



“The show must go on”: Lessons learned from English pre-service teachers in an online teaching practicum during Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 22 November 2021

Revised 11 April 2022

Accepted 15 April 2022

Available online 15 March 2023

Keywords:

English department,
Indonesia,
online learning,
pre-service teachers,
teaching practicum

Abstract

This study explored opportunities, challenges and ways to cope, and lessons learned from an online teaching practicum. Seven pre-service teachers participated in this study after they had completed the online teaching practicum. Using a case study design, the data gathered from a set of questions delivered via WhatsApp and follow-up interviews were analyzed using content analysis. The findings indicated that the online teaching practicum provides opportunities for the PSTs for professional growth as their technological, empathy on students' difficulties, and extracurricular participation improved. The PSTs put effort into ensuring the students engaged in learning. Sharing teaching materials from YouTube and providing PowerPoint, communication using WhatsApp group and personal chats were provided to cope with the difficulty of teaching material delivery. This study implies that teaching practicum programs should be well-planned and well-designed to meet online teaching and learning and to still be able to generate prospective professional teachers. Previously, teaching practicum programs were conducted in a school setting, and recently in an online mode. Therefore, they might possibly be completed in blended learning in the future, which requires Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to anticipate this alternative way of teaching practicum.

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Introduction

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of educational institutions led to an unprecedented

impact on education. The abrupt closure of schools thus also affected the implementation of teaching practicum, which is generally conducted in classroom settings. Therefore, alternative modes of practicum program have been altered into a virtual mode. Teaching practicum in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has been considered as a critical and influential element to prepare professional teachers (Aghabarari, 2020; Portman & Abu Rass, 2019; Widodo & Ferdiansyah, 2018). A well-designed practicum program offers pre-service teachers (PSTs) more opportunities to

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have professional knowledge, skills and experiences (Stuart et al., 2009). The PSTs build on teaching skills, gain various experiences through observation from others, practice what they gain in universities with practice-based learning in schools, reflect what they have done with their students (Flores, 2015), and connect between theory and practice (Durham et al., 2019).

Research has also indicated that teaching practicum is challenging. Individual and contextual factors affect mentoring relationship both from mentor and pre-service teachers (Faikhamta & Clarke, 2019; Maddamsetti, 2018), have a disconnect of theory and practice (Lilach, 2020; Yin, 2019), and various PSTs' attitudes, beliefs, and values due to issues related to personal disputes have contributed to failure of teaching practicum (Danyluk et al., 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, the PSTs completed the teaching practicum in school settings within three to four months. Currently, it is conducted virtually, which gives them less exposure to practicing teaching strategies and managing classroom disciplinary issues, which could be challenges later in their careers (Mohamad Nasri et al., 2020). With online learning, the students have limited interaction and direct classroom activities and how the teaching material is delivered cannot be assessed (Kim, 2020; Moyo, 2020). This study explores opportunities, challenges and ways to cope, and lessons learned from an online teaching practicum. The findings are expected to provide better understanding of the virtual teaching practicum that contributes to ITE to reframe and re-envision teaching practicum in the future.

Literature Review

Kim (2020) highlighted three advantages to use virtual learning whether asynchronous or synchronous, namely flexibility, cost effective, and convenient. It is flexible as it requires no exact physical location and can thus increase participation rates, and students and teachers reduce travel and other costs required to attend in-person classes so that it is cost-effective. Moreover, online learning can be a convenient means for communication among students and teachers because they do not have to meet in person.

Limitations of online learning can vary depending on the teachers' or students' technological abilities to access online sites and use computers particularly for students who may not have online access or have limited experience with online learning tools, such as computers (Fedynich, 2014). Students have insufficient opportunities to have more interactions and hands-on activities (Kim, 2020). Assessing students is more challenging as student-teacher transparent interaction is limited (Anderson, 2008).

Research has shown that online teaching practicum raises more various challenges. The study by Mohamad Nasri et al. (2020) found PSTs had only managed to complete one month of their teaching practicum and were not adequately evaluated by the mentor teacher or supervisor. They focused on employing the best teaching approaches and showed increased empathy for their students and ensured a successful learning process. They had less exposure to practicing teaching strategies and classroom management that could face difficulties later in their careers. Moyo (2020) emphasized when teaching practicum is online, the nuances and richness that inheres during lesson delivery could thus not be captured and assessed through online technology.

The researchers employ two perspectives, social-cultural theories by Vygotsky (1978) and online learning by Anderson (2008) as a theoretical framework. The Vygotskian perspective emphasizes the importance of culture and social context for learning. Accordingly, in this study, the PSTs designed the activities based on their knowledge and understanding with consideration of educational components such as the school system, students, curriculum, and culture. When they learn to teach, they develop, construct, and reconstruct their teaching practice to address students' needs and context. They develop their professionalism as teachers in the teaching practicum as they apply educational theories gained in the ITE.

Anderson (2008) underlined the importance of interaction in online learning and classified it into six types; student-student interaction, student-content interaction, student-teacher interaction, teacher-teacher interaction, teacher-content interaction, and content-content interaction. Only student-student interaction, student-content interaction, and student-teacher interaction were employed as they were the frequent types of interactions which occurred in this study. Student-student interaction is a peer-to-peer interaction for social and cognitive development as they support each other. Student-content interaction happens between students with learning materials provided from the Web including with ICT tools; and student-teacher interaction includes asynchronous and synchronous communication and requires students' participation; therefore, student-centered learning occurs.

Methodology

A case study was applied to understand and report the research from an individual viewpoint (Abbuhl & Mackey, 2017). Seven pre-service teachers, females and aged 21–23, who had completed the online teaching

practicum, were voluntarily selected to participate in this study. The participants can be seen in Table 1.

The purpose and objectives of the study were well explained to the participants. The consent form was delivered after they agreed to participate. Ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity, and permission to withdraw from the study were thoroughly explained and discussed during data collection, analysis, and interpretation process.

A set of questions was delivered via WhatsApp to the participants and returned after a week. These questions sought biographical information of the PSTs and their experience during the online teaching practicum. They were asked about obstacles, how they addressed the challenges, and suggestions for future teaching practicum program. The questions were performed in Indonesian language to prevent possible difficulties in interpreting what were asked and requested, while valuable extracts were translated into English for the purposes of this research. The second and third author checked this to ensure accuracy. The follow-up interviews on phone lasted about 15–20 minutes and were recorded to maintain integrity and transparency in data collection process. Taking notes of important information was employed during the interviews (Kvale, 2007).

Content analysis was used in this study (Lune & Berg, 2017). The transcript data were collected and managed to be readable to gain key ideas and ensure the transcriptions were complete. Highlighting key information of the opportunities, challenges and how the PSTs coped with their challenges during the practicum was completed. The next stage was developing initial codes by adding and recording the key words on the transcript pages; for example, when the pre-service teachers reported challenges and what efforts they managed to minimize their difficulties. Further, identifying similar key words and phrases, and comparing patterns were conducted. All the codes were then altered into blocks of themes, and similar blocks were merged into major themes found in this study.

Results and Discussion

The four major themes found in this study were connecting theories and practice, profession growth, relationship with mentors and supervisors, and challenges in teaching performances and overcoming barriers. The sample data analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 1 Participants of the study

No	Participants (Anonymous name)	Gender	Level of schooling	School location /Field school
1	Nisa	Female	Grade 11	Rural school/PPU
2	Hana	Female	Grade 8	Rural school/Tenggarong
3	Emil	Female	Grade 8	Rural school/Tenggarong
4	Dini	Female	Grade 8	Rural school/Loa Kulu
5	Nova	Female	Grade 7	Urban school/ Samarinda
6	Chera	Female	Grade 7	Urban school /Samarinda
7	Silvy	Female	Grade 7	Urban school /Samarinda

Table 2 Sample data analysis

Emergent themes	Data
Connecting theories and practice	<i>I think the courses we learned were quite helpful in implementing the teaching practicum. However, it's just that during the pandemic where teaching is done online, many things are a little different.</i>
Profession growth	<i>I needed to think and make strategies how to teach online, deliver the materials, and give assessment on my students' work. It developed our creativity and ability as prospective teachers to still be able to make good and quality teaching for our students in the midst of the current situation.</i>
Relationship with mentors and supervisors	<i>He lent me the textbook from the library and helped me in preparing the lesson plans and in reprimanding students who did not do assignments while I was teaching.</i>
Challenges in teaching performances and overcoming barriers	<i>For material, I still shared material from YouTube as well as material from PPT to class groups, taking screenshots for students whose cellphones did not support to open PPT files. So, if the students did not understand, they could ask questions in WhatsApp group or private chat.</i>

Connecting Theories and Practice

Pre-service teachers perceived the courses they learned assisted and provided them knowledge to teach their students to complete their practicum as one reported

“The courses obtained from the campus help me to do practicum, but it is better to add more knowledge to deal with the online learning system such as the right teaching method, online classroom management and online learning assessment (Nova-30/06/21).”

The courses were designed for the PSTs to teach in the classroom context. They had to make some adjustment when accomplishing online teaching practicum. Therefore, some courses given in the ITE dealing with teaching methodology, classroom management, and assessment and evaluation had to be more emphasized to correspond to current online teaching practicum. This implies that the theories are slightly disconnected as they need to be adjusted into the recent context (Lilach, 2020; Yin, 2019).

Profession Growth

Professional growth links with more exploration of technological teaching media, empathy to students, and PSTs involvement in extracurricular activities. Online learning forces the PSTs inevitably to deliver the teaching materials properly to their students.

“I used power point, YouTube and Filmora as learning media. I put the learning materials in YouTube so the students could watch it at any time. I used Google forms to post student assignments every week and WhatsApp as a place to teach, discuss and also communicate with students every day (Nisa-24/0621).”

The PSTs used various teaching media in their teaching. One employed power point and Filmora to deliver the materials attached with the YouTube links as guidance for her students so that they could see and watch whenever they wanted. She put weekly assignments in the Google Form and had daily communication and interaction for her students using WhatsApp application. She accomplished what she could do to allow her students to engage in their learning.

Online learning also raises PSTs' awareness to be more empathetic to students' difficulties related to social aspects as they did not go to school and could not meet, causing less enthusiasm in learning.

“Personally, the teaching practicum during the pandemic made me patient and understand the students. In the normal condition where they studied at school,

they could meet and socialize with their friends; however, because of the pandemic, happiness at school couldn't be achieved. Their enthusiasm for learning decreased as did their boredom (Silvy-23/06/21).”

Further, a PST reported that as a prospective teacher, the online teaching practicum had developed her creativity and sharpened her competence in teaching (Stuart et al., 2009). She had to make her teaching engaging and ensure that the teaching materials were well-received by her students. With all this, the PST had to be patient and tried to understand students' difficulties such as lack of socialization leading to demotivation and boredom of learning.

The PSTs were given the opportunities to train students in facing quiz competitions in the context of Independence Day. Indonesian Independence Day on 17th of August is usually held lively. Various competitions are organized to celebrate it. However due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the competitions were performed virtually. The PSTs involvement in many activities during the teaching practicum such as teaching activities, preparation of teaching materials, making lesson plans, including the extracurricular activities such as student's competition coach, and a committee member for Independence Day triggered their competencies as a prospective teacher. One reported that she was able to do and participate in many school activities within a month although she was sometimes fatigued and felt pressure. However, as her students were able to win the competition at the provincial level, she found that it made her feel impressed with what she had done with them. This improved her confidence and strengthened her teaching competence (Vygotsky, 1978).

Relationship with the Mentor Teachers and Supervisors

Most PSTs had no difficulties with both of the mentors or the supervisors. The mentor teachers helped in teaching preparation such as guidance how to engage with the students and to deliver the teaching materials, and classroom management. However, one PST explained that she gained limited guidance from the mentor teacher

“At first everything went fine, then my tutor suddenly changed. For example, he forgot what he said himself, he always blamed me as if I had never consulted the teaching plan before. Everything was always handed over to me (Chera-25/06/21).”

One PST perceived the mentor teacher help was not as it was expected. Although at the beginning of the practicum program, he was quite helpful, in the end,

everything was left to her. This could imply the mentor gave an opportunity for the PST to be a “real teacher”, however, the PST perceived the mentor needed to give the guidance until the program ended. This could create misunderstanding between the mentor and mentee, which is one of the issues that often arises in teaching practicum (Faikhamta & Clarke, 2019).

Challenges in Teaching Performances and Overcoming the Barriers

The PSTs reported that delivering the teaching materials was challenging therefore they prepared the best media for their students; however, their students could not assess the materials due to unsupported facilities (Fedynich, 2014).

“I gave the material using videos on YouTube and many students ignored such. They didn’t read it and didn’t do the assignment. Then I shared via power point, but many students’ smartphones did not support to open the PPT files, so I had to take screenshots of the material in power point (Emil-24/06/21).”

The PSTs used the video from YouTube to deliver the teaching material. However, this received less interest and only a few responses from the students since there were only few students with a smartphone to support the applications (Anderson, 2008). Anticipating this situation, the PSTs did the power point and shared it. They also allowed their students to have discussion or ask questions in the WhatsApp group or have a personal chat with their teacher. Next, on time assignment submission was also challenging for the PST.

“I give an extension of time to send materials or assignments through WhatsApp groups or personal chats. Internet connection is beyond my control, then I can only be patient, wait, and try again at another time (Hana-30/06/21).”

The PSTs contacted the students who were late to submit their assignment via WhatsApp group or personal chat. The teacher waited patiently and tried to contact again after few hours or the following day. Making documentation of the students’ chat was also completed to monitor students’ communication if the problem dealt with the internet connection. In this case the PSTs tried to do their best to allow their students to engage in their learning.

The PSTs reported interaction with their students was the biggest difficulty, that hindered other activities which could be done in the classroom setting (Anderson, 2008; Kim, 2020).

“The biggest obstacle is regarding interaction with students in discussions. They rarely respond in the discussion, only a few questions and answers that can be done (Hana-30/06/21).”

Since only a few students were involved in the question-and-answer session, the PSTs tried to anticipate this situation. As Dini reported, “To motivate students to participate in the discussion, I give appreciation to students who answer my questions. I also actively try to repeat my question and make it easier”. The PST gave compliments to students who actively participated in the discussion and for those who responded to questions. Repeating the questions, to make her students understand what she asked, was completed during the discussion. Providing feedback on students’ assignment, particularly English skills, was difficult for the PSTs as one stated

“My only difficulty is finding motivation to correct students’ assignments such as writing and speaking. I do it at my own pace because if I push myself, all I do is judge haphazardly. So, I try to do it slowly (Chera-25/06/21).”

One PST mentioned that assessment on writing and speaking of students’ work was not easy (Moyo, 2020). This forced her to work based on her pace as she had to give the feedback carefully showing she did her best in assessing students’ work although it was overwhelming for her. This indicates that she tried to be professional (Flores, 2015).

Conclusion and Implication

The findings have revealed the PSTs were able to connect the theories gained in the ITE into their teaching practice. However, the theories need to be improved to support current online teaching and learning. The online teaching practicum provides opportunities for the PSTs for their professional growth. Their technological knowledge improved as they employed various application in their teaching activities, they realized the students’ difficulties that build up their empathy, and they were involved in the extracurricular activities. Guidance from the mentor teachers and supervisors were helpful.

The PSTs put effort into ensuring the students engaged in learning. They shared teaching materials from YouTube and provided power point to cope with the difficulty to deliver the teaching material. Communication using WhatsApp group and providing personal chats were also

given. Since interaction rarely occurred, a PST gave compliments to active students during the discussion and for those who responded to questions. Repeating the questions to make their students understand was completed during the discussion. They provided feedback on students' writing and speaking work based on pacing themselves, as it took time.

This study involved only a small number of participants; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to a broader context. Future investigation might have a more significant number of participants and stakeholders. The findings bring implications that courses given in ITE related to teaching media, classroom management, and assessment need to be addressed and correspond to the current context. The teaching practicum programs should be well-planned and well-designed to meet online teaching and learning and to still be able to generate prospective professional teachers. In the future, the teaching practicum programs could be possibly completed in blended learning as a combination of online and offline teaching and learning, that require ITE to anticipate this alternative way of teaching practicum.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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