Learning to Teach in a Pandemic: Qualities Contributing to Success

Elizabeth Leer
St. Olaf College

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As a teacher educator at a small, liberal arts college, I wear many hats: Education department chair, chief institutional representative for accreditation, "Principles of Education" instructor, Director of Student Teaching Abroad, and student teaching supervisor, to name a few. As an English education specialist, however, my favorite role is teaching the English methods course each spring and mentoring pre-service English teachers. Sitting down with, typically, four to six bright, eager future English teachers for a semester of animated conversation about the theory and practice of teaching language arts is a joy—and makes some of the less enthralling parts of my position (e.g., preparing for accreditation visits, writing the departmental annual report) worth it.

When COVID-19 threw the world into chaos and our student body was abruptly sent home in mid-March of 2020 to finish out the semester virtually, our "Teaching Communication Arts and Literature" course remained a dependable constant when so many other aspects of life became uncertain. Despite living in different states and time zones, last spring's students were able and willing to continue our regular Tuesday/Thursday afternoon class meetings synchronously, so we carried on as usual with only minor syllabus adjustments. Despite the virtual context, interacting with this tight group twice a week contributed a much-needed anchor to the semester and allowed us to experience the human connection that we all craved.

At the semester's conclusion, I felt satisfied with our work, and although students' observation hours in local classrooms were cut short, I was confident that they were, indeed, prepared for their student teaching practica in the fall. But then fall arrived and my teacher candidates found themselves in completely virtual student teaching placements. I had not prepared them for this context in English methods. Unlike veteran teachers, they had not yet developed extensive pedagogical toolkits and couldn't draw on previous experience to assist the transition to the virtual classroom. What would they do? How would they perform? And could this distance learning environment prepare them for the "regular" classrooms they would spend their careers in post-pandemic?

While that last question has yet to be fully answered, I need not have worried about the other two. In short, my teacher candidates rose to the challenge of distance learning remarkably well. As I reflected on their experiences, rereading my observation notes and the journals they submitted weekly throughout student teaching, three qualities stood out that seemed to contribute to their success in the distance learning context: care for students, flexibility, and passion for the profession.

1. Care for Students

"Principles of Education" introduces pre-service teachers to the nuts and bolts of the teaching profession like lesson and unit planning, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Regardless of the pedagogical topic, two predominant themes are woven throughout the curriculum: building relationships with students and creating inclusive, equitable, culturally responsive classrooms. We know that students learn optimally only after their basic needs for belonging are met ("Maslow's Hierarchy") and that learning is grounded in the need for social connection (Noddings, Thayer-Bacon). Students will not be motivated to learn if they do not perceive an "ethic of care" from their teachers (Noddings).

Going into his student teaching at a large urban high school, my student Nick (all names are pseudonyms) was determined to build relationships with his 11th and 12th graders, even though he knew he would only ever meet them on Zoom. He was further challenged upon discovering that he couldn't even see most of his students' faces as, typically, only two or three of them in each class turned their cameras on; thus, he saw most students only as "alphabet letters." Daunted but undeterred, with help from his host teacher, he implemented a daily "Warm Welcome" to get to know students—10 minutes at the beginning of class when he chatted informally with them as they responded to a warm-up question (e.g., What's your favorite text you've read for an English class?). As most students were reticent to participate in whole-class activities, the warm-up occurred primarily via Zoom's chat feature, but Nick would respond orally to acknowledge and affirm student contributions, as well as

try to facilitate interaction among the students. He consistently included every student in his comments and questions, even when some of them consistently refused to respond publicly; he was purposely sending the message that each student was a valuable part of the group regardless of their level of participation and that he would not give up on anyone. Not surprisingly, by the end of Nick's practicum, more students were turning on their cameras, unmuting their microphones, and turning in assignments.

Midway through student teaching, Nick also implemented small group and one-on-one meetings during "work time" (chunks of time during the virtual class periods when students were free to work on their reading or writing for class). He noted that "students were far more willing to talk if it was just me and a couple others, and I was able to have back-and-forths with students whom I had never heard speak before." He plans to work individual student appointments into his future in-person teaching, as well, because "some of my students just really needed somebody to sit next to them and talk" with them as they worked. Further, individual meetings raise the level of accountability for students—and caring for students involves demonstrating your belief that they can achieve and holding them accountable for doing so.

At the conclusion of his virtual student teaching, Nick reflected that reading students' writing afforded him the best way to get to know them because he still had never seen some of their faces. While shopping in the neighborhood, he mused, "I was thinking about how I could be walking past any number of my students and would never know it. Still, I was

fortunate enough to get to know so many of my students' personalities through their writing, and I'm confident that I'll still be able to name and describe quite a few of my kids...many decades from now." Despite the lack of direct, in-person contact, Nick's care for students led him to develop meaningful relationships with them—and encourage meaningful language arts learning—nonetheless.

2. Flexibility

While careful planning for instruction benefits all teachers, thorough lesson planning is essential for pre-service teachers. Crafting a detailed plan that links standards and measurable objectives with assessments, notes how instruction will be differentiated for diverse learners, considers how the content relates to students' backgrounds and experiences, and attends to teaching the academic language embedded in the lesson maximizes the chances that students will achieve the intended learning outcomes. Therefore, our teacher education program places strong emphasis on planning for instruction, and the great majority of our student teachers excel in this area. Sometimes, however, relying too heavily on plans can be detrimental because teaching also requires great flexibility (Parsons et al.). Teachers need to be able to change course in a moment both in response to students' learning needs in the classroom and in response to the shifting context outside of the classroom.

My student teacher Kirstin is a self-proclaimed Type-A personality, a highly conscientious student who thrives on planning ahead. Before her practicum started, she was concerned that so many details about her teaching placement were up in the air—what learning model would be implemented, which classes she would be teaching, what collaboration with her host teacher would look like during the pandemic, etc. In early conversations with her host teacher, though, Kirstin realized that he was wondering about all of these questions, too. His assurances that the two of them would work through the uncertainty together helped her summon the flexibility that allowed her to flourish during student teaching.

Kirstin's learning to live with ambiguity and respond to continual change proved essential, as her practicum school district changed its learning model several times during her 12 weeks of student teaching. She started teaching completely online, then the district phased in hybrid instruction for one grade at a time (while the other grades remained online). A couple of weeks later the district pivoted back to distance learning, then later completely revised the distance learning daily schedule. While all of the changes were overwhelming and frustrating at times, Kirstin took cues from her host teacher and was able to remain focused on mitigating the effects of the changes on her students and their learning instead of focusing on her own discomfiture.

Kirstin's host teacher provided an excellent model of maintaining an open attitude of flexibility in the midst of uncertainty; however, this frame of mind may actually prove easier for some pre-service and new teachers to embody because of their novice status. Student teachers haven't known anything different; all their lessons are new, and they are not tied to particular ways of doing things. As they have not yet established and settled into comfortable routines, change may be easier for them to handle.

3. Passion for the Profession

While many factors contributed to Kirstin's and Nick's successful student teaching, an additional quality played a significant role, as well. They both demonstrated robust commitment to and passion for the teaching profession. Stepping into the teaching role confirmed that their chosen vocation "fit," and their enthusiasm for teaching was visible even in the midst of challenges. While Kirstin admitted that there were some days "when I was in the thick of lesson plans and grading and anxious about if class would go well the next day, I wondered if I really wanted to be a teacher," she explained that the satisfaction of working with students and the joy of knowing them ("Middle schoolers are hilarious!") "affirmed that despite everything that was thrown at me [in student teaching], I still do want to be a teacher. Probably even more so than I did at the beginning of this experience!"

Student teachers could be in a better position than experienced teachers to convey passion for education as teaching is new for them, and it is likely their first professional opportunity. However, student teaching is also a highly demanding experience. In addition to taking on teaching responsibilities, pre-service teachers must simultaneously juggle the requirements of their teacher preparation programs and initial licensure (e.g., submitting lesson and unit plans, attending seminars, writing weekly reflective journals, completing performance assessments). Despite the heavy workload, Kirstin, Nick, and my other teacher candidates were largely energized in their new roles. They discovered that, despite the challenges, teaching really is what they want to do, so they were willing to put in the necessary time and effort to succeed with their students. Their passion for teaching and student learning buoyed them up and propelled them through the challenging times.

Embodying an ethic of care for students, flexibility, and passion for the profession helped my teacher candidates succeed as student teachers in the distance learning classroom, despite their novice status. But will they succeed when they secure their own positions and teach independently in traditional "in-person" classrooms? Certainly, they will need to hone various skills that they were unable to practice online (e.g., managing student behavior in the classroom, establishing and guiding in-person routines, etc.); however, I believe that the traits that served them so well in student teaching will continue to benefit them long past the novice stage. Strong connections with students and care about both their academic and general well-being, the ability to "go with the flow" and live with the ambiguity, and keeping sight of the importance of one's work and passion for it are important conditions for student teacher success, but they apply to all teachers.

While deep knowledge of English language arts content and strong pedagogical skills are essential for quality English teaching, other aspects play an important role, as well. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of soft skills and exacerbated the need for adaptation, but teachers are continually asked to adapt to changing circumstances even in "normal" times. Regardless of teaching experience, those who embody key principles like care for students, flexibility, and passion for the profession seem able to navigate shifting teaching contexts successfully.

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