

Teacher Candidates' Perspectives on Teacher Education Instruction: Online vs. Face-to-Face Modalities

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Abstract

COVID-19 ushered in a forced time of online instruction for many universities across the United States. As such, faculty had to quickly adapt their pedagogy in order to provide students with quality instruction in this new mandated virtual environment. At the researcher's institution, post COVID students increasingly desire more choices in learning modalities. The researcher has transitioned to teaching solely online and wanted to conduct research to support the understanding of best practices for virtual instruction. The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis between the perceived effectiveness of teacher candidates of a secondary methods course taught online versus in a face-to-face setting. Findings indicate that students were satisfied in both environments primarily due to their connection with their professors, easy accessibility to their professors via email, zoom or in person, their connection to their peers as well as their appreciation of the content and delivery of the content within the course.

Keywords: Online Teaching, Best Practices, Teacher Candidate Perceptions

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Introduction

COVID-19 changed the landscape of higher education. Professors were forced to adapt to online instruction. Zoom became a platform everyone was familiar with and professors learned to adjust instruction to ensure that courses were still valuable. Furthermore, teacher educators had to learn new ways to model instruction for their teacher candidates within a virtual context.

This study focuses on the series of methods courses taken at a state university in the Central Valley of California. Students in this program are part of the secondary education program, are graduate students, and student teach for two semesters.

In the first semester, students take EDSS 4100: Secondary Education Methods I. In their second semester of student teaching, students enroll in EDSS 4300: Secondary Methods II and EDSS 4400: Secondary Methods III. These classes are referred to as the cohort series at this institution and students will have the same professor throughout these classes as well as the same peers.

Students participated in this study during their second semester of student teaching, while enrolled in EDSS 4300 and EDSS 4400. One set of participants were enrolled in a face-to-face section while the second set of participants were enrolled in the online section.

During COVID, the researcher moved locations and now only teaches online. It was important, for the researcher's own reflection and growth, to understand the perspective of those students within our program taking the same methods course, both online and face-to-face. It is within this context that this study emerged.

Literature Review

Even prior to COVID-19, distance learning was the fastest growing mode of learning. (Vaughan et al., 2013) However, all modes of distance (synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid) learning exploded with the COVID pandemic. As such, a review of the literature is more essential than ever in understanding how best to utilize the online platform.

Design of Online Learning Courses

Prior to students enrolling in the course, an online professor must invest substantial time into designing and organizing the online course in a manner that is conducive to student learning and success. Garrison states, "Designing a blended learning experience should start with organizing the content and activities. In addition, clear objectives for content and performance expectations will ensure a productive educational experience...it is crucial that the course outline, assignments, and grading rubric be posted well before the course begins" (35).

Finally, the online professor needs to lean on student feedback for continued reflection on their practices and organization of the Learning Management System (LMS), syllabus, and tentative schedule in order to promote continual improvement (Garrison, 43).

Successful Student Qualities

The online student must possess certain qualities to be successful within this modality. Prior research has demonstrated that student self-motivation is essential (Fedynich, Bradley, & Bradley, 2015). Furthermore, the online student benefits by maintaining a system of organization within their online courses (Hong and Jung, 2011).

High Impact Practices

Virtual learning is often viewed from a deficit perspective; however, continued research and pedagogical exploration is proving that virtual learning is not only a matter of convenience, but also an option for rigorous learning opportunities (Montelongo, 2019).

High impact practices for the online classroom include, but are not limited to allowing opportunities for student reflection and instructing using various modes and mediums for content delivery (short videos, podcasts, guest speakers, infographics as well as other avenues of sharing content).

Furthermore, it is essential that the professor be accessible via email, zoom office hours or other avenues of connecting in order for students to feel engaged, cared for and supported in their learning. Relationships are essential to the success of the virtual classroom (Fink, 2016).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in an Online Modality

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) articulated and defined culturally relevant pedagogy as being comprised of three components:

1. Student Learning - The students' intellectual growth and moral development, but also their ability to problem solve and reason.
2. Cultural Competence - Skills that support students to affirm and appreciate their culture of origin while developing fluency in at least one other culture.
3. Critical Consciousness - The ability to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems, especially those that result in societal inequalities.

Within this framework, virtual instructors must strive to meet these demands within diverse modalities. This can prove to be more challenging within the limitations of an online environment; however, with intentional efforts, these limitations can be overcome.

Pedagogy must be included that supports an understanding of various learning styles as well as various communication styles. Some specific strategies to consider include: video introductions, weekly overviews/agendas, video grade feedback, and synchronous live meetings (Montelongo, 2019).

The Use of Technology Tools

Faculty teaching online need to invest time in understanding the technology tools available to enhance their instruction and increase student engagement (Montelongo, 2019). While the Learning Management System provides a foundation and shell for the course, this should not be the lone form of technology use in an online course.

Theoretical Framework

This research seeks to determine teacher candidates' perspectives regarding the effectiveness of face-to-face courses versus online courses in a teacher education program. This study is situated within the framework of the Community of Inquiry (CoI). Within this framework, the learning experience is defined by three presences: cognitive, social, and teaching (Garrison et al., 2000).

The cognitive presence is defined as the meaning making through discourse, reflection and critical thinking. Social presence is the creating of a safe learning environment characterized by the building of a community where all participants feel safe and comfortable to share and ask questions. Finally, the teaching presence consists of several components. First, is the design and organization of the learning experience. Next is the design of the learning experience to provide opportunities for discourse and engagement among the students and between the student and teacher. Finally, is the direct instruction from the teacher to share their expertise.

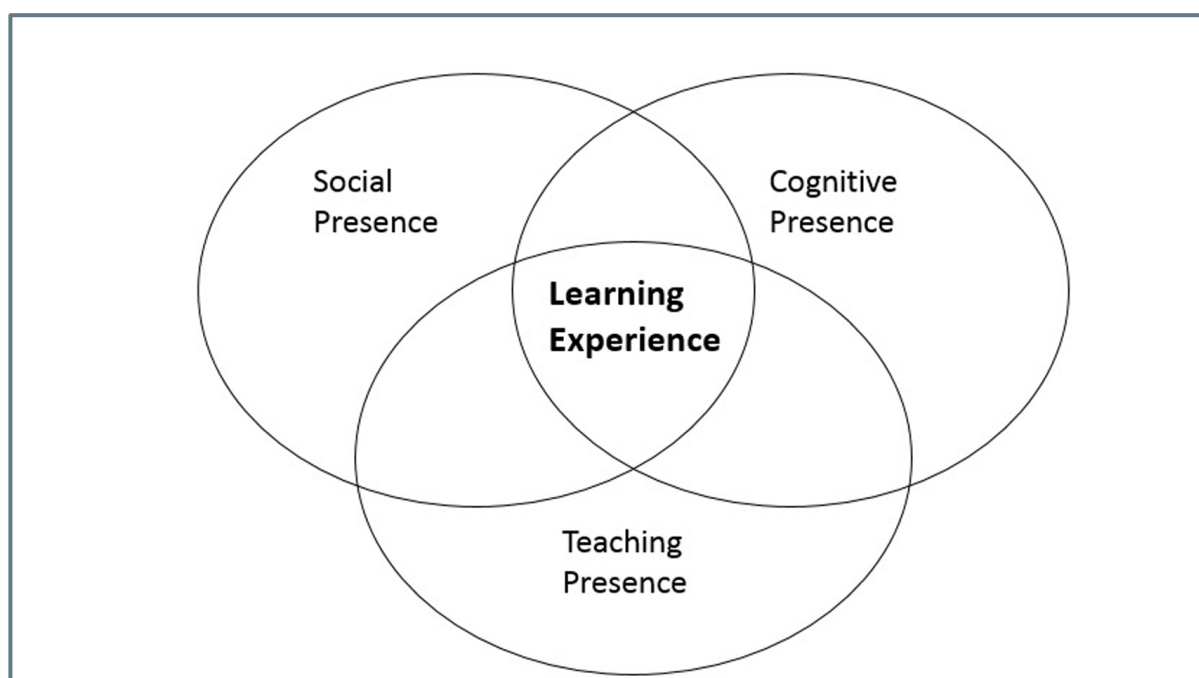


Figure 1: Community of Inquiry Framework

Methods

A comparative analysis approach was utilized throughout this study in order to distinguish the perspectives of face-to-face students versus online students within the same educational methods courses. These cohorts of students spend one year together in a series of secondary methods courses: EDSS 4100, EDSS 4300 and EDSS 4400. EDSS 4100 is taken in their first semester of student teaching while EDSS 4300 and EDSS 4400 is taken during their second semester student teaching. This research was conducted during students' second semester as student teachers.

Participants

Participants were culled from 2nd semester cohort (methods) students, from an online and face-to-face section. Thirty-eight students responded to the survey. From the online class, 21 responded from the 22 enrolled and from the face-to-face class, 17 responded from the 20 enrolled.

Figure 2 shows the ethnicity of participants while Figure 3 illustrates the various content areas that the teacher candidates were completing their field work in.

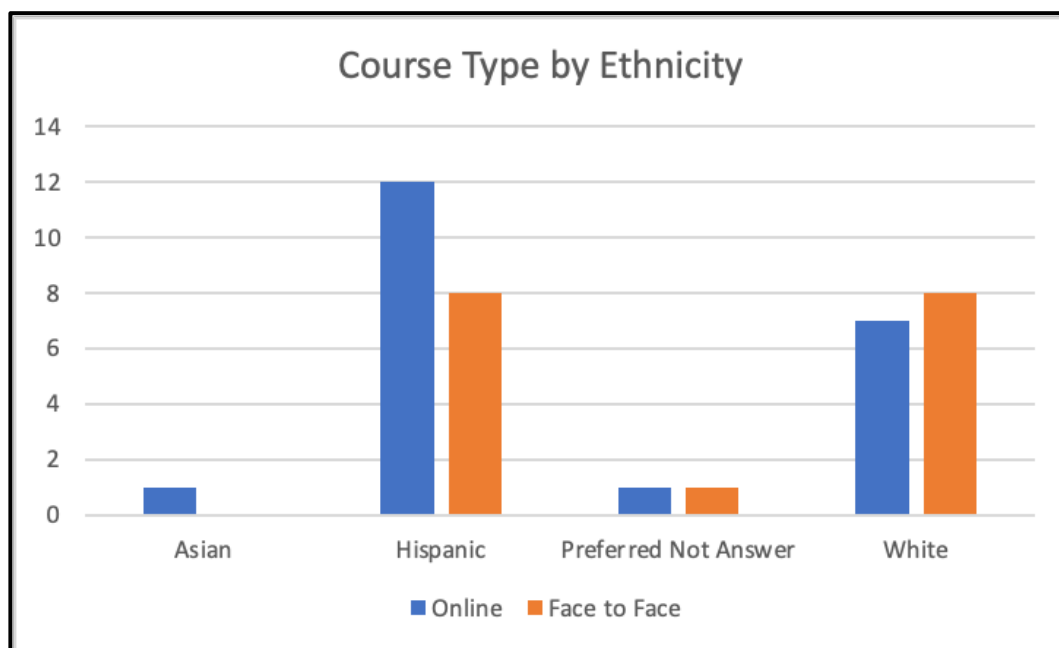


Figure 2: Ethnicity of Teacher Candidates

Content Area	Online Class	Face-to-Face
ELA	5	3
Math	3	1
PE	4	1
Science	2	2
Social Science	4	4
Theatre	1	1
World Language	2	2
Art	0	2
Health	0	1

Table 1: Secondary Content Areas of Teacher Candidate

Data Collection

During a combined virtual class of both sections, students were given links to a consent form and a link to a survey. They completed the survey within the week of receiving it. The survey had five sections: demographics, teacher candidate characteristics, instructor effectiveness, effectiveness of course modality and open-ended questions.

All participants also participated in zoom focus group interviews. Combined professional learning community (PLCs) groups from the two sections met via zoom. The focus groups were student facilitated with professor provided questions. These sessions were also recorded and sent to the professor. Figure 4 lists the questions students engaged with in their zoom focus groups.

Interview Focus Group Protocol	
<i>Teacher Candidates' Perspectives in Teacher Education Instruction: Online vs. Face-to-Face Course Work</i>	
1.	Please introduce yourself briefly. (<u>first</u> name, content area, and a fun fact)
2.	Do you have any personality traits that you believe make you more successful as an online student or as a face-to-face student? Explain.
3.	Please share your overall experience with your methods courses, specifically how did the modality impact your success and/or challenges within the course?
4.	What structures and/or routines within the class promoted your success and/or presented challenges to your success?
5.	Please describe the collaboration experience with peers in your methods class.
6.	Do you think your chosen modality impacted how prepared you were for your clinical practice? Explain.
7.	If you had to take the methods courses over again, would you sign up for the same modality? Why or why not?
8.	What advice would you offer future students when selecting between taking a methods course online or face-to-face?
9.	What advice would you offer the program as they design future courses to be offered both face-to-face and online?
10.	Do you have anything else you would like to share?

Figure 3: Focus Group Questions

Results

A total of thirty-eight students responded to the survey. From the online class, 21 responded from the 22 enrolled and from the face-to-face class, 17 responded from the 20 enrolled. The online modality was the preferred method for students with 30 of the 38 participants listing the online course as their first option for the cohort series of courses.

Table 2 is derived from open-ended questions in the survey. Students were able to share multiple reasons for their preference; however, for the online student the convenience of this modality was a leading factor in their decision to take the course online. Another reason mentioned by nine participants was the ability to save money on gas and to avoid a commute.

Face-to-face students cited they performed better with in person learning as well as that post-COVID, they needed human interaction and were suffering from zoom fatigue.

Reason you had preference	Online Class	Face-to-Face
Easier/convenience	18	
Life balance	2	
Exposed to less germs for loved ones/fear of COVID	4	
No commute/no gas expenses	9	
Made it possible to be an intern	2	
Not vaccinated/can't go on campus	2	
Did not want to buy campus parking permit	2	
Nervous about in person learning after pandemic	2	
Harder to gauge reactions in an OL setting		1
Better with in person learning		4
For Prof. Singh/he was my prior teacher		1
Needed human interaction		2
Zoom Fatigue		2

Table 2: Teacher Candidate Preferences for Chosen Learning Modality

The researcher was also interested in how the motivational level and organizational level of teacher candidates impacted their modality selection. Table 3 outlines how the two groups of participants rated themselves in motivation while Table 4 shows how these same students rated themselves with organization.

Of interest to the researcher is that, generally speaking, the face-to-face participants rate themselves higher in both motivation and organization. A review of literature points to these characteristics as beneficial to all students; however, they are essential for the online learner.

Motivation Level	Online Class	Face-to-Face
1-Highly	1	7
2	8	7
3	1	2
4	2	1
5-Unmotivated	1	0

Table 3: Teacher Candidate Motivation Levels

Organization Level	Online Class *1 did not state	Face-to-Face
1-Highly	4	9
2	12	4
3	1	2
4	2	1
5-Unorganized	2	1

Table 4: Teacher Candidate Organization Levels

Table 5 outlines the ease with which participants were able to contact their professor. In both modalities, professors were accessible to students. Participants shared this supported them in their learning and success within the class. Table 6 shows participants’ rating of the effectiveness in the teaching methods that were modeled. Once again, both sets of participants rated this area high.

Professor easy to contact	Online Class	Face-to-Face
1-Always	20	17
2	1	0
3	0	0
4	0	0
5-Never	0	0

Table 5: Ease of Contacting Professor

How effective were teaching methods modeled?	Online Class	Face-to-Face
1-Very	15	12
2	6	5
3	0	
4	0	
5-Ineffective	0	

Table 6: Effectiveness of Teaching Methods Modeled

Table 7 shows participants' opinions regarding which modality they would choose for this class if they were to take the class again. The online participants would all choose the same modality again; however, the results are more varied for the face-to-face participants.

If you had to take the class again, would you take it in the same modality?	Online Class	Face-to-Face
yes	21	9
no	0	1
Maybe	0	7

Table 7: Teacher Candidates Modality Choice

Participants were reflective in the focus group sessions. Several participants shared the need to be understanding of one's own strengths, weaknesses and needs.

"You need to know yourself. Know where you will succeed."

"Think about what you are good at and how you learn best."

"Go with the option you will enjoy more. You are in the program for a long time."

Furthermore, participants recognized that the two sections followed the same organizational pattern and exposed teacher candidates to the same topics.

"You can be successful in either modality. You get the same information."

Participants also recognized that certain personal attributes can support success within the different modalities.

"For online classes, you need to be more organized."

Findings from this study reveal that post-COVID students want and expect options within their program of study. Furthermore, research demonstrated that online learning is most successful when the professor is readily available, the professor and the LMS is well organized, opportunities for community building are built into the course and opportunities for PLC Zoom Sessions and Asynchronous Sessions are embedded throughout the semester.

Conclusions

In this study, participants shared their perspectives on two diverse learning modalities, online versus face-to-face, to support the researcher in understanding best practices according to the students.

Within this particular study, both sets of participants perceived their modalities as effective. The availability of the instructor, the organization of the LMS, and the relevance of the content delivered all were factors contributing to the overall positive perceptions of all participants.

Participants' focus interviews revealed that the success of online learning is fostered by a community with both the professor and peers within the class. Online instructors need to integrate meaningful opportunities for discussions and collaboration. Furthermore, the effective online instructor will be intentional in their delivery of content, using varied approaches for delivery as well as for student engagement.

As universities plan for future schedules, it is imperative to continue to offer students options for face-to-face, online and hybrid learning. It is clear that post-COVID students desire options for their learning.

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