

## Virtual Field Experiences: Technology alternative to traditional field experiences

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Technology can be a powerful tool in helping preservice teachers understand and grasp educational concepts that may be difficult to explain in traditional formats (Hasselbring, et al. 2000). For example, teacher candidates often struggle to grasp the complex process of planning and implementing instruction. Teacher education programs, school districts and content area experts can collaborate to structure distance education programs that enhance the teacher candidates' abilities to reflect on issues related to planning and implementing instruction.

The traditional format for exploring planning and implementing instruction is the field experience. One goal of the teaching field experience is to improve teacher candidates' skills, moving them toward becoming expert teachers. Teacher candidates can improve professional schemata, and bring teaching practice to a higher level by reflecting on teaching routines, application of pedagogy, and the implications of the teacher's actions (Schon, 1983; Siens & Ebmeier, 1996). The value of engaging in reflection can be enhanced by collaboration with others, be they student peers, classroom cooperating teachers, or university professors (Beach, 1994; Pollard & Tann, 1993; Siens & Ebmeier).

This article considers the use of distance education as an alternative to the traditional field experience. For the purpose of this article, distance education is defined as instruction where some or all of the entities accountable for the preparation of teacher candidates and the teacher candidates themselves are separate from each other and where telecommunications technology is the bridge between them. Specifically, I consider Virtual Field Experience (VFE) as an alternative to a traditional field experience.

**Description of the VFE project:**

The virtual field experience (VFE) is a videoconference that allows preservice teachers to peek into or participate in a teaching situation- such as a classroom, museum, etc. The VFE program brings together schools, university faculty, teacher candidates, and subject area experts as participants in virtual field experiences that provide opportunities for the students to collaboratively reflect about teaching and learning shared via distance education.

There are several VFE formats that can be classified into the following three categories. Below I describe these categories and consider their benefits:

(1) Virtual field visits to elementary school classrooms.

The virtual field experience (VFE) is a videoconference that allows MSU students an early peek into elementary school. Through video conferencing preservice teachers observe a lesson taught at an elementary school. The students collectively analyze the teaching and learning illustrated in the teaching episode and dialogue with the elementary school children and the cooperating teacher.

(2) Interactive lessons

Elementary school children and teacher candidates collaborate on problem-based learning curriculum. Teacher candidates gain valuable hands-on experiences with a problem-based teaching strategy they learn as part of their theoretical instruction at MSU. Elementary school children take the role of teacher/facilitator and practice public speaking skills

(3) Interactive virtual field trip to meet content area experts.

Elementary school children from several schools meet with field experts via videoconferencing. To date, the program has focused on meeting published children's book authors. Education students observe the virtual interactions with the expert book author.

The VFE project began three years ago. During the first year, MSU and Warren Point Elementary school (Fair Lawn, NJ) engaged in four videoconferences. These activities focused on providing education candidates with opportunities to observe children

learning and teachers teaching. Post observation discussions with the teacher were key to the success of the activities. (Category 1)

During year two, the same partners (MSU and WP) engaged in videoconferences that offered a balance of observation and participation for both partner groups. The elementary school students planned a VFE experience and assumed the role of VFE guide. (Category 2)

During year three of the project, the videoconferences connected authors with two classes from two elementary schools. These content experts came from varied backgrounds. The first guest, Paula Danziger, is a famous children's book author. The second content area guest was John Barrel, a scientist at the American Museum of Natural History.

**Results:**

VFE received positive feedback from all participants. Participants reported many benefits to VFE. Education students developed their abilities to analyze classroom instruction, used professional language to discuss teaching and learning, and built a repertoire of teaching skills and strategies. Elementary school students practiced public speaking skills and made connections with various community groups. Cooperating teachers enjoyed hearing others' perspective on their teaching and the opportunity to collaboratively reflect on their teaching.

Three key benefits were found for teacher education programs. VFE was found to (a) engage students and teacher candidates, (b) provide candidates with experiences about which they may collaboratively reflect, and (c) be a meaningful way to assess teacher candidates' ongoing development.

**Conclusion:**

The VFE project is an example of an innovative partnership among those accountable for the preparation of teacher candidates. This article can provide guidance to institutions interested in offering VFEs as a component of their teacher education program. Such

institutions can explore one or more of the three VFE formats explained in this article, including (1) Observation field experiences, (2) Interactive lessons, (3) Interactive virtual field trip to meet content area experts.

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