Trading Snowmen for Alligators: Student Teaching at a Distance

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This paper describes a unique innovative teacher preparation program entitled Cross Cultural Student Teaching (CCST). The CCST program placed student teachers outside the university’s traditional service area and the challenge became how to offer and deliver the same quality program no matter where the placement experience was located. Through the use of various forms of technology (i.e. word processing, Internet, email, Blackboard, and interactive television) faculty were able to meet the challenge and maintain program consistency.

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“Little is known about the effectiveness of the various models for the delivery of field experience programs. All too often, models for student teaching…are developed out of convenience or tradition” (Guyton & McIntrye, 1990, p. 517). For most institutions, including Grand Valley State University (GVSU), this translates into having preservice educators complete their student teaching in settings close to their teacher preparation institution. The adherence to an established pattern for student teaching has caused some educators to suggest that “there is a growing need for experimentation with configurations of field experience and for the generation and study of new models to determine their effectiveness” (Bullough, et al., 2002, p. 69).

Opportunities to create unique innovative teacher preparation programs however, frequently result in as many unforeseen challenges as unexpected benefits. One such innovative program originally entitled Cross Cultural Student Teaching (CCST) designed...
at a Michigan regional university (Grand Valley State University) documented both types of results. The CCST program placed student teachers outside the GVSU traditional service area and the challenge became how to offer and deliver the same quality program no matter where the placement experience was located. Similar to other student teaching programs, GVSU supports the implementation of theory into practice by providing meaningful field experiences (Griffin, 1986; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996, as cited in Dexter & Riedel, 2003) and classroom observations with constructive feedback (Pajak, 2001). As such, the program consists of the following components: diverse field experiences, on-site classroom observations, and weekly seminars which include content, review/clarification of assignments, discussion of instructional best practices/strategies, classroom issues, sharing and problem solving.

When placing students at distant sites for their student teaching, it is especially important that consistency is maintained in both the teacher education program expectations and in the student teaching observations. Regional institutions feel the need to be nationally accredited, thus GVSU offers a program that is consistent and responsive to the assessment/accountability structures. It was not an easy task to offer a consistent and responsive program when placements were over 1000 miles from the home institution. Thus GVSU faculty and students experienced programmatic challenges and professional benefits during each semester the program was offered. The major challenge faced by the program was how can a College of Education (COE) maintain its program consistency when offering student teaching in sites away from main campus, including outside the state? More specifically, how could a COE maintain consistency during
classroom observations and seminar offerings? Before answering these questions, a
discussion of the background, description, and history of the program will follow.

Background, Description, and History of the CCST Program

Background

Numerous urban environments need more teachers than they can find to hire. Thus, when discussing the possibility of piloting an innovative student teacher program in a distant urban multicultural environment, a number of cities were considered including San Diego, California; Houston and Dallas, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Tampa and Broward County (Fort Lauderdale), Florida. The goal was to find a supportive district needing teachers that wanted to mentor prospective teachers into becoming successful teachers in multicultural environments unique to their location.

Description

Using criteria that focused on the availability of student support, GVSU faculty and administrators considered the possible sites and decided upon Broward County, Florida as the site for the pilot. Some of the factors used in making the decision included the support system Broward County had in place by having master teachers serve as on-site coordinators who have as their primary task the support of prospective and new teachers in Urban Academy schools. These teachers were recognized by district administrators, their principals and peers as being outstanding teachers of at-risk students, had excelled in a course on supervision of field experience students, had successfully mentored prospective and new teachers, and had experience working with numerous institutions of higher education. Upon meeting these master teacher/coordinators in the exploratory trip to Fort Lauderdale prior to finalizing the pilot, the GVSU project director
found them to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the opportunity to add from 6 to 12 primarily elementary GVSU student teachers to their loads. The Human Resources Office of the district also supported the prospect as did area colleges and universities. GVSU had a former COE dean living in the area and a faculty member who would be there during the initial semester, winter 2004. In addition, the location was attractive because many families from Michigan have relatives who live for all or part of the year in Florida and Florida is a common vacationing area for many other Michiganians. This familiarity with the area was felt to be a draw to students who might want to consider student teaching and possibly obtaining a position in Broward County, Florida. Thus, Broward County Public Schools was the location selected for this project.

CCST placed student teachers in Urban Academy Schools in Broward County, Florida in or near the cities of Fort Lauderdale and Pompano Beach. Apartments were identified by the university then rented, furnished, and made available to students for their housing. Throughout ensuing semesters the program piloted various support systems to assist the Michigan students in making a successful transition from their home to diverse urban settings in Broward County. Particular attention was given to maintaining the student teaching program consistency for accreditation while delivering instruction at a distant site. A snapshot of each semester and its changing structure follows.

*Implementation of the Initial Semester*

All seminars and student teacher observations were conducted on-site with a university student teacher coordinator and an on-site coordinator from GVSU working with the 7 elementary student teachers. In addition, the director of the program and the director of student teaching flew down once to observe the students and to visit the
participating schools. Technology provided limited support for the program. Some uses of technology included lesson planning using word processing, PowerPoint, web searching via the Internet, e-mailing and Blackboard [a course support software package used by GVSU]. Also access to the Blackboard site being used by the student teachers placed in Michigan was provided, so that every student had the same resource availability. The university student teacher coordinator on-site in Florida held seminars and supplemented them by using videotapes of a few professional development seminars held on GVSU main campus.

The program offered students the opportunity to be integrated into the greater Broward County area. Student teachers expanded their experience by exploring the local areas and by participating in the local cultural events. Having a student teacher coordinator on-site however proved to be too expensive to continue and necessary changes were made for the next semester.

*Implementation of the Second Semester*

The second semester’s group was again 7 in number (6 elementary and 1 secondary) and was modified to include: (1) holding seminars via interactive television (ITV); (2) conducting observations in Broward demonstration classroom using ITV technology (i.e. a minimum of two times), and (3) using a course specific Blackboard site for announcements, some discussion, and assignment submission purposes. The GVSU former dean was in attendance at the Florida site for support during seminar times. Two faculty members (i.e. the project director and director of student teaching) conducted the weekly seminars via ITV from the GVSU campus while student teachers participated from one of the demonstration classrooms within Broward County Public Schools. In
addition, the same two faculty members observed students teaching their classes on-site to obtain a “true picture” of the student teachers’ performance and abilities (i.e. by flying the two faculty members in three times) and conducting seminar while there.

**Implementation of the Third Semester**

The third semester consisted of 11 student teachers (10 elementary and 1 secondary), funds were no longer available for an on-site coordinator or support from the former dean and the faculty members were uncertain whether the use of ITV, Blackboard, and e-mail would provide them and the students with adequate support, thus two Broward County Urban Academy Coordinators (UAC), who worked in the schools where the students were placed, were hired to: (1) be GVSU student teaching coordinators; (2) provide on-site support; (3) assist in scheduling and attend the ITV classroom observations and weekly seminars (i.e. facilitate the technology and room set up); and (4) participate with the GVSU faculty during the on-site observations. The faculty felt comfortable offering them this position after working with them in Florida for the past semesters and hosting them on the GVSU campus. They thus became familiar with the program’s expectations and the types of communities from which our students come. The GVSU faculty continued to be on-site three times. During one visit faculty hosted the former students (i.e. who had been hired in Florida) to an alumni gathering and on a different evening hosted a cooperating teacher and principal dinner. Both events served to provide insights and input into the program.

This semester the faculty wanted to know more about the use of ITV in the program and began to gather qualitative and quantitative data for the purposes of inter-rater reliability between the two UAC and the two GVSU faculty members. Later
qualitative data was used for discourse analysis to look specifically at the consistency among and between the two groups’ comments. All of the ITV seminars were videotaped to help address questions related to quality and to determine the consistency and success of the ITV medium for seminars. The data suggested that both sets of faculty members were looking at similar facets of the student teaching and were quite consistent in their comments and concerns. This made both groups more comfortable with the use of ITV for observations and the hiring of the UAC coordinators to serve as the GVSU coordinators for the GVSU student teachers in Broward County.

Implementation of the Final Semesters

During the final semesters (i.e. 4th = 7 elementary and 2 secondary; 5th = 5 elementary and 4 secondary students; 6th = 5 elementary and 2 secondary; 7th = 5 elementary), the program continued to employ UAC and increased the number of ITV classroom observations to three. One faculty member continued to fly down at least once each semester and hosted the same two on-site events. ITV was used for classroom observations and seminars and the analysis continued. Blackboard was used much more extensively during the last two semesters. Student teachers were assigned weekly discussion board topics; including case studies (i.e. critical incidences; elementary and secondary) for analysis and adjustments were made to weekly seminars to better accommodate all student teachers (secondary and elementary).

Each ensuing semester brought many new challenges along with unexpected educational benefits for all the participants. Faculty searched for possible solutions to the challenges. It was thought that research findings would provide the necessary guidance, support, and direction so that program consistency was maintained. A search of the
literature specific to field supervision and technology (i.e. its use and implementation) was conducted.

Field Supervision: Research and Results

Research states that, “involvement of education faculty in supervising preservice students in their practicum placements does not occur to the degree one might expect” (Beck & Kosnik, 2002, p. 6). The university coordinators did not want to emulate those findings or be part of the research that stated “there is little communication between the academic program and the practicum (Goodlad, 1990b, Zeichner, 1990; 1996, as cited in Beck & Kosnik, 2002, p. 6). Beck and Kosnik (2002) further state that often times in programs consistency is lacking between the program’s philosophy of teaching and learning and what occurs in the practicum.. Often, there is no connection between the college’s theoretical underpinnings and what occurs in their students’ practicum experiences (i.e. a major disconnect).

It has been suggested that university professors, field coordinators, and cooperating teachers should work as a three-person team (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). The team should collaborate and articulate the goals of the program into the field placement. This would at least be a step to in the right direction to attempt to create consistency. But “as long as most supervision is done by nonprofessional field personnel, a separation between the campus courses and the practicum will persist (Beck & Kosnik, 2002, p. 7). To avoid these potential pitfalls, the GVSU director of teacher education was directly involved in doing on-site and ITV observations and conducting the ITV seminars for the Florida students.
The COE supports the importance of having professors involved in the practicum experience, not only to allow open communication between the university and the K-12 site, but to assure coherence between program expectations and the actual practicum (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Zeichner, 1990, 1996; as cited in Beck & Kosnik, 2002). The research of Beck and Kosnik (2002) also found that by having faculty directly involved in the practica, “the school-university partnership was strengthened, the practicum was enhanced, the campus program was improved, and the faculty grew in knowledge and understanding of schooling strengthened the school-university partnership” (p. 16).

Practicum experiences are a vital part of teacher preparation coupled with on-site supervision and the ensuing constructive feedback (Cosgrove, 2002; Dexter & Riedel, 2003). Having professors conducting weekly seminars, observing classroom instruction interactively two-three times, and on-site supervision two-three times provided the much needed consistency between the university and the distance site, as well as theory into practice.

The mere fact that university faculty members conducted observations interactively and on-site strengthened the relationships with school personnel (i.e. human resource personnel, administrators, UAC, cooperating teachers, and other universities field supervisors). In addition, individual buildings became more receptive to accepting our student teachers, several new cooperating teachers were added, and more involvement in the university sponsored events. Our findings mirrored those of Beck and Kosnik (2002).

A second benefit was that faculty members during observation and seminar times were able to discuss and “explore relationships between what is taught, how it is taught,
and what students learn” (Ryan & Kuhs, 1993, p. 78). Other research according to Moore (2003), states that in order for student teachers to connect theory into practice then teacher preparation programs must support the process prior to student teaching, as well as during the practicum.

Technology: Research and Results

In addition to on-site support, GVSU faculty used technology as part of their support and program delivery system, even though when CCST was initiated the implementation of technology was not anticipated. Some research however has been conducted in the area of interactive courses (Nugent & Faucette, 2004), but there is a paucity of research available on the subject of observing student teachers teaching via interactive television (i.e. the student teacher conducts the lesson and the observations are watched via ITV). Much of the research available that investigated the use of technology in instruction compared online v. distance learning. Online learning delivers a course partially or totally on the Internet (Caywood & Duckett, 2003). Whereas distance education uses educational television or teleconferencing network with one instructor providing instruction to students at multiple sites simultaneously (Caro, McLean, Browning & Hains, 2002).

Research further supports the use of video conferencing technology. The benefits include: “increased contact with on-campus personnel; opportunities for face-to-face interactions; and the chance to provide immediate feedback to field-based students” (Falconer & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2002, p. 368). This format was used to assist students located in remote areas (Falconer & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2002). GVSU faculty used this
format before and after seminars to talk through problems being encountered by student teachers.

As cited in Wepner, Ziomek and Tao (2003), Perkins (1985) suggests “that users of technology use a mindful process in determining whether or not to use technology” (p. 53). He states there are three criteria to be considered and in place, first that the opportunity to implement technology exists, second that users understand the opportunity exists and third that users have a certain amount of motivation to accept the opportunity. Perkins (1985) believes that:

Users only make an effort to seize upon a technology opportunity when they perceive that it has value and relevance to their work. For teacher educators to use technology, they need to recognize the value and relevance of technology for their students and curriculum. (as cited in Wepner et al., 2003, p. 53)

The GVSU CCST program capitalized on the available technology and the opportunity it offered to students and faculty. Using all the technology available (i.e. internet, email, Blackboard, and ITV) provided students a support system for instruction and personal concerns. The faculty members directly working on the project found themselves following Perkins’ (1985) criteria for the use of technology, but they were not sure of its efficacy. Thus they decided to find answers to their questions.

GVSU faculty went into the use of the technology with little training. They found, as did Murphy (1998), that the simultaneous “challenge for faculty was in learning to use technologies themselves while providing students technical training and course content” (as cited in Caro, McLean, Browning, & Hains, 2002, p. 335).
To assist the students with technical training and to promote a smooth transition, several things occurred. MAC laptops (i.e. two computers per apartment) were provided for their use, since the public school classrooms in Florida were equipped with only MAC computers. Each apartment had internet service via cable network availability.

Other research found it important that new teachers develop a level of familiarity with potential uses of technology (Cosgrove, 2002; Dexter & Riedel, 2003; LePage, 1996; Matthews, 1999). Thus prior to leaving, students were provided training (hands-on) using ITV, Blackboard, and how the MAC interfaces with the university personal computers. Students were also given the opportunity to experience ITV from the GVSU site to a demonstration classroom in Florida. They were seated in the designated GVSU room and interactively met the Urban Academy coordinators along with some cooperating teachers (i.e. those who were able to attend). First hand students experienced the time delay and the actual view instructors would have during the semester.

Since most children in current K-12 classrooms are quite adept at using computers, including various software packages and the Internet, it made logical sense to encourage our students to use whatever technology was available and whenever possible model it for them. Research further indicates that classroom instructors who are “in-tune” must implement additional technological methods and materials to meet the needs and interests of their students and also be willing to adapt to these rapidly changing technologies (Cosgrove, 2002).

Faculty therefore modeled various technological methods to assist the student teachers’ technological adaptability. “Early exposure and hands-on use of distance learning affords them (i.e. teacher candidates), experiences both as consumers and
producers of this technology” (Abdal-Haqq, 1995; Beck & Wynn, 1998; Fatemi, 1999; Wang, 2000; Wright, Rice & Hildreth, 2001, as cited in Cosgrove, 2002, ¶3). Since technology takes on increased importance as we continue to move from an industrial to an information-based society, it behooves “teachers to be skilled in technology applications and knowledgeable about using technology to support instruction and to enhance and extend student learning” (Otero, et al., 2005, p. 9). During the CCST program when facilitating weekly seminars or conducting observations using interactive television, faculty experienced the challenges as well as the benefits of using and implementing technology.

**Weekly Seminars: Benefits and Challenges**

Florida seminars were offered at the same time that seminars were being conducted at GVSU, thereby providing the students with a common bond with other student teachers, as well as maintaining program continuity and consistency. For example whatever current information and/or programmatic concerns were being disseminated at the Michigan seminars, the student teachers in Florida received it simultaneously. It also provided the faculty with the assurance that the same program was being delivered at the off-site location and assessments would be comparable with any other GVSU student teacher (i.e. we would be comparing apples to apples). Each seminar included a time for discussion of: current issues and newsworthy items from Michigan and Florida; any classroom issues, concerns and/or questions; requirement explanations and review; instructional strategies and best practices; content related pedagogy; and closing with final thoughts and expectations for the following week.
Students submitted all assignments electronically (i.e. weekly reflections, lesson/unit plans, parent letter, etc.). Once the process was established the submission of assignments electronically worked fairly well. Even though students used MAC computers and faculty used PC computers, accommodations made proved to be effective. Of course, there is always the challenge of the Internet server going down (e.g. the cable company suffering storm damage, etc.). The other challenges related to the use of ITV for weekly seminars were the time delay, the necessary room set up, and the sensitivity of the technology (i.e. losing connections, sound, volume, etc.).

Since the CCST program focused on elementary preservice teachers, an additional challenge was meeting the needs of our secondary student teachers. One methodology or form of technology that proved to be beneficial was the use of Blackboard. The program used Blackboard for weekly discussion questions. The use of discussion board topics that covered a wide range of topics applicable to secondary, as well as elementary student teachers proved to enhance the cohesion of the group(s) and to address some of the varying needs of each. This technology enabled them to learn from one another in meaningful ways (i.e. critical incidences/case studies). Each offered his/her own insights thereby providing different perspectives to similar situations. Secondary student teachers were better able to understand the demands placed on elementary teachers, and vice versa. Students further developed an appreciation for what each does in the preparation of students (K-12) and began to realize that there are more educational commonalities between them than differences (i.e. classroom management strategies, instructional techniques, parental concerns, conferencing, etc.).
Classroom Observation and Supervision: Benefits and Challenges

Being able to observe student teachers consistently throughout any experience is beneficial and this situation was no different. While observing onsite or observing interactively, faculty members were able to document the students’ ever developing pedagogical skills, in conjunction with their professional growth and maturity. A minimum of three observations were conducted using ITV technology, while a minimum of four observations were conducted onsite. An additional benefit of using ITV observations helped the project director address some of the fiscal problems of the project by not having to pay for additional trips to Florida.

Often student teachers are placed in buildings or districts where there are no other student teachers or are placed in grade levels with the same scenario. They can feel isolated, as well as somewhat disconnected. Considering these factors, the students who self-selected to experience Florida were given the opportunity to: teach in the same buildings and with similar grade levels in the same district with the same coordinators and planned and lived with their colleagues with whom they were teaching. Even though cohort models where students literally share the same ordeal have not always been proven successful (Bullough, et al., 1999), this model worked for GVSU. It worked because of the commitment of all parties and to the program’s support structure. As Bullough, et al., (2002) found the students saw “themselves as responsible for one another’s development…invested in each other, not only to assist in the classroom but to help with life’s problems” (p. 77).

“The biggest challenge to using distance learning in teacher preparation programs is accessing compatible technology between sites and scheduling observations”
GVSU faculty were also challenged with the scheduling of ITV observations (i.e. securing the room at GVSU and in Broward County, since dates and times varied between students and schools), as well as scheduling on-site observations. Broward County’s school calendar did not always mesh with the GVSU calendar. Thus faculty worked around schools being closed for in-services, holidays, weather, professional development and testing schedules. While on-site faculty usually observed each student teacher twice and provided additional conference times when warranted.

The challenges of scheduling using ITV were not much different than other university field coordinators experienced in Michigan (i.e. scheduling observations around changing school calendars and classroom events). Since we were on a shortened timeframe, the issue seemed larger. The mere fact that the program implemented different forms of technology will benefit these student teachers in the future.

Several researchers have found after examining teacher technology use that “teacher preparation may be enhanced by creating opportunities for teachers in training to see and experience the positive effects of technology on teaching and learning (Russell, Bebell, O’Dwyer, & O’Conner, 2003). “Teachers entering the profession need to develop positive beliefs about technology and skills to use technology in a wide variety of ways… moving away from focusing on teaching technology and instead focus on teaching with technology ” (Russell, et al., 2003, p.309). Other research studies found that the use of technology in the field placement affects how technology will be used later in one’s teaching career (Dexter & Riedel, 2003).

Our student teachers developed a certain comfort level working with the technology. As evidenced by technology being incorporated into their unit plans, the use
of PowerPoints during classroom observations, the use of importing videos using software (i.e. Video Streaming), and importing game show formats to review content which motivated secondary and elementary students alike.

**Reflections on the CCST Program**

Thinking back on the program, the greatest concern was to provide the GVSU student teachers in Florida with a quality experience that would be comparable to that provided on campus in Michigan. We feel that we were able to do this by having the director of teacher education teach the seminars and observe the CCST students both in Florida and by ITV and by having regular interactions with the Urban Academy Coordinators throughout the program. This provided the desired expectation, content, and process consistency in the program. Both CCST student teachers and faculty developed flexibility and competence in using technology for varied purposes.

By having all of the Florida student teachers live in the same apartment complex, they built a learning community that went beyond the classroom. This closeness helped them to make adjustments when many stayed on to begin their teaching careers in Florida. Some CCST participants continue to live and teach in Florida, others started there and have moved to other teaching positions, while others moved to other locations to start their teaching careers. All point to CCST and its strengths and weaknesses as avenues for helping them as they prepared for starting their careers.

**Conclusions**

Changes to field experiences need to be made as different approaches are proven to be successful. The CCST program’s approach to student teaching was not typical or traditional. The program was able to document the success of implementing interactive
television as a viable medium to use when conducting student teaching observations and weekly seminars to distant sites. Riedel and Dexter state it best, “The value of field experiences for preservice teachers and efforts to prepare new teachers have always extended beyond the college’s walls” (p. 344).
References


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