

UFCooperatingTeachersSupport.com: A Resource Tool for Florida Cooperating Teachers

Heather Nesbitt
University of Florida
P.O. Box 110540
Gainesville, FL 32611-0540
heather.nesbitt@ufl.edu

Alyssa Rogers
Doris Sanders Learning Center
1201 Enchanted Dr
Lakeland, FL 33801
alyssa.rogers@polk-fl.net

Debra Barry
University of Florida
1200 North Park Road
Plant City, FL 33563
813-757-2288
dmbarry@ufl.edu

Introduction

The cooperating teacher has one of the most influential roles in the student teacher's internship experience (Norris et al., 1990). The mentorship responsibilities of the cooperating teachers have been explored, however continual reinforcement of these responsibilities throughout the internship experience has yet to be studied (Roberts, 2006; Crasborn et al., 2011). Research Agenda Priority 5 of the National Agricultural Research Agenda focuses on strengthening agricultural education programs to be more efficient and effective (Roberts et al., 2016). This includes teacher education programs and their responsibility to prepare and support their cooperating teachers.

To accomplish this, the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida created a website-based resource tool to actively strengthen cooperating teachers during the 14-week student teaching internship experience. The objectives of this resource were: (1) provide bi-weekly guidance, (2) present role responsibilities and feedback guidelines to encourage best practices for mentoring, and (3) create an online repository for the Cooperating Teacher Manual, Student Teacher Handbook, and forms needed during the internship experience (Barry, 2019; Barry & Nesbitt, 2022). The website serves as supplemental support for cooperating teachers with the goal to increase guidance and mentorship to the student teacher, potentially leading to a greater positive influence on the student teacher's confidence in the classroom (Hamman et al., 2006).

How it Works

This website-based resource tool was designed to promote and foster positive mentorship from cooperating teachers. During pre-internship professional development, the cooperating teachers were introduced to the website, its navigational menu, and instructed on where to locate electronic copies of observational and evaluative documents. Once the internship experience began, the cooperating teachers were contacted bi-weekly via email, titled "Welcome to Week [X]." The email consisted of positive feedback from the Cooperating Teacher Support Program Leader, reminders of upcoming dates, a link to the corresponding bi-weekly website page that included additional materials, and an infographic that described a specific best practice for cooperating teacher implementation. The individual pages of the website included *Home*, *Contact*, *Weekly Guides*, *Your Role*, *Giving Feedback*, *Forms*, *Resources*, and *Blog*. Additionally, related research and helpful resource links were provided throughout the website that highlight positive mentoring practices.

Results to Date

The website was piloted during the 2019 student teaching internship experience. The website was not utilized in 2020 and began its full implementation in the spring of 2021 with a group of seven cooperating teachers. During the 14-week experience in 2021, the website received 162 unique visits and 384 total pages views. This created an average of 9.4 unique visits per week. The heaviest traffic days tended to be dates surrounding cooperating teacher Zoom sessions and dates that the website was shared with other faculty/universities. Zoom sessions were an option for cooperating teachers to join and were used as a professional learning the positives and challenges of their experience. The individual pages that were visited the most

frequently, other than the home page, were the *Week 1-2* page (beginning of the internship experience), the *Week 13-14* page (end of the internship experience), the *Resources* page, and the *Blog* page. At the completion of the 2021 internship experience, the cooperating teachers were asked to rate the usefulness of website using a Likert-type scale from 1 (*extremely useful*) to 5 (*not at all useful*). Overall, the cooperating teachers found the website to be *extremely useful* ($M=1.33$, $SD=0.52$).

For the 2022 student teaching internship experience, 15 cooperating teachers hosted student teachers and were invited to utilize this webpage as a resource tool. At the completion of the 14-week experience, the website received 144 unique visits and 422 total page views, for an average of about 10 visits a week. The pages viewed the most frequently, other than the home page, were the *Forms* page, *Week 13-14* page, the *Resources* page, the *Your Role* page, and the *Giving Feedback* page.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future plans for this program involve continuing to implement and grow the website as a resource tool for cooperating teachers during the student teaching internship experience. Additional collection of website traffic could provide insight on website growth, activity, and potential use of this resource. Continuing to utilize direct feedback from the cooperating teachers about their use of the website will help researchers and program coordinators to understand the use and potential need for this type of support mechanism.

The website platform could serve as a model for other university teacher preparation programs as a supporting tool for cooperating teachers. The products from this tool could be altered to fit the specific state needs of teachers. However, the basic tenets of this platform and the mentorship tools provided could translate to other teacher education programs.

It should be noted that two challenges have surfaced while using this resource. First, the use of a blog was introduced to the 2021 cooperating teachers and was not utilized after two posts. For the blog, cooperating teachers were asked to volunteer to write a post related to mentoring a student teacher. The lack of participation in the blog could have been due to the number of stressors teachers were already experiencing due to the pandemic (Shoulders et al., 2021). The second challenge was limitations within the first design platform, Piktochart, that was used for infographics. Piktochart limits the number of free items per category, preventing new or updated designs each year. For the 2022 infographics, Canva has been utilized for all infographics and has been found to be easy to use, with less constraints.

Resources Needed

Time, a budget for a domain name, as well as a website host, and a design platform are major resources needed for the website-based resource tool to be successful. Both the website host and the domain name have yearly reoccurring fees that are incurred. An alternative to paying for an additional platform and domain name would be the potential to host this type of site within a current university web system. Furthermore, the financial assistance for a graduate student would be advantageous to aid with the routine management and updates of time sensitive elements on the website, such as updating important dates, creating infographics, and analyzing website traffic.

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