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Training teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic: using live video for observation of practicum

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Abstract

This article provides a vignette to exemplify how the training of teachers in primary schools in England was adapted in one context during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the key challenges the HEIs and schools faced was how to continue to assess the practicum of trainee teachers while trying to maintain the integrity of classroom 'bubbles'. A fast change in practice occurred with recommendation from the Department for Education (DfE, 2020) that observations could be made face to face if the risk assessed and COVID-19 safety measures were in place. Observations could be remote using a digital platform or other suitable technology to capture practicum at a distance. Alternatively, practicum could be 'unseen' with pre- and post-observation discussions with mentors from the HEIs. The latter option left the school-based mentors picking up most of the observational workload in schools. Given the global crisis that unfolded from early 2019, the workload was unmanageable for most schools. This article concludes that the use of video provides a rich observation opportunity that does not degrade the quality of observation of trainee teachers. It is proposed that policy and practice beyond the pandemic considers maintaining live video observation as an example of good practice and offers practical steps on how this methodology for observation can be deployed in other teacher training settings across the world.

Keywords: *Teacher training; remote video observation; assessment; mentoring; COVID-19; ITT Partnership.*

Introduction

At the start of the 2020–2021 academic year, the Department of Education in England issued guidance to HEIs and Initial Teacher Training (ITT) establishments on *remote observations, moderation and assessment* (DfE, 2020; latest update April 2021). This guidance initiated a change in the practice of observation and assessment with trainee teachers. The guidance gave autonomy to ITT Partnerships to decide whether remote practices were appropriately grounded by the following three main principles: 1) that decisions respected school policies, 2) that practice was consistent with Partnership Agreements and 3) that practices met safeguarding and data protection requirements. These three principles ensured that decisions made at this time were concurrent with existing legislation and aimed to keep all parties safe during mitigation of educational practices (such as observation and assessment) that might be adapted to occur in virtual, online, remote or recorded spaces. The ITT Partnership exemplified in this article endeavoured to maintain face-to-face observation where it was practical and safe to do so, but where this could not be facilitated remote. Live video observations were selected by the Partnership because the technology was immediate. This change enabled the university-based mentors to have a presence without destroying classroom 'bubbles' (a term used to describe the formation of a working group of people who engage in all educational activities at the same time in the same space, including periods of isolation if there is a COVID-19 case confirmed within that bubble). This change to pedagogy and practice provided quality observation, assessment and opportunities for feedback.

1. Policy and theoretical underpinning of practice

The literature analysed and discussed was scoped based on the three main principles, firstly drawn from policy and practice with respect to existing school policies; secondly focused on the ITT Partnership Agreements and the agreed

contractual practice of mentors for observation, moderation and assessment; and finally safeguarding and data protection requirements. The second dimension of the literature presented focused on perceptions of key aspects of using live video as the mode of observing practicum with regards to immediacy for contingency planning; presence and positionality of the observed (trainee teacher) and observer (university- or school-based mentor); and quality versus practicality and/or convenience of video as a mode of observation.

School-level policies are usually created by interpreting government policy for implementation in a specific context, in this case schools. Schools are complex learning organisations (OECD, 2016; Figure 1). These organisations are focused on equipping learners with knowledge, skills and confidence to succeed in an uncertain and dynamic future. The uncertainty in the ITT landscape became more prominent during the pandemic.

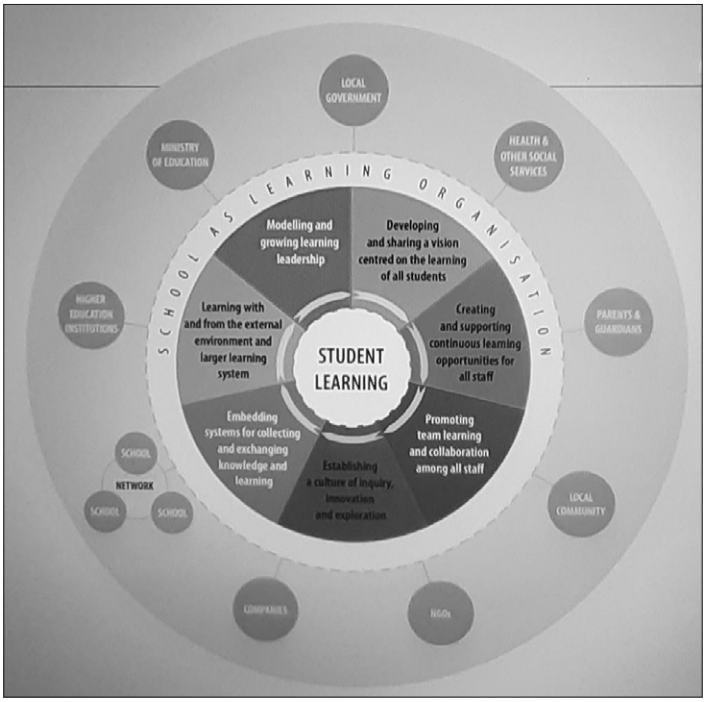

Fig. 1. Image of an integrated model of a school as a learning organisation (OECD, 2016:1)

School policies are meant to reflect a shared vision of student-centred learning with the aim of teaching to optimise student performance to achieve the optimal outcomes, for example, the perceived indicators of student success. Recently, researchers have indicated that taking everything online might not lead to the same levels of success, and that mixing modalities of delivery as well as the need to advise students carefully on how to get the best out of different modes of learning is deemed very important (Hamann, Glazier, Wilson & Pollcock, 2021). The implementation of school policies and the success in practice are hinged on effective school leadership (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012) and how well all members of the organisation work together towards a common goal. The mentors are central to this organisation when it comes to the training of teachers and as part of their professional lifecycle; they act as mentors and receive mentorship (OECD, 2014) as part of their own professional development, which continually supports improvements in the system (Kools, Stroll, George, Steijh, Bekkers, Gouëdard, 2020).

ITT Partnership Agreements are contractual documents that determine the role of partners in terms of time allocated for mentoring or other teacher training activities, payment and regulation of work undertaken or intended within the partnership for the coming academic year. The terms and conditions of the ITT Partnership Agreement are designed to reflect the government's requirements for the programmes of ITT, as set out in the Teachers' Standards in England from 1 September 2012 (DfE, 2011). Partners, in this case 'schools', sign up to be part of the joint consortium 'The Partnership' with other schools and the HEI, who are governed by the Partnership Council with Terms of Reference brought before the Partnership Executive Committee (PEC). Should the government's requirements change for programmes of ITT (even if temporary, like the changes imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic), then the ITT Partnership Agreements should reflect those changes with temporary amendments to the Terms of Reference after consultation with the PEC. Mutual benefits and obligations set out in the agreements include funds; training models; stipulating who coordinates school- and university-based training, who communicates with DfE and *Office for Standards in Education* (Ofsted) and other similar regulatory bodies, as well as stating who is responsible for quality assurance (QA) of school- or university-based training. Other details within these agreements may include programme design and management, individual or joint responsibility within the partnership, accreditation, and disciplinary and appeals procedures and resourcing. Notice and severance of such an agreement requires 28 days written notice, and to finalise the agreement, it is signed by the HEI registrar and secretary and validated by the HEI solicitor. The reason why this information is relevant is that a change in pedagogical approach to teacher training that even one imposed in an unprecedented situation like the COVID-19 pandemic requires

consultation and planning in a measured way; even if the process is expedited, it requires agreement and communication to the ITT Partnership.

Safeguarding and data protection requirements in this case of remote observation, moderation and assessment of trainee teachers were stipulated by the DfE within the following five specific pieces of guidance: *Keeping children safe in education* (2015, updated July 2021), this included information related to online safety; *Safeguarding and remote education during coronavirus* (2020, updated March 2021); *Data protection: toolkit for schools* (2018); *National Cyber Security Centre guidance on choosing video conferencing services and using them securely* (2020), which also included advice on virtual lessons and livestreaming; and finally, *UK Safer Internet Centre (SWGfL, a not-for-profit charitable trust) Guidance on Safe Remote Learning* (2020). The guidance cited here broadly follows very similar principles (Table 1). Some are more focused in school settings or HEIs, and some crosscut the two educational organisations.

Table 1. A comparison of the principles underpinning safeguarding and data protection

School	HEI
Child protection	Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults
Managing Behaviour	Code of conduct and Student Charter
Responsible processes	
Designated Lead Role	
Induction including sight of relevant policies	

These policies encourage organisations to assess and provide resource to support, act or provide an intervention and make a record of the impact this has on the learner (in this vignette, the dual impact on trainee teachers' practicum and the pupil outcomes). With regard to safeguarding and remote education during COVID-19, resourcing and ensuring provision for high-quality learning was important. What constitutes quality is brokered through important conversations among the ITT Partnership and with parents, carers, pupils and trainees. Openness and reporting concerns mean the learning can be responsive, for example, what is working and what is not, and can maintain age-appropriate resources that are available to trainees and advise parents on the use of parental controls on digital devices.

As educators were classed as key workers during the pandemic, they became more aware of the barriers to education caused by a social crisis, which manifested itself as poverty (Lancker and Parolin, 2020). There was a need to provide access to support and pastoral care remotely for some of all learners (child and adult), as well as innovative ways to support those with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) at a distance following *SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years* (2015). Another issue that arose in using video and other digital modes entering schools from remote places was gaining informed consent of all parties and for our youngest primary school pupils, it was considered whether they could really consent to someone from afar 'beaming in'. This gave rise to further policies being created recommending that video observations are recorded using password protection, such as Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA), with adherence to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR; ICO; 2021). Organisations were provided with detailed guidance on video conferencing and using the services safely with infographics, such as the one shown in Figure 2 from the National Cyber Security Centre, to support the whole ITT Partnership and those who invested in the education of pupils and trainee teachers.

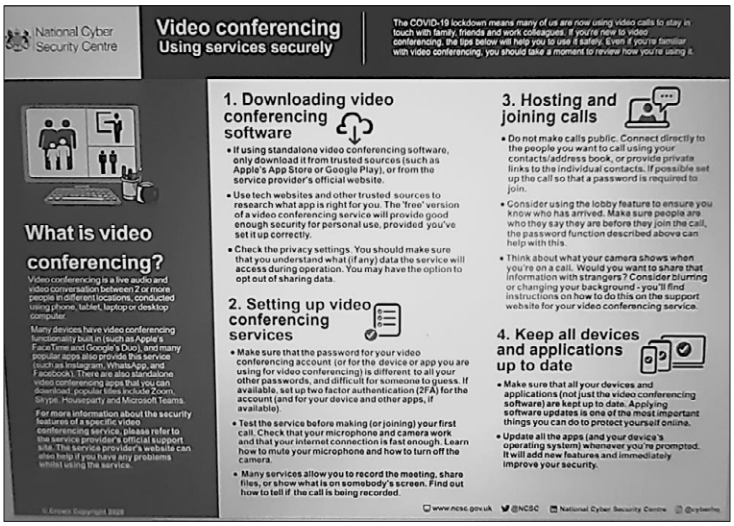

Fig. 2. Infographic from National Cyber Security Centre (2020)

Australian academics Dawson, Bearman, Boud, Hall, Molloy, Bennett & Joughin (2013) acknowledged that a good range of technologies have been designed to support HE assessment, but these are generally inconsistently used. It is true to say that in this vignette, video observation was deployed as a mitigation to being unable to observe in person, rather than it being integrated into normal practice when observing practicum. Dawson et al. concluded that introducing video as a form of assessment provided economic benefits (such as reduction in travel to perform observation); therefore, using remote observation via live video in unprecedented times provided an immediacy of observation and feedback to trainee teachers, which meant they could make adaptations and improve their practice much quicker.

When considering the difference that presence might make to observation and mentoring remotely and online, recent studies have shown that when working online, educators have had to reconsider academic paradigmatic pedagogic practices to both online and face-to-face practices (Usher, Hershkovitz & Forkosh-Baruch, 2021). Other studies have demonstrated that teacher's presence in a learning space (face-to-face or online) increases engagement, the sense of community and supports retaining learners in study (Stone, 2017). Moving to remote and online mentoring and observation at pace during the pandemic, with observation in this vignette occurring via live video, has forced policymakers in the ITT Partnership to rethink practices, and in most cases, this has led to further efficiencies in teacher training in this particular instance and education more broadly.

Social interaction and effective communication face to face are something that is felt to strengthen the relationship between a mentor and a trainee teacher (Moor et al., 2005). Some mentors had concerns that moving mentoring online at pace would compromise this relationship. However, in a recent study, trainees found e-mentoring a positive way to work collaboratively with the mentor and building confidence in their teaching practice during practicum (Ersin & Atay, 2020). Because social interaction can take place in different spaces, digital, virtual, audio and immersive, then following social constructivist principles of mentoring, this is beneficial (Beck and Kosnik, 2006). In general, this ITT Partnership found that moving mentoring online and observing practicum via live video was generally a positive experience for trainees and mentors and provided a quality experience with opportunity to provide quality feedback to trainees following the observation.

The literature reviewed above highlighted that the change, even emergency change at pace during the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to efficiencies in mentoring and the observation of practicum that does not disrupt the social interactions occurring in alternative spaces (not face to face), and that in most cases, experiences were positive and the change in observation-mentoring mode did not negatively impact on the mentor–trainee relationship.

2. Methodology

Initial guidance on *remote observations, moderation and assessment* was received by HEIs in March 2020 from the Department for Education (England, DfE, 2020). Meetings took place with the Head of School and Programme Directors at the HEI to decide a positive course of action that would suit the ITT Partnership based on the Terms of Reference detailed in the current Partnership Agreements.

A much larger communication to consult and gain agreement from the ITT Partnership was prepared and sent mid-March 2020 to make clear the need for a change in practice (as stipulated by the DfE). The purpose and agreement to mitigate during the pandemic using remote observation and the roles and responsibility of university- and school-based mentors and trainees. The image of the table sent as part of a larger communication to the ITT Partnership (Figure 3) illustrates the proposed and subsequently agreed roles and responsibilities of the three stakeholders during a remote observation.

University Tutor Role	School Mentor/ Teacher Role	Trainee Role
To agree with school which platform will be used for observation e.g. Google Meet; VEO or another. To ensure they are on mute and video is not enabled.	To decide the best way to observe practice in the classroom e.g. screen focused on trainee and instruction, no children visible to observer.	To discuss and agree the focus of the observation with the school mentor and university tutor informed by current development points.
To discuss the focus of the lesson with the trainee and school mentor prior to the remote observation.	To ensure necessary consent is obtained at school level of remote observation.	To ensure planning is sent to the University Tutor before the observation
To ensure planning is received from the trainee and that they are comfortable with the mode of observation.	To support the trainee in school with preparation for the observation and discuss the focus of the lesson with the trainee and mentor.	To engage with the post-observation discussion to support reflection and development of practice.

Fig. 3. Image of table sent as part of a larger communication to the ITT Partnership in March 2020 regarding the roles and responsibilities during remote observations

3. Ethics and consent

The majority of schools within the ITT Partnership chose to use Google Classroom© as the platform for the video observations. The rationale for this was that the schools already had a local policy on its use for distance teaching when children were forced to be educated at home during school closures and/or periods of teacher and/or pupil self-isolation. Consent from the school to conduct remote observations was subject to the observer (usually a university-based mentor) at a distance from the school premises only having sight of the trainee teacher in the classroom or learning space during video observation of practicum (to confirm the children were not visible to the observer) and that the observer's camera and microphone for audio were disabled (so they were not visible and could not be heard in the classroom). To join the observation, the university-based mentor was sent a hyperlink to join the live online video call via the Google Classroom platform. This was very easy to set up and facilitate as long as the university-based mentor or the HEI had a Google account; 100% of the mentors had access to a Google account, so this arrangement was unproblematic.

4. Discussion

The discussion will consider the positives and barriers to using video for remote observations of practicum for teacher training during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion may raise implications for policy and practice to be considered when planning teacher training in the future.

5. Immediacy and contingency planning

When planning a mitigation in the midst of a global emergency, speed of the intervention is very important to try and avoid disruption to the training and assessment of trainee teachers. However, given the consultation process and for gaining of consent from the ITT Partnership which was required to adhere to the contractual Partnership Agreements, the process added a little time to any contingency planning. The platform itself – using live video via Google Classroom for the purpose of observation, feedback and assessment – did provide a quick and fairly simple solution to the problem. The observer (university-based mentor) could be in the classroom from anywhere and conduct the remote observation. Clear communication before the observations was key to supporting a 'problem-free' observation because each stakeholder (teacher, school-based mentor, trainee, university-based mentor) was clear about their roles and responsibilities during the remote video observation (as per Figure 3). University-based mentors reported that the video observation itself was a positive practice and described part of the experience as follows:

> 'Simply magic. Although I could not see the children I could hear the buzz in the classroom and the impact that positive feedback from trainee teachers had on the children's progress as part of the classroom activity. The buzz of happy children's voices demonstrated they were clearly enjoying their learning'!

Another stated,

> 'I was concerned at first that I would miss something with only seeing the trainee in action and not all the other classroom activity. However, I could hear everything and the school-based mentor acted as "my eyes" in the classroom. The post-observation discussion was so important for both reflection and to triangulate what was heard by me and observed by the school mentor. It was pleasing to note that we agreed the outcomes of the observations even though we observed the practicum from different perspectives, including the perspective of the trainee and how they felt the lesson went'.

These two accounts from mentors demonstrate that there were reservations about this mitigated form of observation, but that both mentors found that the observation was rich in experience for all stakeholders.

6. Presence and positionality

It was felt by stakeholders in the ITT Partnership initially that not being present in person as a mentor to conduct an observation of practicum would create some barriers to the observation process. This barrier was not actually realised and presence, whether in a digital, virtual audio or immersive space, still created a strong sense of presence. What made the presence strong was video meetings before and after the observation, where there were visual and audio cues from those involved in the discussions, and while they did not share a physical space, they were still very much 'present' in the discussion. The discussions engaged both the trainee and mentor in the dialogue around the expected practice before the observation and reflections about the practicum, and in the discussions that followed the observation about the modifications for future practice (Moor et al., 2005). This built a professional community focused on practice, which supported the trainees to push through barriers with encouragement from the community (Stone, 2017). Social spaces for open discussion were created in the video observation discussions, and one trainee recounted the experience stating,

> 'I forgot my university-based mentor was there observing me because I could not see or hear them through the screen. I was able to perform as the teacher without the same nerves I have when mentors sat at the back of the room'.

It seemed that trainees were more nervous when a mentor was physically present to do an observation '*at the back of the room*'; therefore, being present in an online space via a video link where they are not visible to the trainee teacher actually supported a less-stressful observation experience. This was a consensus observed among most trainees during practicum using live video. However, those trainees who were perhaps having difficulties during practicum (>10%) stated that they preferred the face-to-face discussions and support, and that meeting online via video was less useful as the 'discussions were not as long online' and '…we felt we did not have as much time when talking online rather than face-to-face it was easier to look at and discuss paperwork in school in person'. This was mitigated by spending more time with the school-based mentor, which had some knock-on effects on the temporary increase in school–mentor workload when compared to before the pandemic. This had to be factored into a temporary increase in school staff hours as part of the modified Partnership Agreements.

7. Quality versus practicality and convenience

When reviewing the effectiveness of this mitigation following 2020–2021 training across the ITT Partnership, it was agreed that the positives of using video as a mode of observation during remote observation of trainee teacher practicum during the pandemic outweighed the barriers. Observation and assessment of practicum did build trainee teachers' confidence in practice, was less threatening than having a mentor present in the physical space watching and offered rich discussion opportunities that were timely pre- and post-observation. Regulation by the DfE and independent bodies such as Ofsted meant that the ITT Partnership was concerned about maintaining *quality* training during unprecedented circumstances; however, video observation offered an immediate and relatively simple platform that maintained the quality expectations of teacher training. What seemed really important was maintaining the confidence of trainees in a disrupted time for both schools and HEIs, but the existing relationships within the ITT Partnership meant they were able to work closely to plan mitigations to practice and maintain regular communications via e-modes. As reported recently, e-mentoring is still very effective (Ersin and Atay, 2020). What maintained the quality aspect even when building new practices at pace was the measured and gradual way the changes were staged to support all stakeholders in the ITT Partnership; the constructivist principles were deeply rooted in community and collaboration (Beck and Kosnik, 2006) to get through these difficult times, while maintaining robust and quality training for teachers in an attempt to maintain teacher supply.

Conclusions

This vignette of changes made to teacher training during the COVID-19 pandemic with regards to a shift to live remote video observation and assessment have demonstrated that this change to practice does maintain a quality mode of observation that both mentors and trainees find beneficial to their experience of teacher training. Despite some concerns about changing pedagogy in training at pace and ethical concerns around gaining consent and consultation of the ITT Partnership to secure temporary changes to Partnership Agreements, strong collegiality among stakeholders ensured that the learning community and willingness to collaborate during unprecedented times led to a successful management of change during challenging times. The ITT Partnership has agreed that where contingency plans have led to further efficiencies in the training of teachers, those modified elements of practice will be maintained post-pandemic. The implications for policy and practice are threefold. Firstly, the changes can happen at pace with success where a strong partnership works collaboratively to maintain the learning community and a quality experience. Secondly, the concerns over ethics and consent can be addressed and the Partnership Agreements can be modified to 'flex' with situations where all parties are consulted and work towards a consensus when finalising agreements. Thirdly, the presence of a mentor is still strong in a variety of modes (online, virtual, audio and immersive spaces), but it is communication in all its forms that builds confidence among learners (in this case, the trainee teachers), and maintaining constructivist principles of learning authenticates the level of social interaction in a very practical-based programme of training, which ensures the continued success of training of teachers even during a global crisis.

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