissa gave the students edit access to Google Slides, and each day there was a task to complete. For example, on Mondays, the students identified the main idea and found three details to support the main idea. On Tuesdays, students shared three amazing words they found in the book and had to explain the meanings of the words to the group. Students enjoyed Thursdays because it was Flipgrid day and they had the opportunity to teach the rest of the group something they learned from the book. Using Google Slides in this focused manner supported the students' reading, and Melissa found assigning one slide with a targeted task benefited the students' comprehension of the book more than in the physical classroom. In addition, Melissa realized due to the Google Slides activities, the students read the books multiple times and learned how to go back into particular parts of the book to find information to discuss.

Melissa and Jordyn were able to experiment with the format of the ELA instruction they planned and implemented, and they learned the redesigned content kept the students engaged with the ELA curriculum. Remote teaching provided them with the opportunity to truly support the second graders' reading comprehension; the students made strides and benefited in a way they do not believe would have happened the same way in the physical classroom.

### **New Perspectives on Teaching ELA**

COVID-19 provided Melissa and Jordyn with opportunities to teach through new online formats. They learned to deliver ELA instruction through different modes while reflecting on how the students learned through these formats. Reimagining ELA instruction and experimenting with a variety of digital platforms taught Melissa and Jordyn how technology can be used to maximize the ELA instruction taught in the physical classroom. As Melissa shared, "Remote teaching taught me that there are new ways to reach all students and engage them in reading and writing. In today's world, it's important to have an understanding of digital teaching and physical classroom teaching." The experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic provided Melissa and Jordyn with the confidence as well as the opportunity to learn how to include technology into ELA teaching in a way that supports reading and writing.

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