We Are All in This Together: Teacher Preparation, Lesson Planning, and Aiding Classroom Teachers During an Emergency School Shutdown

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Abstract

This essay documents the attempt by a small group of student teachers in a secondary History/Government Education program to do something meaningful with their skills when buildings closed in early 2020 in a state of emergency and instruction was shifted to homes. Our solution was to create a digital classroom to share lessons and teaching materials for teachers to use as they grappled with distance learning.

Keywords

We Are All in This Together: Teacher Preparation, Lesson Planning, and Aiding Classroom Teachers During an Emergency School Shutdown.

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As everyone knows, 2020 quickly became a very difficult year. Out of many problems, we all keenly felt the strain on schools and teachers in the spring of 2020 when schools in our community first faced COVID-19. As the chair of a program that prepares social studies teachers who mainly work in a large urban school district, and as a parent of children in that same district, things got tough when schools had to quickly move online in an attempt to stave off a pandemic. Professionally, I knew that my student teachers and teacher candidates, my education students, deserved quality preparation to teach. As a district parent and friend to district teachers, I saw how we were all scrambling to figure out what to do. My small contribution was to change my social studies methods classes immediately and gear our activity to helping History, Geography, and Government teachers switch their own instruction from in-person to online. In the process, my own students became better at thinking about what made for quality instruction and gained skills and confidence in the face of uncertainty.

It was the middle of March and our district schools were stirring already with the idea of shuttering in light of COVID-19. By March 17th, Governor Kelly gave an executive order closing schools for the rest of the schoolyear and my student teachers suddenly found themselves in a sort of limbo as everyone waited for instructions for how to enact what the state would later call "continuous learning" (KSDE, 2020). I wanted our group to be of help and feared waiting would decrease that possibility, so we started a small but ambitious project to provide teachers with materials (for free) to facilitate teaching History, Geography, and Government online.

What is no surprise to anyone now, teaching effectively through an online environment requires time, resources, and operational knowledge of interactive technologies (Moore-Adams, Jones, & Cohen, 2016; Pape, et al., 2011). Our partnering district did not have time, resources were somewhat slim, and teacher comfortability with online and interactive educational technology was surprisingly limited. However, my student teachers could assist; almost all were already comfortable with various digital technologies and were not overly daunted by designing online curriculum. (At least, not any more daunted than they were at designing traditional curriculum!) We took Google Classroom, a tool normally used to provide content to students, and designed a class for teachers, with lessons, videos, and activities they could download and adapt for their own teaching. My students easily grasped how the program worked and immediately started uploading and organizing materials. We gave out the access code so teachers could enroll (as students!) and start downloading. At that time, there were thirteen student interns/student teachers from the program, and fifteen pre-student teaching candidates. Essentially two cohorts, one a year ahead of the other in our program. I placed the student interns as leads and assigned each one or two teaching candidates to mentor as we all worked to build lessons to share.

We created categories in our Google Classroom page to reflect the different subjects taught in middle and high school social studies, but also added a "non-specific" category for generalized lessons, such as how to analyze a political cartoon, understanding maps, or what is oral history. We also created lessons for a category called "Exploration" which specialized in lessons that require students to find objects at home, inspect their surroundings, or speak with family members. The idea was to encourage thinking about the past or being engaged in community with what resources can be found in the students' own environ. Other than these two special categories, our lessons were organized by grade level, with 6th Grade Ancient World History, 7th Grade Geography and Kansas History, 8th Grade U.S. History, 9th Grade World History, 10th/11th Grade U.S. History, and 12th Grade Government. Each lesson uploaded came with a short plan that demonstrated how the lesson met KSDE standards for History, Government, and Social Studies, outlined key concepts for the lesson along with the main idea to be taught, as well as a brief outline for how the lesson could proceed.

To ensure usefulness and quality, every lesson shared was to be short, focused on a specific moment or theme in history, and easily done by students at home. The materials also asked children to tie past events to their own lives and situations, which was not new in the teaching candidates pedagogical training (Kerr, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). I set a quota for the thirteen student teachers for the remaining seven weeks, starting with five lessons a week, tapering off to two or three lessons a week by May. The fifteen pre-student teaching candidates were required to create two lessons a week, but because lesson planning and classroom teaching was still relatively new to them, any lessons created by the less experienced group had to be reviewed and approved by their more experienced counterparts. This provided some increased oversight in the lessons created by the newer cohort; it also gave an opportunity for my student interns to critically engage with other student work. I also served as a supervisor and had to regularly send lessons back to students with items to fix or main ideas to tighten up. This proved quite time consuming, but we generally felt pressure to produce something valuable as these lessons were going out into the ether and potentially shared with anyone interested. The idea that our work was public, that what students created could be examined but also used in classrooms was motivating, if not just a little terrifying for many of my students. Yet they dove into the work.

Almost immediately the student teachers shifted from teaching in the classroom to creating lessons, making short videos, or collecting materials for learning from home. By March 27th, we had just over fifty lessons in the digital classroom. I contacted mentor teachers in our partner district, as well as the district curriculum coordinator and explained what we were doing and how to access the material. We also shared access codes with administrators in surrounding districts to distribute to their social studies teachers, then kept plugging away making lessons and hoping that they would be used.

At first, teacher involvement came at a trickle. Getting teacher buy-in was difficult as our local school district took three weeks to release plans and roll out instructional materials to students. Classroom teachers were left in a sort of limbo and thus were reticent to use our lessons as they did not know exactly how they would be teaching. However, slowly more teachers signed into the classroom and began to use our resources. The floodgates opened when one of the candidates shared the class with an online group of social studies teachers. Suddenly, we had teachers from districts across the country using our materials and making requests. By mid-

April, over 100 teachers accessed the classroom. By the summer we had over 300 lessons, with activities, home-made videos, and assignments.

The education students took the task of lesson design and resource production seriously and they worked hard, providing materials on a host of topics across the chief social studies courses taught in Kansas. The best lessons tended to be the most creative: one student teacher made a video of herself canning jam in her kitchen while explaining rationing during World War II, another demonstrated how revolutionary Americans used a Brown Bess musket, again on video. Lessons asked students to talk with their families about the past and look through their houses for historical artifacts. Every lesson came with a two to three-page lesson plan that laid out the method, materials, learning objectives, and how the lesson met state standards. We did this to not just provide lessons that could be passed on, but rationales and planning that could be taken and modified according to an individual teacher's or class need. The idea was to provide resources to teachers that could be adapted to the specific needs for the class it would be used with. We also set up a section on the online classroom for teachers to give feedback, ask questions, or make requests. What ended up happening is teachers mostly asked for lessons on various topics, and we all tried to accommodate.

I do not know yet how much of an impact we have had with our course, but teachers in our immediate area, as well as several districts spread across the country, were teaching our lessons. Teaching materials that have received the most praise are simple yet creative, and plenty of the candidates had to learn to pare down their material. (This alone was a wonderful skill for them to practice!) Teachers also expressed appreciation for lessons that came with simple downloadable worksheets and primary sources. This hints at what impact we may be having, in that teachers from Chicago, Wichita, rural Ohio, even India post gratitude for individual lessons and requests for specific topics to be addressed. Another sign that we are on to something: we are getting requests for areas outside of our own expertise: particularly math and elementary level history. Teachers need more resources and our own efforts were not enough!

Apart from helping teachers during a crisis, my own students benefitted from our restructuring of a methods course and the churning out of lessons we engaged in for three months. For the younger cohort of teacher candidates, the ones still a year away from student teaching, they were thrown into lesson creation with added pressure. In a unique way, they got to experience how their lesson planning and educational ideas were potentially used in actual settings, and not just as an academic exercise. This group struggled the most with creating high-quality, short, and engaging lessons—mostly because they were new at it. Assigning the candidates a student mentor, somebody going through student teaching, allowed this cohort to learn from people in a similar situation as them, but a little further ahead. For me, it was nice to see my student teaching cohort repeat some of the same feedback I gave them, but to the next generation of student teachers.

From the students' point of view, this exercise we engaged in (and I made lessons too, I held myself to the same standard as the students in that regard) allowed for a lot of practice. And while it was not the same as being in the classroom, helping classroom teachers by creating curricular resources gave us all something to focus on in our education, but it also added to the student's conception of professionalism. This group learned that responsibility toward students

did not end when the schools closed and instruction moved online. The determination and creativity displayed by the student teachers and the pre-student teaching candidates made them think about teaching in a new way and at the very least, made them better at creating focused, quality lessons.

The question facing me now is what happens as the next step. I want to move the teaching materials to a website that students in the program and myself will maintain, free and accessible to any person. Our local school district solidified plans for the fall of 2020 and shifted away from Google Classroom to other online platforms, so I need to adjust as well. As we do not really know when we will get back to "normal" in our schools or what schooling will exactly look like on the other side of our national crisis, this project needs to continue. Our Google Classroom site continues, and people are still accessing materials. (If you are interested, our classroom is called *History Teaching Resources*, class code *y4jlakd.*) For myself, I see value in having this student work be shared, as a professional courtesy, to other social studies teachers. I envision creating a clearinghouse, publicly available and continuously added to, as a service to the profession and as practice for those learning and seeking to become educators. What we created from our corner in Kansas was not revolutionary or particularly difficult to set up, I encourage anyone to join our own efforts or to create their own version, within the various disciplines taught in our schools. The largest resource needed to begin this endeavor is time (which is always in short supply, I know), curricular expertise (which you have), and a group who are willing and able to practice and learn while creating curriculum (and we all have students who can rise up to the work).

We started this project to help our immediate community, but we are influencing teachers from across the country. Not too shabby for less than thirty education majors in southcentral Kansas. This whole venture is really a simple idea: have a group collectively create resources for teachers and students in an easily accessible platform. The good that ensued came from individual efforts, shared on a team scale. If others would like to replicate this model (and you can!), my advice is to start small, get the word out to teachers and administrators, and keep students centered on simple plans, but let them be creative and to have fun with their design. Additionally, take the time to give praise and quick feedback when lessons are submitted. This project required much time and energy on my part, but it led to better outcomes as my students have remained actively engaged in curriculum design and have demonstrated more creativity than before the crisis. I sincerely believe they will be better teachers for the efforts they have been making. In the immediate sense, this group of student teachers are better prepared to teach online. There is more to learn as we continue, but this model seems to be one way in which we can contribute to the profession while engaging in meaningful teacher preparation. By creating, leading, and writing about this little project, I hope that my own students, classroom teachers, and even you, dear reader, can see that we are all in this together. We are better off finding ways to support each other, particularly during an exceptional crisis.

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