THE USE OF WEB CAMERAS FOR VIDEO CONFERENCING IN FIELD EXPERIENCE SUPERVISION

By

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ABSTRACT

For universities located in rural areas, field placement supervisors often find it difficult to locate placements for student teachers who are specialized in areas (e.g., special education, P.E.) with a limited number of cooperating teachers in each school. In those cases, placements for student teachers may require the cooperation of schools outside the prescribed radius from the university campus. Because university faculty may be assigned to multiple schools across a wide region, traveling to and from distant placements reduces the amount of time spent with student teachers and cooperating teachers after observation of instruction.

The use of web cameras for video conferencing allows students, teachers and their supervisors to engage in debriefing sessions that are less impacted by time restrictions, teaching schedules, and travel time. Video conferencing after observations of instruction promotes more thorough, meaningful feedback by the supervisors and more reflective responses by the student teacher, which may result in improved instructional effectiveness. In the current program (n=6), which is being piloted in selected sites throughout the area, university faculty provided web cameras to cooperating teachers to use for video conferencing.

Key Words: Web Cameras, Video Conferencing, Student Teacher Supervision, Rural Areas.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most effective ways to prepare future teachers for the diversity in today's classrooms is to provide them with field experiences in a wide range of classrooms (Goodlad, 1990). For teacher education programs in universities serving rural areas, the placement of student teachers in schools that provide opportunities for working with diverse student populations is a consistent challenge. In particular, providing quality supervision and meaningful feedback to student teachers in rural areas across the United States is a concern for university supervisors in specialized fields, such as special education (Canter et. al, 2007). It is not always possible to place student teachers nearby or at the same school so that travel time and scheduling conflicts may be avoided and quality time to develop and enhance the instructional effectiveness of the student teacher is maximized.

Some universities provide the only programs in teacher preparation in a large geographic area. To provide for diverse field placements and multiple opportunities to teach across grade and ability levels, undergraduate student teachers can be placed outside the prescribed supervisory radius of the university. For graduate students who are pursuing a master's degree, and who already have a teaching position, supervision occurs in their classrooms, which may be a great distance from the university. Therefore, because of the significant travel time, university supervisors often have inadequate time to debrief with the student teacher and cooperating teacher following observations of instruction. Student teachers need frequent and consistent feedback, and university supervisors and cooperating teachers need more time for high-quality interactions and conferencing. To ensure more effective collaboration among the student teacher and supervisors, the use of web cameras

for video conferencing provides a valuable means of communication. Video conferencing following observations promotes student teacher and supervisors' interactions that include more meaningful feedback and reflective responses, which may improve instructional effectiveness (Monk, 2007).

Rationale

The purpose of this article is to examine the use of web camera technology as a means of post- observation conferencing with the student teachers and cooperating teachers in remote areas across the region. The authors' program and use of web camera videoconferencing is described.

When a university supervisor makes a visit to a school, typically they expect to meet with the student teacher and cooperating teacher to discuss the focus of the lesson and any areas of concern. After the lesson is taught, the three participants meet as a team to discuss in more depth the student teacher's performance during the lesson with the ultimate goal of improved instruction and self evaluation of teaching. The post conference is a critical piece of the continued growth of student teacher, hence, everyone involved finds it is more beneficial to have all three participants to discuss strengths and weaknesses together as a team.

It is the practice in our program to conduct unscheduled observations of our students and the ability to come to a school at any time and remain there for as long or as short a period of time as is warranted has made these unscheduled observations possible at those placements that are located some distance. Because the university supervisor is not restricted by having to observe when an immediate planning period or non-instructional time of both the student and the cooperating teacher follows, the unscheduled observations can be accomplished.

In response to the changing dynamics of rural education, the use of technology is becoming more available within classrooms as a means of communication. Additionally, with the increased accountability placed on universities to provide student teachers with informative and quality feedback, the use of technology-mediated conferences is a modern, efficient way to alleviate some of the pressures of time, distance and schedule constraints in rural settings (Lambe & Clarke, 2003).

Web Cameras for Video-Conferencing

Video conferencing through web cameras are one way to provide meaningful feedback and an opportunity for reflective response in a collaborative environment via technology. Monk (2007) described the importance of meaningful feedback and reflective response as a means of retaining quality teachers in rural areas in special education.

While our program has used web cameras for video conferencing exclusively, Garrett and Dudt (1998) reported that cooperating teachers have used video conferencing for planning conferences, pre-observation conferences, and post-conference activities. Other uses for the web cameras could include the reduction of actual physical observations conducted by the university supervisor. Some of the physical observations could be replaced by real-time video supervision of the student teacher during instruction.

By using web cameras for video conferencing, this provides a model for students and cooperating teachers to increase and improve communication with their own students, family, and community resources. The same time restrictions that are faced by university supervisors also occur when scheduling parent-teacher conferences. Video conferencing may help to alleviate some of these conflicts and improve home-school collaboration. Other possibilities may include providing a service delivery model based on consultation with specialization for one specific student with a specific disability. Often times the services and resources are limited in rural areas and require specialists to drive a great distance to observe students and provide feedback and consultative services (Rule et. al, 2006).

The Model

The concern for more quality interactions with the student teacher and cooperating teacher together as a team was a shared concern amongst faculty. Because we are no longer restricted by the 60-mile radius, we are able to

place student teachers with quality cooperating teachers with whom we have prior experience, those who have demonstrated effective teaching and the willingness to supervise student teachers. Previously, we could not place student teachers with them because of the prohibitive distance and many qualified teachers who we would have included in the cooperating teacher pool were not selected for this reason. The decision to use web cameras was welcomed by our Partner School Committee who continuously strives to support university faculty out in the field in innovative ways and was eager to provide the cameras for faculty use.

The faculty began by choosing a team of a coordinating teacher and a student teacher who were willing to serve as each of our individual models using video conferencing via web camera technology for the post observation conference. Several measures had to be taken into consideration such as the available technology in the classroom as well as the technological support at the school level. Within each team the university supervisor served as the liason between the university and the partner school, ensuring access was granted to use the university host site for the conferences as well as any barriers within the delivery model.

The six sites where the web cameras were set up vary in regards to distance and demographics. All school sites are considered as Title 1 schools and are 6 60 miles away from the university. All schools provide a continuum of services ranging from self contained to inclusion in general education and the special educator at the school who served as the coordinating teacher may serve in varying roles throughout the day based on the individual model at the school.

The model used in our program mirrors best practice for provision of immediate and succinct feedback to student teachers, certification-seeking graduate students, and their cooperating teachers in the field and the ability for video archiving of conferencing for further reflection. The university supervisors provide web cameras to the student teachers and graduate students who are being supervised. Specific instruction is given to the students and several test runs of video conferencing are performed prior to any actual observation.

The video conferences are archived within the university platform, which affords students the opportunity to return to the conference at any time during their placement for further clarification or explanation of the feedback they received. Many times the cooperating teacher and the university supervisor provide specific instructions or suggestions for instruction, classroom management, and content development. Because the conference is recorded, the need to take notes of everything that is discussed is not necessary. If a conflict arises regarding the actual feedback itself, the archive provides an exact record of what was said during the conference.

Conclusion

The use of web cameras to complete post-observation conferences is especially helpful when students are teaching full time and the time available to conference with them after the actual observation is not appropriate. Many times the university supervisor would like to observe the student teacher demonstrating a particular skill set that occurs in the middle of instruction and does not have the time to observe other instruction before departing for another visit at another school. In these cases, the university supervisor will leave a written description of the feedback and will then videoconference with the student upon his or her return to the university. This allows the student and the cooperating teacher the opportunity to reflect upon the feedback provided before conferencing with the university supervisor. It has been our experience that the cooperating teacher has been able to offer more examples of the specific feedback that he or she has observed to the student that match the university supervisor's remarks and thus provide more thorough comments regarding similar experiences. This time lapse between the actual observation, the written response from the university supervisor, and the discussion surrounding the observation results in much more reflective reactions from the student. The period of time seems to provide the student with time to think about the critical comments that might have been presented and have seen less hasty responses from the students.

The feedback from the use of web cameras thus far has been mixed with frustration over difficulties that arise using technology and relief that a new model is in place to support the quality of conferences and ultimately improve student teacher instruction. Continued work in this area will focus on the use of web cameras in more school settings as well as broaden the range of where student teachers are placed.

In today's fast paced society, there is not only a need to reach out to our expanding community but embrace it. The use of web-cameras to reach the hard to reach schools could be a valuable component to address in teacher education programs. Under typical circumstances the supervising teacher, student teacher and university supervisor sit down face to face to debrief regarding an observation of the student teacher teaching a lesson. Due to various constraints in rural communities including time, schedule and travel limitations, meaningful interactions are not always feasible. With the introduction of web cameras for video conferencing, student teachers, supervising teachers and university supervisors are able to have significant collaborative conferences via technology. Web cameras have exceeded the level of communication available and enhanced the use of technology in both the K-12 and university setting.

Providing the best field experience for pre-service teachers, regardless of the distance in which those may occur, is far more important than remaining within a restricted geographical region for the sake of convenience. However, university supervisors must be fiscally responsible and mindful of time constraints. The use of web cameras, and specifically video conferencing, lessens the restrictions on field placements, and more emphasis can be placed on putting teachers in quality diverse settings rather than placing them nearby.

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