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Charles Tocci

Loyola University Chicago, ctocci@luc.edu

Frances Bartolutti

Loyola University Chicago

Katherine Czajka

Loyola University Chicago

Jenna Jeffirs

Loyola University Chicago

Maddi Matassarini

Loyola University Chicago

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Charles Tocci, Frances Bartolutti, Katherine Czajka, Jenna Jeffirs, Maddi Matassarini, Noe Serrano, and Amanda Timlin

Developing Educational Websites in lieu of Clinical Fieldwork

CHARLES TOCCI, FRANCES BARTOLUTTI, KATHERINE CZAJKA, JENNA JEFFIRS, MADDI MATASSARIN,
NOE SERRANO, AND AMANDA TIMLIN

Loyola University Chicago, USA

ctocci@luc.edu

fbartolutti@luc.edu

kczajka@luc.edu

jjeffirs@luc.edu

mmatassarin@luc.edu

nserrano1@luc.edu

atimlin@luc.edu

When the COVID-19 pandemic prematurely ended our field-based social studies methods course, we quickly pivoted to creating a public educational website about how pandemics have impacted society past and present. Though the website was a limited replacement for clinical classroom experiences, we found valuable learning through the process that aligned well to the course's enduring understandings. Crafting content for a social studies website required us to create accessible texts and organize information for an authentic audience around key questions within a topic responding to current events. We propose that other teaching methods courses could build on this example and make the development of educational websites a valuable extension of clinical fieldwork.

Keywords: clinical fieldwork, website, social studies, history, pandemic, enduring understandings, current events

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic prematurely ended our secondary social methods courses four weeks early, and we were in need of a replacement for the fieldwork component of our class. Our teacher education program at Loyola University Chicago is field-based, meaning that all courses are conducted in schools or at other educational sites (Ryan, Ensminger, Heineke, Kennedy, Prasse, & Smetana, 2014). These clinical experiences are central to the preparation program, and candidates' coursework is, to a significant extent, designed around the work they are engaged in with teachers and students (Zeichner 2010). In short, the fieldwork is at the core and classwork supports the experiential learning.

When our university ended all in-person instruction with a month remaining in our course, we had to forgo 28 hours of fieldwork and classwork onsite at a local public high school. This was not only deeply disappointing, it brought into question how we could meet our courses' enduring understandings (Wiggins & McTighe 2005). As presented in the syllabus, these enduring understandings require candidates to create instructional materials specific to the classrooms in which they are working:

- Design a standards-based instructional unit that uses backward design to align objectives with assessments and instructional practices based on high expectations for each student's learning and behavior.
- Select relevant instructional content, materials, resources and strategies for differentiated and universally designed instruction.

Typically, candidates in the social studies methods course would demonstrate their attainment of these objectives through assessments embedded in their classroom work as well as assignments produced for the instructor. But with the classroom work no longer possible, the instructor, Dr. Tocci, proposed that he and the candidates collaboratively develop an educational website as a proxy experience.

There appears to be limited literature about employing website development as a strategy to build candidates' pedagogical skills. Burgess (2009) found that incorporating online tools into a reading pedagogy course, candidates in the

course would be better equipped to support student independent learning. Lindsey-North (2000), working with an earlier generation of web platforms such as bulletin boards, argued that websites had great potential in pre-service programs, but it fell short due to lack of candidate motivation. Still, other scholars have found that explicitly teaching technology integration as part of preparation programs is increasingly important for future teachers (Admiraal, van Vugt, Kranenburg, Koster, Smit, Weijers, & Lockhorst 2017; Buss, Foulger, Wetzel, & Lindsey 2018).

Indeed, building class websites has become a common practice for teachers to communicate with students and families, but as Dunn and Peet (2010) have argued, these sites can do more than present basic information. At their most developed, class websites can serve as “a dynamic and growing knowledge repository for the course” (Dunn, 2013, p.24). Our experience suggests that teacher candidates can have valuable learning experiences by developing educational websites that seek to be meaningful enhancements and extensions of the curriculum.

INNOVATION

As a group, our initial discussion focused on how to develop a website that would be useful to teachers and students at present. We had observed that teachers were struggling to rapidly move their curriculum online as school districts shifted to remote learning. Our experiences in schools suggested that many students and teachers would want to explore the history of epidemics and the current social disruptions stemming from the Coronavirus, but that few teachers would have the time and energy to collect and curate these materials in late-March of 2020. But as a class, we now did.

On the recommendation of one candidate, we selected Squarespace as our platform and secured the URL www.pandemics.education. We divided the work among the candidates and instructor to build out four major sections of the site: a brief overview three pandemics in the past; a discussion of the emergent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; a set of tools for distinguishing reliable from false or misleading information online; and a page of questions and resources to prompt students to consider the post-COVID world. These four sections are a clear reflection of the social studies education philosophies embedded in the course, namely that students should develop “historical thinking” (Wineburg, 2001) and “online reasoning” skills (Wineburg, McGew, Brekaston, & Ortega, 2016) in social studies class in order to understand the present and take informed action for a better future (Swan, 2013).

Over the course of two weeks, candidate teams developed content for each section of the site and provided feedback as well as resources to one another. The instructor guided development to align with the course enduring understandings, particularly maintaining high expectations for students who access the site while also making its content readily accessible and meaningful to a diverse range of learners. We attempted to do this in three ways. First, we used the students at the Chicago public high school where our course had been based as a reference point. The students here, on average, score significantly below state median on the SAT, and have 25% of the student body enrolled in special education and 18% enrolled in the English as a second language program. This challenged us to ensure our site could be read independently by struggling readers without sacrificing the sophistication of the content. We also drew on our knowledge of inquiry-based history teaching practices (vanSledright 2010), which meant integrating a number of compelling questions into site content as well as recommendations about ways students could publicly share their own views and experiences. Finally, we used the Universal Design for Learning framework (Novak & Rose, 2016). This is a set of principles for planning and delivering instruction that increases accessibility for students by emphasizing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression throughout lessons. This pushed us to consider how we could use multiple media and a variety of page layouts to facilitate student connections between text, images, videos, and charts.

With a full version of the site developed over three weeks, we published and shared the website broadly through our professional networks in early-April. Over the first month, the site had more than 1,600 unique visitors, largely from the United States. Anecdotally, we have heard that seven high schools in our region have used the site or shared it directly with students. We are currently working with a literacy education class at St. Edwards University to develop a new section of the site that links to and provides annotations about child-appropriate literature and websites addressing COVID-19.

RESULTS

The results of our website project should be understood as a developed-on-the-fly attempt to approximate the clinical fieldwork experiences we missed due to the pandemic. It was our collective goal to continue to build candidates’ practical

skills and content methods pedagogy by creating a site that would have an authentic audience of teachers and students. To begin assessing if we met this goal, the instructor surveyed the candidates after the end of the course. Their responses comprise the remainder of this section.

Designing a wide-use website challenged us to really consider accessibility on a larger scale. We did not know the exact members of our audience, so we had to assume that everyone using the website has the potential to be a diverse learner and design accordingly. This emphasis on a varied audience has important implications for our in-person instruction as well as any online instruction we engage with in the future (Dack & Triplett, 2020; Tomlinson, 2017).

In building the website, we approached an issue we have been tackling throughout our semester: how do we balance important content and skills while simultaneously addressing issues and topics that are culturally relevant to our students (Kumar, Zusho, & Bondie, 2018)? Through practice in classrooms, we found that students were engaged most with content that was most relatable to them. In social studies, we are able to connect with various issues in social justice (for many of our lessons, racial and gender disparities) that are relevant to students in high school and later adult life. On the website, we were able to take a tangible issue facing high school students as well as ourselves - being out of school due to a global pandemic - and use our experience in the classroom to create meaningful pages to teach both content (relevant data and information about COVID-19) and skills (practical ways to identify reliable sources as well as ways for young people to become leaders in their community) (Swalwell & Schweber, 2016).

Though the idea for the assignment was created rather quickly in response to COVID-19, the assignment was very relevant for the current times and that made the work feel more important. Something we liked about it is having the students create what the assignment is. Through many Zoom meetings, we all decided what we wanted our assignment to be. We not only created the content in the assignment, but we also created the assignment itself. We think it is useful for students to be very active in choosing what type of assignment they want to do (Hanewicz, Platt, & Arendt, 2017).

Teachers must create a lesson that fits the circumstance, even if it is unexpected. A teacher can have the same enduring understandings and essential questions and totally change the platform it is presented on. Something we learned while building the website is just how universal essential questions and guiding questions are to teaching social studies. Incorporating questions in our website structured it in such a way that inquiry and critical thinking were at the forefront of the experience. It reaffirmed the importance and of using questions to guide learning (Sattes & Walsh, 2014) and showed us just how ubiquitous they are in social studies education (Lennon, 2017).

IMPLICATIONS

Collectively, we believe that other teacher candidates and possibly in-service educators should have the opportunity to work on website development since it both helps build valuable pedagogical skills, such as designing for diverse learners, and can enhance the curriculum. Based on our experiences, articulating a clear purpose with an authentic audience was vital to our work. Candidates were not creating another unit plan for the instructor to critique but were collaborating on a public resource set that we expected many teachers and students would access. This gave real stakes to our efforts; the site had to be high quality because teachers, some we knew but many we did not, would be assessing our work for value to their own students and curricula.

Because we were trying to complete the website before the end of the semester, we skipped a number of steps that should be part of future website projects. First, we did not thoroughly search for websites addressing similar content or that attempted to serve a similar purpose. We would have learned a great deal and improved our own work if we had. Second, we did not seek feedback from teachers or the public until after the site was launched. We have since received comments, which we have used to make revisions including the addition of several graphs, more historical images, and a subsection on the politics of naming pandemics. Third, we needed to explore more ways to embed inquiry-based teaching techniques into the website. The website presents a large amount of information with numerous questions poised to students interspersed, but there are only a few places where students are asked to submit their ideas or to share them via social media. Future sites should be more interactive and solicit students' ideas, questions, and insights in order to catalyze learning (Fiock, 2020).

We believe other teacher education programs should incorporate public educational website development into their programs as a way to extend clinical learning experiences. It's quite possible that many do, and we encourage them to publish their experiences so the field can learn from it and collaboratively develop this practice.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research on educational websites needs to fall along two lines, which are both oriented towards building foundational theories and concepts for the topic. First, there needs to be investigation into how teacher-developed websites enhance and extend the curriculum. This entails exploring successful case studies as well as bringing together literature and new research into student perspectives on what makes for curriculum-enhancing sites. Following from that, we should investigate what teacher candidates learn from attempting to build these kinds of sites during their preparation programs. Our experience suggests that developing educational websites can provide additional valuable learning for candidates, both about building educational websites as a pedagogical tool and designing instructional materials for diverse student audiences.

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