

Chapter 5

Equity and Access in a Virtual Field Experience: A Story and a Conversation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter narrates the experiences of individuals at an institution of high learning in a southeastern area of the United States who use and facilitate the use of a popular virtual field experience platform for teacher candidates in their courses. Amidst background information on the virtual field experience at the institution, the chapter will provide discussion excerpts among colleagues in different roles around the implementation of the virtual field experience in the teacher education program. The chapter will contain information and discussion around the features, affordances, critiques, and possible future uses of the virtual field experience for teacher candidates.

INTRODUCTION

Sweeney, et al. (2018) define a virtual field experience (VFE) as “a mechanism that mediates the practice of teaching and teacher behaviors through interactions with virtual students” (p. 677). As the digital landscape becomes more expansive, using technology to move toward more equitable instruction is imperative. Use of a VFE becomes an avenue for such pedagogical improvements, but the use of a tool does not directly lead to an adequate solution. Most stories are more nuanced than that. This chapter contains the story of learnings from the use of a popular virtual field experience platform with specific aims toward access and more equitable instruction.

Popular Platform Provider at a Southern Institution of Higher Learning

Our large public institution has a long-term relationship with a popular VFE platform to supplement the field experience that all teacher candidates get as part of a robust teacher preparation program. Approximately over 300 teacher candidates are enrolled in the institution’s programs per semester. Each candidate is required to complete at least 25 hours of observation in a wide variety of public-school classrooms near the institution. Thus, there is a high demand for a VFE that offers common experiences for teacher candidates.

The institution has been a high-volume user of the VFE platform for over ten years. Since utilization of the VFE platform increased across different users, it became more challenging to schedule sessions during peak time frames needed for the institutions’ teacher candidates. This led to an agreement between the VFE platform provider and the institution, via a site license. As a result, a faculty member was hired to oversee the institution’s implementation of the site license (i.e. VFE Coordinator) and the subsequent growth of the project, both internally and externally.

Setting up the Chapter: A Story and a Conversation

In this chapter, we will narrate the early implementation of a popular VFE platform, shifts that occurred when we moved to a local implementation model with our own interactors staff, changes that happened when we offered VFE sessions to other institutions as a fee for service arrangement, as well as adaptations made during COVID-19. Within the text, there are responses from several stakeholders at the institution to common questions someone tangentially familiar with such technology might ask about its use. We end the chapter with critiques and improvements for VFE. To familiarize the audience with the participants in these conversational vignettes we include positionality statements from each of the participants as well as information describing their relationship with the VFE platform (see Table 1).

Further, to help readers understand the conversation, what follows are definitions of some terms that the participants will use in the conversation. *Teacher candidates* will be used to refer to undergraduate students who are seeking certification to teach through one of the programs at the institution. Again, *Virtual field experience (VFE)* is defined as “a mechanism that mediates the practice of teaching and teacher behaviors through interactions with virtual students” (Sweeney, et al., 2018, p. 677) and participants would generally be referring to the classroom with the virtual students, referred to as *student avatars*. The *VFE platform* is the software that facilitates the VFE and we differentiate the platform from the VFE because there are changes discussed in relation to the platform that do not necessarily change a teacher candidate’s experience in the VFE but features that surround the VFE. The term *interactor*

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