

Field Practice Assessment in a Pandemic: Why Zoom might be the next best thing.

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Over the past two years, the education landscape has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Restrictions placed on face-to-face interactions and lockdowns have impacted how education is both accessed and assessed. New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC) has had a long history of embracing new technologies. The online platform that was initially introduced in 2006 has evolved over the years with robust systems and support provided for students completing Early Childhood Education qualifications. However, these systems and platforms could not completely insulate the College from the impact of Covid-19, and like many other organisations, an adaptation of previous processes was needed to ensure quality outcomes for students. Although students continued to access their academic learning through the online learning platform, significant changes to Field Practice assessment needed to be made to ensure the continuity of the Field Practice course and the health and wellbeing of student teachers, the early childhood community (children, families and teachers) and lecturers. This article will explore how the values of the College underpinned the innovative practices that were developed to support remote assessment of students' Field Practice learning outcomes.

Introduction

As lecturers in early childhood initial teacher education programs, we were interested to learn the affordances and barriers of assessing student teachers completing the Field Practice placement component of their undergraduate teaching qualifications using video conferencing technologies. We were also interested in the lecturers' newly developed and refined practices using Zoom for triadic meetings and the alignment of those skills with the values of *Heart, Vision, Competence* and *Spirit* held by the service provider. The lecturing team was invited to participate in this survey by completing a questionnaire. Lecturer anonymity was ensured as the questionnaire was offered online via Survey Monkey. Seven lecturers chose to participate by completing the questionnaire. The data from the questionnaire was then organised into key themes informed by the values of NZTC.

The Education Review Office [ERO] (2021) acknowledges the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. ERO (2021) shared that staff in centres experienced anxiety due to the uncertainty of what would happen and how they would be able to support the tamariki and whānau. Undergraduate students impacted by these challenges were guided by the College.

Student achievement is always at the heart of the College and therefore, supporting the wellbeing of students became a stronger focus of the lecturers' work. The notion of *staying apart yet keeping together*, a message

reiterated by the College's CEO Selena Fox, encouraged regular contact with students. Joseph and Trinick (2021) share that online communication was invaluable at this time as it reduced the feeling of isolation by having meetings through online platforms such as Zoom.

Being ready to support

The shift to moving triadic Field Placement assessments online was a new experience for the lecturing team as well as the students. The college values *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face-to-face) interactions with students. Traditionally Field Placement assessments have included a *kanohi ki te kanohi* component which allows lecturers to meet and observe students in their placement settings and have first-hand experience of the students' work with *tamariki*, *whānau* and other *kaiako*. Research by Young and Bruce (2020) highlights that most students and lecturers prefer face-to-face interactions to online only learning. Interestingly, the research also identified that online delivery and video conferencing that was planned and delivered well, were rated in a positive manner.

In the following, we will further discuss the benefits of online Field Practice assessment. The discussion will be organised into the values of *Heart*, *Vision*, *Competence* and *Spirit* and how these values were evident in lecturers' interactions with students during online Field Practice assessments.



With heart and kindness, we celebrate and embrace people and their diverse cultures, talents and abilities. We acknowledge that it is through our students love and affection that families and the wider community benefit.

The value of *Heart* was reflected in lecturers' interactions with students by creating a warm, positive and supportive environment in the Zoom triadic meetings. One lecturer shared that "*body gestures and hand gestures are exaggerated...so they have a sense of normality*". This reflects the emphasis the College places on lecturers being supportive in all their interactions with students, no matter if those are face-to-face or online and via Zoom. Another lecturer shared that she started her triadic by "*asking students what they are most proud of*" as this would set the tone for the triadic and help to build relationships.

One lecturer commented that through building supportive relationships and mentoring, she was able to establish an effective rapport with both students and ATs. The focus of triadic meetings is students' growth in practice and the application of professional knowledge to guide their work with *tamariki*, *whānau* and other *kaiako*. Lecturers supported students during the Covid-19 pandemic, as there was an increased focus on student teacher creativity in engaging with *tamariki*, *whānau* and *kaiako* online. Reflecting on the support lecturers offered to students via Zoom triadic meetings, one lecturer suggested that "*empowerment is key – even when a student is struggling, building up their confidence in at least one area means that trust is created*".

Although Zoom triadic meetings were successful, lecturers identified challenges such as Zoom fatigue. The online Zoom platform also often presented challenges for students, ATs and lecturers with issues such as internet

connection or limited technical knowledge and experience. Crawford et al. (2021) found that technical issues were the biggest issue in maintaining learner engagement. One lecturer shared that she supported the students and ATs with phone calls, talking them through the process of how to join the Zoom meeting. Those extra efforts shown by the lecturers link well with the value of *Heart*, as lecturers embraced the challenges in an effort to support ATs and students on Field Practice placements.



Guided by deep care and respect for the vulnerable and recognising their potential unique needs we are encouraged to look to the future and dedicated to the best outcomes for those whose lives we touch.

As lecturers could no longer observe students within a shared physical space, lecturers, students and ATs had to embrace triadic meetings via Zoom. Lecturers found the students' written evidence provided insight into the students' teaching practice. One respondent shared that:

"In my preparation times before the Zoom triadic I was able to write down specific questions to refer back to in my notes when having conversations with students and now I find that my active questioning flows a lot easier."

Having prepared questions and prompts supported lecturers to effectively guide meaningful, professional, and learning-focused conversations. Through implementing triadic meetings via Zoom lecturers found efficiencies, *"I have also found that we manage the duration of the triadic a lot better via Zoom"*, alluding to the focused nature of a triadic meeting via Zoom. While some may argue that time is a challenge, others recognise that early childhood teachers are busy and have routines and schedules they need to follow. Therefore, conducting triadic meetings via Zoom aligns with the value of *Vision*, where the best outcomes for students are highlighted.

At times, due to centre needs, it was not possible to have both the student and AT attend the triadic meeting simultaneously. A lecturer commented *"I have found that I could be more flexible with changing the time or date of the triadic when they are done through Zoom"*, demonstrating a capacity to accommodate the centres' needs at short notice. Accommodating the needs of the centres, ATs and students reflect the value of *Vision*, as the lecturing team showed dedication to the best outcomes for the students.

Key strategies identified by lecturers to engage ATs and students in Zoom meetings were preparation, facilitating the conversation between the AT and the student, and offering further support and suggestions. One respondent reflected: *"For me, empowering the student right from the start in them celebrating their success means that the triadic process tends to be more a conversation about learning, and connections are a natural part of the discussion."* Joseph and Trinick (2021) note that while technology has improved teaching and learning for many educators and students, student participation online requires support. This correlates with lecturers findings in relation to the strategies they employ to facilitate and focus on explaining the structure of the triadic meeting via Zoom. One lecturer commented that *"I explain to the students that we will go over each of the learning outcomes and ensure*

that we stay focused on those during the meeting". Another team member added *"paying attention to how the student teacher and AT respond...acknowledging specific aspects of the evidence...and generating a discussion to explore what is missing, or what could be extended upon further"* was a strategy to encourage active participation from the students and ATs.

Lai (2017) discusses that online learning in its earlier stages was often teacher directed and based on a transmission of knowledge from the teacher to students. However, triadic meetings are in nature a conversation between the participants and lecturers that have reported on the need to engage students and ATs in conversations. The openness to and promotion of change is something the College has always embraced. Letting go of traditional thinking in order to forge a positive path ahead is clearly reflected in the College's value of *Vision*, highlighting the commitment to all students and their unique needs (New Zealand Tertiary College, n.d.).



Dedicated to increasing competence and confidence, we enable students to make a positive difference through care, education, professional service and a commitment to excellence.

Chertoff and Thompson (2020) outline the importance of warm interactions that connect students and make them feel valued. The lecturing team were asked to consider how they have effectively managed virtual triadic meetings with those that were unfamiliar with the technology and process. One lecturer highlighted *"I check in at the start and make it light hearted when there are issues with technology. I also call students for phone support if needed"*. This demonstrates not only a commitment to making the meetings on Zoom a positive experience but also reflects the lecturers' competence in conducting Field Placement assessments online.

In the questionnaire, lecturers were asked how they actively involved ATs in the discussion of students' learning progression via Zoom. One lecturer shared their competence, saying that *"the AT brings an important perspective to the meeting of the student and can offer specific feedback on their areas of strength and development"*.

A key theme identified among the lecturers' responses was the transference of techniques used in face-to-face triadic meetings to the Zoom platform to foster deeper conversations about the student's practice and the AT's observation. Callaway-Cole and Kimble (2021) found that the technological and prior online experience of lecturers contributed to a "smoother transition" (p. 842) to a virtual assessment of Field Practice placements. Responses to the questionnaire suggested that conducting the triadic meeting via Zoom may remove the environmental distractions of face-to-face meetings and encourage stronger engagement in the nuances of what is happening on screen. One lecturer commented: *"In some instances I have seen the AT make a particular face, so I've invited them to pose a question to their student teacher as a means of figuring out why their expression changed."*

Since the move to Zoom triadic meetings, students are required to email written evidence to lecturers prior to the triadic meeting. This demonstrates the College's forward thinking when making decisions that support students to schedule their studies during a pandemic. Lecturers surveyed acknowledged the first week phone call to the student

in setting out expectations, answering questions and providing information as key in ensuring that all parties were prepared for the triadic meeting in the final week of the student's placement.

“Careful planning. Letting both AT and student know the date and time ...reminding students I need their evidence and reports prior to the triadic meeting ... being flexible while planning well. After all, they are involved in and coping with a pandemic too.”

Another theme identified was also the increased communication and clarity of expectations between the AT, student and lecturer. This increased communication balanced the need for flexibility of assessment and accommodated changes that may be occurring within the centre due to the demands and impacts of the pandemic. One lecturer shared that *“I now cc in the AT into the initial email with the student which has meant that the entire process is collaborative between the student, AT and myself”*. This aligns with Callaway-Cole and Kimble (2021) findings of the importance of *“preparing for the unexpected and adapting practice”* (p. 849) to meet individual and community needs.



Encompasses not only a spirit to succeed and act with courage, but is a powerful acknowledgement of God's spirit; the life-force within every adult and child. We acknowledge this spiritual dimension, His guidance and enabling in our lives, our endeavours and our outreach.

Field Practice placements provide students with an opportunity to set themselves relevant learning goals, develop a practical understanding of how the theory that they are learning within academic courses applies to their teaching practice and developing identity as a teacher. The role of the lecturer and AT within this process is to support, question and evoke the students' spirit to succeed and act with courage,

With the value of *Spirit* in mind, lecturers were asked how the move to triadic meetings via Zoom had impacted the inclusion of the student voice. One of the key findings drawn from the data was that the virtual meeting space acted as a *'barrier of safety for students'* not only in keeping them safe during a pandemic but also (re)creating a safe learning and assessing environment for students to overcome the anxiety of being assessed and develop self-confidence.. One lecturer explained;

“I have not seen, heard or noticed a decrease in vocal participation, but rather an increase which I feel is attributed to the screen serving as a barrier of safety for students ... while I appreciate kano ki te kano ki, I also think it can be confronting for student teachers.”

The value of *Spirit* can be seen in lecturers' practice as they have worked to raise students' personal mana through strengthened student voice. A lecturer commented that;

“When the meetings are completed via Zoom, I feel it gives the students a chance to elaborate on their teaching practices further and actually gives them more of a chance to speak because as the lecturer I have no prior knowledge or assumptions of the students practice on the floor.”

Surveyed lecturers highlighted the affordances that were offered via Zoom; however, it must also be acknowledged that as practices are adapted, loss for previous practices and cultural norms can be experienced. When asked about the barriers or challenges that lecturers experienced in implementing the triadic meetings via Zoom one lecturer comment summed it up sharing *“not the same as being present with the student”*.

Conclusion

Through showing the value of *Heart* and demonstrating compassion, lecturers were able to support students through either already existing relationships or building relationships via Zoom meaning that Field Placement triadics could continue throughout the pandemic. The value of *Vision* was reflected by changing the way triadics were conducted and by thinking ahead to future proof the success of the College's students. Although the lecturers at NZTC were already technology savvy, becoming familiar with Zoom and learning to conduct a triadic meeting in an online space, was a challenge that was embraced and mastered, reflecting the value of *Competence*. While Zoom triadics have not been without challenges, it is interesting to note that some respondents felt that this platform supported students to speak more confidently and freely, which relates to the value of *Spirit*, as students felt supported to act courageously. This small survey highlighted the benefits of moving triadics to an online platform so that they could be concluded. Although the responding lecturers prefer to meet students and ATs kanohi ki te kanohi, conducting triadics via Zoom might just be the *next best thing*.

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