Lead By Example: The Impact of Teleobservation on Social Studies Methods Courses

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Abstract

This teleobservation pilot study focuses on an innovative approach for the preparation of elementary social studies preservice teacher candidates through the use of interactive videoconferencing to provide observations of elementary classrooms. Preservice teacher candidates observed social studies lessons team-taught by regular classroom teachers and university professors in public school classrooms via videoconferencing equipment. Preservice teacher candidates remained on campus while another professor guided them through the social studies observation. Qualitative data were collected from preservice teacher candidates completing their social studies methods course through reflective summaries, KWL charts, and archived threaded discussions. The benefits and challenges of teleobservation are discussed along with implications and possibilities for future work. Specifically, the goals of this project included providing future social studies teachers with the following opportunities: 1) observe an elementary classroom in real-time; 2) discuss teaching as it is happening, and 3) observe university social studies professors modeling theory into practice.

Introduction

Imagine the possibilities for preservice teacher candidates who are invited by their university professors to partake in a teleobservation experience in which university professors guide them during an observation of a social studies lesson in a public school classroom via teleconferencing equipment. This project was designed to develop a videoconference connection with two elementary schools in rural Eastern North Carolina. The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of using videoconferencing equipment to provide observations of public school classrooms, while university professors modeled applying theory to practice. Specifically, the goals of this project included providing the following opportunities: 1) observe a live classroom in action; 2) discuss teaching as it is happening, and 3) observe university course professors modeling theory into practice.

Traditionally, social studies methods professors share methods, demonstrate lessons, and deliver theory while leading discussions relevant to the social studies. Most methods courses require the preservice teacher candidates to observe social studies lessons in the local elementary schools. For example, preservice teacher candidates may be assigned a classroom in a local school where they will conduct observations and teach a social studies unit during the course of
the semester in order to fulfill a compulsory number of field experience hours. Frequently, university professors supplement this field experience with paper or electronic video case examples of best practices in the social studies, or they demonstrate lessons for the preservice teacher candidates. Zeichner (1992) found that teachers praise the value of the field experience in relation to the rest of the teacher education experiences, so perhaps teacher education programs need to consider ways to enhance these experiences.

With the use of videoconferencing, this pilot study examines the role of interaction between teachers and students in several ways. There is interaction between professors and preservice teachers, classroom teachers and preservice teachers, children and professors, and children and classroom teachers. The value of videoconferencing as an alternative to traditional observation experiences in preparing social studies educators is also examined. University professors modeled classroom management, teaching strategies, flexibility while teaching, and overall, what real-time teaching actually looks like for the preservice teacher candidates. The guiding questions for this pilot research were as follows:

1) What are the perceived benefits and downfalls of teleobservation experiences?
2) What lessons are learned regarding the effective use of teleobservation?

**Literature Review**

The review of literature begins by examining the value of field experiences in teacher preparation followed by examination of traditional observation in teacher education, including the limitations and values of such observation, and finally considers workable alternatives. Specifically, videoconferencing and teleobservation are defined in the context of this review, and they are explored as potential practical options for social studies methods course observation requirements. This study is situated within a Vygotskian framework which is discussed first.

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory provides the theoretical framework for this research study. The sociocultural theory “is a constructivist perspective that emphasizes the social environment as a facilitator of development and learning” (Schunk, 2004, p. 291). Vygotsky (1978) argued that developmental processes and cognitive growth are stimulated by interactions between and among people in the environment, including collaborations and apprenticeships. Vygotsky (1978) also offered the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is the area between actual development and potential development where learning new tasks can be effectively guided by a more experienced peer or adult. Wenger (1999) built on Vygotsky’s work with his concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). According to the notion of LPP, learners must first participate on the periphery of a new task. In the peripheral position, there are learning tasks to which learners are exposed but are not yet ready to complete individually, similar to the Vygotskian concept of ZPD. Wenger (1999) also asserts the importance of active participation in learning a new task rather than passive participation. He stated, “Observation can be useful, but only as a prelude to actual engagement” (p.100).

**Field Experiences in Teacher Education**

Student teaching and field experiences in teacher education programs are examples of situating learning within the realm of professional experience. It is widely accepted that these experiences are critical to the growth of the preservice teacher. Field experiences provide early
opportunities for legitimate, peripheral participation (Wenger, 1999) in a preservice teacher’s future community of practice. Additionally, learning from teachers who are directly involved in communities of practice, offers experiences that make the connection between university theory and classroom practice more concrete for the preservice teacher (Greene & Magliaro, 2004). In a survey conducted by Smylie (1989), teachers reported “consultation with other teachers” as the most effective source of learning to teach second only to “direct experience as a teacher” (p. 546).

Videoconferencing, a computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) technology, has been touted as one way to bring the public school classroom to the university with less intrusion into a teacher’s classroom and more opportunities for learners to share experiences across a greater variety of time and space (Wong, Sharpe, Crawford, Gopinathan, Moo, Khine, & Hu, 2001). Videoconferencing has opened up a new venue for collegial learning and a new alternative to the traditional field experience. The remainder of this review examines the role and limitations of traditional observations and considers videoconferencing as one possible alternative.

Values and Limitations to Traditional Observation in Teacher Education

There is no argument that observation in the preparation of teachers is important and essential. The field experience is seen as being at the heart of the professional training in initial teacher education (Tang, 2004) as field experiences for preservice teacher candidates can serve as a catalyst for the development of new insights and instructional techniques (Nichols & Sorg, 2001). It is widely accepted and believed that more and earlier field experiences and observations result in better prepared teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Huling, 1998; Malone, 1984; Tang, 2004). The more experience in the classroom where learning takes place, the better for the preparation of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1998). However, the quantity of field experiences does not guarantee the quality of field experiences. There are limitations. Specific limitations to traditional observation in teacher education include the following: a) difficulty finding a quality placement; b) difficulty finding a placement that is related to a specific content area, in this case, social studies; c) high enrollment in teacher education courses; d) limited or no time for the preservice teacher candidates to talk to the teacher before and after the lessons; e) logistics including travel, money, and time, and f) problems disrupting the school day and scheduling. However, despite limitations with traditional observations, field experiences provide a valuable connection between theory and practice and are often noted as generally positive experiences in education methods courses (Malone, 1984).

Student teachers need careful guidance and mediation to help them focus on critical aspects of classroom teaching and to assist them in interpreting what they see in order to benefit from field experience observation (Huling, 1998). Greene and Magliaro (2004) noted that preservice teachers need to be guided in how to observe in order to begin to see the classroom through a teacher’s lens rather than a student’s lens. Teleobservation (using videoconference technology) provides this opportunity by allowing entire classes of preservice teacher candidates to unobtrusively observe and discuss classroom events with the guidance of a professor as they occur. Using videoconferencing to allow observation of classroom instruction may be one way to address the limitations of traditional observation and to provide an enriched observation opportunity.
Videoconferencing as a Possible Alternative

The term videoconferencing is defined by Laurillard (1993) as a “one to many medium making it a sensible way to provide access for many sites to a remote academic expert” (p. 166). Videoconferencing provides a facility that may increase the learning opportunities for students, giving them access to learning environments that are both effective and available in more varied settings (Wilson & Mosher, 1994). It is synchronous, meaning the system is used at the same time by all participants.

Videoconferencing capabilities have been used successfully in the business profession for years. The education profession is also realizing the benefits of this technologically-mediated method mainly for distance education. There are several current educational projects where videoconference technology is being tried to potentially transform the traditional classroom experience (Bell & Unger, 2003; Kinnear, McWilliams & Caul, 2002; Knipe & Lee, 2002; Venn, Moore & Gunter, 2001; Wise, 2002). These projects demonstrate that videoconference capabilities can be used for a variety of purposes including formal instruction, access to experts in many fields, school projects, community events, professional development opportunities, and field-based school observations. These studies demonstrate how the videoconference experience has the potential to heighten motivation, improve communication, and broaden a student’s knowledge base.

Although videoconference has been used in a wide variety of venues, it does have some limitations. In a study conducted by McDevitt (1996), participating preservice teacher candidates reported that nothing could replace the immediacy of being present in an actual classroom following a two-way television observation experience, but the two-way television observation could provide an element of quality control. Thorsen (2003) warns that videoconference is an unpredictable technology and advises potential users to think very carefully before investing time and money in this technology. Videoconference over the open internet is not yet very reliable; however, once bandwidth is improved, videoconferencing will begin to have an impact on the classroom. The next section discusses one possible use for videoconferencing in the preparation of teachers.

Teleobservation

Teleobservation in education is not a new term. In the 1960s, “teleobservation” was used to describe the use of closed circuit television and video recording in teacher training. Bjerstedt (1967) found this use of closed circuit television and video tape recording as “observation amplifiers” in teacher training more effective than live demonstrations. Additionally, the Teachers On Television (TOT) project began in 1982 (Hoy & Merkley, 1989). This was a FIPSE funded program where observation of rural, urban, metropolitan, regular, and special education classrooms were open to large numbers of preservice teacher candidates without disrupting the classroom and with less costs (i.e., travel, time) than traditional observation. There were unedited, uninterrupted broadcasts for six hours for five consecutive days through the use of live, microwave television broadcasts, remotely controlled via telephone from the observation site. More recently, Vannatta and Reinhart (1999) described a partnership between a college of education and two local elementary schools designed to provide preservice teacher candidates opportunities to observe expert teachers integrating technology in the elementary classroom through videoconferencing.
The authors of this study define teleobservation as the use of videoconferencing technology to provide opportunities to observe naturalistic teaching practices without being physically present in the classroom; the focus is placed on teaching and learning rather than the technology. This is real time observation with opportunities for debriefing with the public classroom teacher and methods professors. This technology involves simultaneous audio and video communication between the university and public school classroom. Cochrane (1996) and the authors agree that, “It is naïve to assume that merely linking distant groups or individuals at different locations creates an effective learning environment” (p. 320). However, teleobservation combined with rich university classroom practices can create an effective learning environment that extends beyond the limits of the traditional field experience.

Teleobservation has the possibility of being a new avenue for collegial learning by expanding the community of learners for the preservice teacher candidate. Videoconferencing, as a computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) technology, brings learners closer to real-world environments and provides increasing opportunities for learners to share experiences across time and space (Wong et al, 2001). Preservice teacher candidates do not have to rely on the expertise found in one school in the neighborhood near their college or university. Videoconferencing can access expertise from any school in which videoconferencing equipment is available.

Each of the limitations of traditional observation, discussed earlier in the review, can be addressed with the teleobservation alternative. The use of teleobservation allows university professors to structure and guide classroom observations. Preservice teachers are able to view the same lesson which provides opportunities for guided whole group discussions. Professors can arrange for the students to observe a lesson that is relevant and meaningful to the methods course content, creating a stronger connection between the university and public school classroom. Additionally, teleobservation allows a large methods course, 30+ preservice teacher candidates, to observe a lesson in real time and not have to intrude on large numbers of classrooms in order to be physically present. Instead of disrupting the schedules of 30 teachers to place preservice teacher candidates in classrooms for field experiences, teleobservation requires only one classroom teacher to collaborate with a methods instructor. Finally, time and money is not lost due to travel to field placements.

Methods

Setting and Participants

This teleobservation project transpired at a large public university in eastern North Carolina. Two social studies methods classes at the university participated in this study. Each class had 28 students for a total of 56 preservice teacher candidate participants. The students in the classes were in the second semester of their junior year; this course is a prerequisite to their senior year internship. Two of the three researchers were the professors of record for the two social studies courses mentioned above creating a convenience sample for this study. Two partnering public elementary school classrooms—a first grade classroom and a third grade classroom—also participated in this project. Each school was located about 40 miles away from the university in a rural area of North Carolina. One of the schools was a K-2 school with 800 students. The other school was a 3-5, upper elementary school with a population of 750 students.
Three university professors, two elementary teachers and four technology support persons assisted with this teleobservation project, making this experience a true collaborative effort.

**Procedures**

The university’s college of education started a TeleEducation initiative four years ago. TeleEducation is a professional training model that utilizes technology to connect the university with schools in order to provide meaningful and authentic experiences to preservice teachers. One component of the TeleEducation initiative includes a network of schools within 23 counties surrounding the university. The network works closely with professors to place hundreds of students in field experiences each semester. The researchers chose to work with two schools from the TeleEducation network for several reasons: a) proper equipment was already in place; b) appropriate permissions were gathered within the original TeleEducation agreement, and c) suitable technology support at the university was available to travel to these sites.

This pilot project occurred over the period of nine months. Social studies methods professors made initial email contacts with local elementary school teachers, introduced themselves, and tested the technology. In order to begin a collaborative effort, the university professors visited the elementary school three times to observe the children, help in the elementary classroom, and meet the classroom teacher face-to-face. The technology was tested again. Next, social studies lessons were planned and taught by the university professors and the elementary teachers to the children, while the preservice teacher candidates remained on campus and viewed the lessons via videoconferencing. The first teleobservation experience was an environmental social science lesson in a first grade classroom. The second teleobservation experience was a Civil Rights lesson in a third grade classroom. Each experience occurred at different elementary schools in the same county.

During each teleobservation experience, the preservice teacher candidates from the two elementary social studies methods courses stayed on campus with one university professor, while the other university professor drove to the elementary school to team teach the social studies lesson with the regular classroom teacher. A third university professor also remained on campus to assist with instruction and take photographs and field notes. University technology support personnel were available at both the university and public school locations, freeing the classroom teacher and school of any technical responsibilities.

The preservice teacher candidates were split into two videoconference rooms during the first teleobservation. Each room was equipped with a screen, videoconferencing equipment, and microphones. In order to maximize the bandwidth and the strength of the connection, all of the university students were present in one room during the second videoconference. The university professors who stayed on campus led a discussion and guided the social studies observation during each teleobservation. The university site could hear the elementary site during the actual lesson, but the elementary site could not hear the university discussion until the question/answer period. In the first grade classroom, the question/answer session transpired after the lesson when the assistant teacher took the children to recess; in the third grade classroom, the question/answer session took place during a lunch break when the children left the room. Not having the children present allowed for a more candid discussion about the lessons. Preservice teacher candidates were able to inquire about instructional decisions, behaviors, and choices the professor or classroom teacher made regarding specific children or specific content.
The preservice teacher candidates completed KWL charts (What do you know? What do you want to know? What did you learn?) during the teleobservation period. After the teleobservation experience, preservice teacher candidates completed a reflective summary and participated in threaded discussions which were structured by the professors. The threaded discussions transpired for approximately three weeks following each teleobservation. Preservice teachers posted comments or questions for the classroom teacher and/or for the teaching professor. Some of the postings included reflective comments, comments about strategies they had learned from the teleobservation experience, and/or questions they wanted answered from the teleobservation experiences. Both the university professors and the elementary teachers responded to these online discussions.

**Data Sources**

Data sources included preservice teacher candidates’ reflective summaries, KWL charts, and archived threaded discussions. A discussion of each of these data sources follows.

**Reflective summaries.** Reflective summaries were collected at the completion of the two teleobservations. The reflective summary questions included: 1) In what ways was today successful? 2) In what ways was today not successful? 3) What would you change about today? Why? 4) What did you learn today? 5) What questions do you have about the teacher's instruction?

**KWL charts.** In order to guide the preservice teacher candidates’ observations, the researchers added another data source for the second teleobservation called a KWL chart. Students answered the following questions related to the social studies content and the teaching of the content: 1) What do I know? 2) What do I want to know? 3) What did I learn? There was also space on the paper for students to write notes about what they were observing during the teleobservation.

**Threaded discussions.** The online discussion forums were created by a technology support person specifically designed to use with these social studies courses. The discussions were password protected. Postings were confidential but not anonymous. Each professor and classroom teacher contributed to the open-ended online conversations. One forum was set up in order for preservice teacher candidates to post a question or comment for the classroom teacher, and another forum was created for the preservice teacher candidates to post a question or comment for the professors. The forums opened the evening following the teleobservation experiences and remained available for three to four weeks.

**Data Analysis**

Content analysis, the process of inductively establishing a categorical system for organizing open-ended information, was the data analysis procedure used (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001). Researchers examined the contents of the written documents which were, in this case, the data sources mentioned above. Categories were not initially developed during the analysis. Once the data were coded and themes emerged, then categories were reported (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Data from the reflective summaries, KWL charts, and threaded discussions were
organized and coded. As the researchers searched for patterns, reoccurring themes were evident. In response to the reflective questions, “In what ways was today not successful, and what would you change about today,” occurrences were tallied for the most frequently mentioned teleobservation drawbacks and improvements. Findings from the reflective summaries, threaded discussions, and KWL charts were triangulated to gain an overall view of the effectiveness of the teleobservation experience.

Findings

Preservice teacher candidates mentioned several teleobservation benefits and also indicated several challenges, specifically issues related to technology and difficulties associated with the audio and video. Both of these issues are discussed below. Changes needed to address the challenges are also highlighted.

Benefits

Preservice teacher candidates mentioned several benefits about videoconferencing: learning social studies content, learning social studies classroom pedagogy, observing modeled teaching, and making connections to the upcoming field experience. A discussion of each of these perceived benefits follows.

**Learning social studies content.** Preservice teacher candidates stated on their reflective summaries that they gained factual knowledge related to the Civil Rights Movement content from the teleobservation. Several responses included, “I learned about Claudette Colvin. I do not think I had ever heard of her.” “I barely knew anything [about Rosa Parks].” “I learned about the demands given in order for the boycott to end and the Supreme Court ruling that followed.” “I was unaware that Rosa Parks was not the first person to refuse to give up her seat, that a young girl was the first.” Preservice teacher candidates consistently revealed learning Civil Rights or rainforest content. More comments included, “I actually learned a great deal about Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement from this lesson.” “I learned many facts about the rain forest, and I learned that it really affects kids when you dress up and make lessons fun.” “I learned what an integrated lesson should look like.” Additionally, data collected on the preservice teacher candidates’ KWL charts also indicated content learning, such as the following example: “I learned that Claudette Colvin was the first to say no to a bus driver about moving, but because she was 15 years old, she didn’t go to the Supreme Court.” Several students stated on their KWLs that they were surprised to learn that Rosa Parks had African American and Caucasian lawyers. One respondent to the threaded discussion made this remark about her KWL chart, “I knew about Civil Rights, but my ‘What did you learn?’ column was far bigger than my ‘What did you [already] know’ column.” Another threaded discussion comment sums up the importance of knowing social studies content, “[Preservice teachers] need to update their knowledge. The world is constantly changing and [our] knowledge must change with it as well.”

**Learning social studies classroom pedagogy.** Findings also indicate that during the initial teleobservation, preservice teacher candidates most frequently mentioned that a success was the actual instruction during the lessons. In the reflective summaries and threaded discussions, the preservice teacher candidates described the teleobservations as creative,
interesting, involving different learning styles, intriguing, lively, entertaining, organized, and integrated. The preservice teacher candidates’ responses also included their perceptions of the children. Again, in both the reflective summaries and threaded discussions, they described the children as engaged, hooked, motivated, and intrigued.

Next, behavioral and classroom management techniques, including demonstrating learning stations, gaining attention with positive measures, observing the classroom layout, and using a variety of materials were mentioned as successes. One respondent noted, “You got the students to calm down without yelling at them,” and another stated, “I saw how small groups really functioned and what they accomplished.” Additional comments from the reflective summaries and KWL charts included, “I learned some interesting classroom management tips. I saw a lot of preparation before the lesson must have taken place.” “I also learned that we should involve students and link to their lives.” “I learned a lot about classroom management. I really liked how you specified how you wanted them to pass the coffee beans and pictures around. You were very specific and that helped eliminate some of the chaos.”

Preservice teacher candidates also noticed other modeled practices during the lessons that tend to occur naturally for veteran teachers such as sitting on the floor with children and using nametags for multiple purposes. “I didn’t realize how well the children react to the teacher being at their level instead of above them...you sat on the floor with the students when they were working with their laptops and preparing the book.” “Having the students divided into groups by name tags made things go smooth and quick.” During the threaded discussions, several students mentioned classroom management techniques. Some threaded discussion comments included, “You maintained a sense of control while allowing the students to have a good time and a wonderful learning experience.” “I also liked the way you integrated subjects into that one lesson. In addition, I really enjoyed the way you handled the classroom. I thought that you had great classroom management skills.”

Observing modeled teaching. Another benefit repeatedly mentioned in the reflective summaries was regarding a reversal of roles: observing a professor actually teaching elementary children instead of a professor observing a preservice teacher in a practicum situation. Several respondents made comments regarding the credibility of their professors teaching elementary students. For example, students commented, “I just learned a lot from observing you in a real classroom with students.” “Just watching how you modeled for us taught me more than I thought I would learn.” Additional comments from the data sources included, “I was able to see how to put the concept of absorbing history and doing history into practice. It was amazing to see you incorporate things that we have been talking about in class.” “Not only did I learn a lot of new information about Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement, but I also learned a lot about teaching history to young people.” The data collected in the threaded discussions corroborated these additional benefits, “I believe that observing professors is such a good way to learn and gives us the opportunity to grow as preservice teachers.” “I know that through this activity you wanted to show us that you wouldn't expect us to do anything that you wouldn't do yourself.”

Making connections to the field experience. Another theme that emerged, to the researchers’ satisfaction, was the connection that the preservice teacher candidates were making to their own upcoming field experience. This particular social studies methods course requires a 15-hour social studies field experience at a local elementary school. One preservice teacher candidate said, “I also learned some ideas about management techniques I can use in my
practicum and during my future as a teacher.” Another respondent asserted, “I learned to keep the kids as active as possible. I also learned that stations worked really well when there is a lot of assistance. It made me realize to take advantage of my helpers when I go in to do my lessons!”

Finding social studies lessons for preservice teacher candidates to view in local schools is sometimes difficult. Thus, another benefit included seeing an actual social studies lesson modeled. Some preservice teacher candidates’ comments from reflective summaries and threaded discussions included, “We were able to see a social studies lesson taught, so we have an example to go by before we begin our practicum teaching.” “I really enjoyed watching you teach this lesson, and I picked up on several ideas I will be able to use within my own classroom.”

**Challenges of Teleobservation**

When asked what was not successful about teleobservation, over 95% of the preservice teacher candidates mentioned the video and audio quality. Preservice teacher candidates described the reception as “shaky,” “freezing,” “blurry,” and “choppy.” The threaded discussion data also mentioned these technology challenges. Other items considered unsuccessful were the temperature of the room, not being given a copy of the lesson plan in advance, the crowdedness in the observation room, and the size of the screen. Preservice teacher candidates also mentioned wanting to see all three stations during the guided practice in teleobservation one. Because teaching does not happen in the common area of circle time in a classroom, obtaining quality and a quantity of camera views and microphone placements are additional technology issues that need to be addressed. In regards to technology, one respondent observed, “I learned that technology doesn’t always go as planned.”

**Changes made to address the challenges.** There was only a 48-hour time period between the first and second teleobservation. Researchers worked on several items within that time period including making changes to improve the audio and video quality, providing the lesson plan to the preservice teacher candidates in advance, and trying to control the temperature and seating arrangement, enabling all the students to view the teleobservation from the larger screen.

Following the second teleobservation, preservice teacher candidates cited the improved audio and visual aspects as the most frequently mentioned success. Preservice teacher candidates also mentioned having a copy of the lesson plan and a copy of the PowerPoint being used in the teleobservation lesson as additional strengths. Although the technology ran more smoothly during the second teleobservation, technical difficulties were still mentioned most frequently when preservice teacher candidates answered the question about what was not successful. Preservice teacher candidates also responded that they were not fond of the scheduling in the second teleobservation. During the second teleobservation, the third grade students were engaged in the initial 35 minutes of their lesson, went to lunch, and then returned to the classroom for follow-up and closure. The preservice teacher candidates did not enjoy seeing the lesson in two parts.

**Discussion**

The researchers have considered the impact of videoconferencing on preservice teacher candidates in a social studies methods course. The potential of this videoconference technology has considerable implications in training teachers and in the transfer of knowledge related to teaching and learning in their field experience and their knowledge of classroom techniques.
The professors’ goal was to provide their preservice teacher candidates with an unedited observation experience that allowed them to view real, on the spot management, instructional, and behavioral decisions. In addition to experiencing a non-scripted teaching observation, preservice teacher candidates were exposed to a team teaching model between the classroom teacher and the professor. Preservice teachers also had a chance to view social studies lessons before they entered their required social studies field experience. This is important because finding social studies lessons in the elementary schools can be difficult due to the marginalization of the subject (Heafner, Lipscomb, Rock, NCPSSSE & SCPSSE, 2006 in press).

While videotapes may be good for evaluation—allowing stopping, starting, and editing—teleobservation provides the opportunity for live discussion and interaction. The professors have shown videotapes in earlier courses and discovered that videos can quickly become obsolete if not kept current with the latest best practices. Furthermore, videotapes have several downfalls when compared to live, uninterrupted teaching. First, there is the possibility that a videotaped lesson is scripted and staged instead of being an unfeigned depiction of a classroom. Second, videos do not give preservice teacher candidates the opportunities to view real team teaching. Perhaps most importantly, a videotape does not provide an opportunity for a live follow-up question/answer session with the instructors involved in the teaching.

During the teleobservation experience, preservice teacher candidates had the opportunity to ask questions or make comments immediately following the lessons while the children were at lunch or recess as well as in subsequent weeks, during follow-up online discussions with the classroom teacher and professor. This honors the notion of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. Vygotsky believed that interactions with the environment are critical to successful learning. Additionally, preservice teacher candidates were exposed to learning tasks in their zones of proximal development. The interactions and guided participation that the preservice teacher candidates experienced led to new forms of understanding. Such interaction also honors Wenger’s (1999) notion of legitimate peripheral participation. These preservice teachers were allowed early access into their future community of practice while being guided and supported by a community of experienced practitioners.

Although this is a methods course and not a content course, the professors realized that the preservice teacher candidates lacked social studies content knowledge. Therefore, when the preservice teacher candidates’ were preparing lesson plans for their face-to-face field experience in local elementary schools, the professors emphasized to the preservice teacher candidates the importance of knowing the content they were to teach. Since many of the preservice teacher candidates learned social studies content during the first and third grade lesson, the professors knew that even in a methods course, our future teachers must be reminded of the importance of accurate social studies content.

Another advantage to teleobservation is the fact that social studies was taught and observed. It has been problematic when preservice teacher candidates go to local elementary schools to observe social studies lessons, return feeling elated having met their cooperating teacher for the field experience and having obtained the unit title the teacher wants them to create, but they still have not actually seen a social studies lesson being taught. Because the university professors cannot control what the preservice teacher candidates see during their face-to-face observations, teleobservation puts the university in more control of ensuring actual social studies lessons will be observed by our future teachers.

The preservice teacher candidates also made connections to their field experience. Several of the strategies used by the professors in the team teaching episodes were utilized later
by the preservice teachers in their field experiences. When the professors supervised the social studies field placements, they recognized several strategies that the preservice teacher candidates used were modeled from the teleobservation episodes. Connections such as these, from the university classroom to the public school classroom, are crucial in order for effective learning to occur.

The technology was the biggest challenge faced by the university professors. Although they wanted the technology to be seamlessly integrated, it was not. The audio and video were consistently mentioned as problematic. Finding elementary schools with strong bandwidth is essential to successful technical continuity. Finally, the threaded discussions were an effective addition to the teleobservation project; however, increased use of computer-mediated communications could make this a stronger project.

**Future Directions**

Future research will be conducted to meet more specific objectives including opportunities to: a) gain access to practicing teachers’ decision making in context of a *real class* in real time; b) model the planning and organizational characteristics needed during field experience, and c) form a guided group observation discussion with the help of computer mediated communication.
References


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