

Navigating Practica and Pre-Professional Experiences During COVID-19

Dr. Adrienne Robinson
Assistant Professor of Rehabilitation Services
UAPB School of Education
University of Arkansas – Pine Bluff
1200 North University Drive, Mail Slot 4927
Pine Bluff, AR 71601
robinsonam@uapb.edu

Dr. Neil A. Knobloch
Professor
Department of Agricultural Sciences and Communication
Purdue University
915 W. State Street, LILY 3-232
West Lafayette, IN 47907
nknobloc@purdue.edu

Dr. Hui-Hui Wang
Assistant Professor
Department of Agricultural Sciences and Communication
Purdue University
915 W. State Street, LILY 3-223
West Lafayette, IN 47907
huiwang@purdue.edu

Ryan D. Kornegay, M.S.
Program Specialist
Institute of Food Safety & Nutrition
USDA National Institute of Food & Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW, MS 2201
Washington, DC 20250-2201
ryan.kornegay@usda.gov

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Introduction & Need for LCT Strategy

Practica provide college students with pre-professional experiences to help apply theoretical knowledge and best practices in a real-world context. Practical experiences (defined as practica) are commonly used in education and the human sciences disciplines to provide college students opportunities for explorations, skill development and reflection in real-world contexts (Cooper & Wieckowski, 2017). Specifically, vocational rehabilitation services and agricultural STEM education prepare people with 21st century skills to be successful members of the workforce.

This presentation will highlight how two pre-professional programs conducted practicums for college students to apply vocational preparedness skills during COVID-19. COVID-19 required the two programs to adapt and provide innovative pre-professional experiences for their college students. We will share the similarities and differences of how programs at two different land-grant universities navigated providing practicum experiences for their students during COVID-19, and summarize what the students shared about their experiences, including benefits and challenges.

Connection to Literature

The theoretical framework that will connect this study and understanding the navigation of practica during COVID-19 is Third Space Theory. On the face of it, oppositional first and second spaces work together to create a new third space for knowledge, discourses, and mastery forms. The first space is the student, community, and network. The second space is the institution of learning. The third space is reconceptualization of learning and success. This theory can be used to explore learning as a platform to move students through dynamic zones of proximal development (Pane, 2009). The lens of Third Space Theory is a great way to engage students in reflection during practica. Students can re-imagine structure, pedagogies, and behaviors during these learner-centered experiences (Weimer, 2013). There are two things that are important to draw from third space theory in relation to this study: the creation of new spaces for reflection and renewal but also understanding learning through various dimensions while traversing through a practicum during a pandemic.

How It Works / Implementation of LCT Strategy

The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB) Rehabilitation Services program centers around preparing students for work and advocacy with people with disabilities in the vocational rehabilitation field. During COVID-19, program practicum processes required adjustment due to strict site policies. Besides using Blackboard for discussion/reflective assignments, an innovative measure was to utilize Go React for end of experience case presentations and video reflective exercise. Go React is a video assessment software that helps student teachers demonstrate skills online through capturing video of students for critique of their skills. Additionally, Zoom was utilized for faculty/student monthly meetings and any supplementary conferences.

Students at Purdue University can enroll in a graduate-level course to learn how pedagogy and pedagogical content skills to teach STEM through Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2015). Students prepare a set of lessons and they

engage in a practicum experience to teach youth using one of their lessons. Typically, these afterschool lessons were taught in real-world settings (e.g., 4-H clubs, Girls' Scouts, school enrichment). Because of COVID-19, students taught their lessons to K-12 students via a virtual Ag+STEM Camp. The virtual lessons were delivered using the Zoom platform. The lessons were 45 minutes in length and were conducted in the evenings (6:00 and 7:15 p.m. EDT). The virtual Ag+STEM Camp was part of a college-wide outreach event known as SpringFest, which is an open house for the community and alumni to visit campus and learn more about what faculty, staff and students are doing. A table in the appendix illustrates a comparison between the two courses.

Results to Date / Implications / Impact

The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Rehabilitation Services practicum during COVID-19 had 3 major outcomes. The first being the management of the virtual environment itself. A lot of the experience, normally, was a face-to-face, hands-on engagement to learn and get to understand clients in vocational rehabilitation. It was disconcerting for the students to, in a way, be in a position of a person with a disability, having to learn in an uncharted space. Second, learning and applying new technology during COVID-19. The rehabilitation services program was new to Go React. It was expected to be only used in the teacher education environment. However, the software offered a new aspect to the program and its continued usage. Lastly, the experience did create an environment where the students took more initiative in learning but understanding how people with disabilities deal with disruption in life daily, so it increased skills of flexibility and empathy.

There were five outcomes of the Virtual Ag+STEM Camp. First, hands-on activities, such as a live insect, Kahoot!, drawing a plan, and building a model, engaged students in the virtual environment. Second, the virtual environment was challenging to engage students because it was difficult to see the students and monitor what they were doing during the presentation and activity. Third, the limited number of participants made it challenging to promote discussion and share ideas. Fourth, the technology platform made it challenging to multi-task—making sure the technology was working, monitoring the chat, watching participants on the screen, presenting content, and facilitating the activities. Finally, the virtual youth engagement experience did provide preservice educators a real-world experience that will be useful in their future careers; however, they also desired having a face-to-face experience in addition to the virtual teaching experience.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

A major takeaway from the presentation was that during a pandemic, faculty and students can feel isolated, but it was encouraging to review similar challenges with engagement and experiences. A recommendation is to reach out to other programs, not necessarily similar to view practices employed. The UAPB practicum, though face-to-face and virtual, plans to be expand more virtual experiences; technology makes services more accessible for individuals with disabilities; The program has plans to create an assistive technology lab that would integrate practicum that would expand on the experience. The Purdue practicum will likely be face-to-face and virtual next year because students want to have a more personalized experience and they saw the value of learning how to engage youth virtually and how technology could broaden access to more students. Faculty adapted to integrating technology into practica, which was the direction they wanted to go but COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of new technology in facilitating pre-professional experiences.

References

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APPENDIX 1

Table 1. Comparison of Two Community-Based Practicum Experiences		
Elements	University of Arkansas – Pine Bluff	Purdue University
Course	RHAB 4350 Practicum in Rehabilitation	ASEC 545: Teaching STEM through AFNR
College Students	Upper-level Undergraduate	Graduate & Upper-level Undergraduate
Foundational Knowledge	Vocational Rehabilitation Education Cooperative/Discovery Learning Awareness of Professional Ethics	Integrated STEM Education Meaningful Learning Learner-Centered Teaching Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
Educational Standards	Scope of Practice from Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC)	National Standards for Next Generation Science Standards Common Core Mathematics Standards National Educational Technology Standards National Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources Content Standards Indiana State Learning Standards
Planning, Designing & Organizing	Presentation of case information and experiences relevant to their practicum and the practicum of other students. Submission of a weekly log/session notes of activities/lessons with clients	Students design 3 lessons; or, co-design 5 lessons with a peer; each lesson is 45 minutes of instruction
Engagement with Audience (Service Delivery & Teaching)	Virtual supervised practicum in rehabilitation working with people with disabilities (casework, counseling) Utilization of Go-React	Virtual Afterschool Program, 45-min session with K-12 students and their parents
Reflection & Self-Assessment	Discussions and reflections throughout the course	Multiple reflections throughout the course and a self-reflection and self-assessment after microteaching experience
Peer Feedback	Peer feedback through discussion questions on site, counseling issues concerns, cases	One peer observes and provides written feedback
Professionalism	Site supervisor mid and final evaluation and virtual observations as allowed	Innovative Teaching Poster Ideation Discussion Roundtable Proposal