

Universities join forces to strengthen teaching practicals during Covid-19 and beyond

For the first time in South Africa's history, universities that offer teacher education programmes have joined forces to produce a practice-focused module available to all institutions that offer pre-service teacher education programmes.



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Every year, thousands of student teachers spend time in schools learning from practicing teachers in diverse classroom settings. The Covid-19 pandemic brought each university's placement plans to a halt. Uncertainty around school closures and the trajectory of the pandemic meant that universities had to find alternatives to enable students to meet their practical learning requirements. This challenge was too great for a single institution to address on its own.

Under the leadership of Prof. Lee Rusznyak, a deputy head at the Wits School of Education, a group of highly experienced teacher educators joined a 'Researchers' Bootcamp' organised by JET Education Services. Teacher educators from the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, KwaZulu-Natal, Stellenbosch and North West shared their theoretical insights, knowledge of practice, experience and their research.

In doing so, the team conceptualised an online module called 'Teacher Choices in Action'. It provides students with an authentic, worthwhile alternative to school-based placements where these cannot take place. It supplements curriculum requirements in cases where the duration of a school-based placement is reduced.

The module also addresses a long-standing concern of the sector.

Equalising mentorship

While students easily notice teachers' classroom routines, they don't always notice the many decisions and judgment-calls teachers make in their daily teaching practices. "While some students receive excellent mentorship, many others spend unsupervised time in classrooms. The busyness of a classroom sometimes leaves little time for deeper conversations about why teachers make the choices they do. In these cases, students accumulate experience but don't always develop insights into teaching expertise," says Rusznyak.

The result is that some students return to university enriched by their practical experiences while others benefit little. This impacts on their professional development.

The online module addresses this concern by examining the choices that teachers make in every lesson they teach. This approach also ensures that the module extends (but does not repeat) what is already covered in university coursework. Students analyse how choices are enacted across a diverse range of classroom settings, subjects and learner age groups.

For junior students, the module provides a foundation for the professional learning still to come. For senior students, the module connects different parts of their university coursework in a coherent study of practice.

The module was piloted with 2,400 Wits students before its official launch on 17 August. By the time the online learning platform went live, approximately 24,600 students from 17 universities had been signed up for the module. Arrangements are currently underway for students from several other institutions to participate over the next few months.

Materials from the online module have been converted into a Resource Book. In this way, student teachers from the d/Deaf community and those with intermittent internet access and poor mobile coverage can proceed with their learning.

What do teaching students think?

In addition to analysing lessons recorded in both under-resourced and well-resourced school contexts, the module presents students with opportunities for personal reflection. It also provides opportunities for student teachers from different institutions to discuss various topics of concern amongst themselves. Third-year Bachelor of Education student Mongezi Maluleka says the online module has helped him to understand how concepts help to make sense of classroom practice.

“One of my classmates said that this is the first time that they are enjoying their teaching practicals. It is through the use of videos and tasks that the module helps us to understand the practices of South African teachers in action.”

“The module has challenged the way I understood teaching,” adds Samantha Mungwe, a final-year education student. “We focus on knowledge and forget the context and learners, or vice versa. This module assists us to understand teachers, context, the content knowledge, learners and the relationships between them.”

An exciting research opportunity is associated with the module. Researchers will analyse the development of teacher expertise through their study of practice. Valuable feedback on the initial module proposal and research project was received from teacher educators across numerous South African institutions, and internationally from the LCT Centre for Knowledge-Building (Australia) and scholars based at the University of Nottingham (UK). Research findings are expected to empower the sector to strengthen its curriculum offerings and will inform a work-integrated learning policy currently in draft.

The module will be offered to interested universities for several years. Along the way, refinements will be made. It pilots an envisaged DHET National Learning Platform for student teachers.

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