Experiential Learning from Home:  
The impact of COVID-19 on field based practices

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In Spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic upended the operations of educational institutions worldwide. In the U.S., colleges and universities responded to the call to help “flatten the curve” by clearing campuses, transitioning staff to remote work, and moving students and instructors to “emergency remote learning.” Resources and support for faculty members navigating this change at Purdue University addressed a generalized vision of instruction, one primarily focused on how to get course content online. However, what if the content of the course was place-based learning such as in the “field” or “real world” vs. the campus classroom? What happened when students not only needed to study the course content but also practice the course content? For degree programs that require experiential learning such as internships or student teaching, the requirement to “go online” was fundamentally more complicated.

Field-based experiential education (EE) places learners in authentic professional settings where they can observe, learn, practice, and reflect on skills and the professional craft for which they are training. Students are embedded into a field-based setting part-time or full-time throughout the semester and receive coaching and mentoring from a field-based cooperating professional. Among others, one valuable component of EE is the ability to observe and reflect on one’s own professional skills as well as the skills of masters in the field. Schön (1983: 1987) identified that reflection on one’s own or a master’s actions (reflection on action) and reflection during events or behaviors as they unfold (reflection in action) are vital components to professional growth. However, these concepts do not translate well to an online platform if students are unable to personally observe a master in the field and practice their skills in the settings where they would be used.

In this paper we focus on our experiences in field-based experiential education. We reflect on how the courses we instruct and supervise were affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, how we, as faculty who oversee experiential education, managed the shift to

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emergency remote instruction (Hodges et al. 2020), and the long-term implications of the rapid pivot to online education for field-based education.

**The Conceptual Mismatch Between EE and Purdue’s Plans for Remote Instruction Due to COVID-19**

Experiential education (EE) is a philosophy that views hands-on experiences and reflection on those experiences as a mechanism for student learning (Smith and Knapp 2011). Among the key design principles of EE is authentic engagement with meaningful issues in real-world contexts, settings, or situations (Itin 1999; National Society for Experiential Education 1998). Learning is thus not under the sole control of the university course instructor. EE relies on partnerships with real-world contexts, such as, schools, hospitals, and social service agencies; staff, clients, or students who operate within those contexts; the university student; and, the course instructor. The collaborative, immersive, and applied nature of EE stands apart from classroom learning in its potential to facilitate students’ development of the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for future professional roles. As a result, EE activities may be essential components of department curriculum standards or may be required for students to meet state or national standards for graduating from professional programs, such as, teaching, nursing, and family life education.

When Purdue made the call to discontinue face-to-face instruction in the spring of 2020, all the university’s educational activities moved online. While a well-designed online course can be just as, if not more, effective and engaging than an on-the-ground course, this modality of teaching and learning, arguably, works best for courses that are primarily focused on the delivery of content as based in lectures. Faculty who are preparing students for professional roles, such as teachers, nurses, and social service workers, provide EE opportunities for students to learn in applied ways from professionals in the field. The content, in this case, is field-based skill development that is not easily or quickly replicated online. Thus, the typical strategy at Purdue for educational continuity during the pandemic (i.e., “put your course online”) was fundamentally a mismatch with the nature of the learning in EE courses.

**The Pragmatic Mismatch Between EE and Purdue’s Plans for Remote Instruction Due to COVID-19**

During the move to emergency remote instruction, Purdue hustled to dispatch guidance and resources to assist instructors with moving their courses online. Attention to experiential components such as labs, service learning, and student research was sparse. Considerations related to substantial field-based EE such as student teaching, internships, and clinical rotations were virtually nil. For instance, the initial communication about the change in mode of instruction sent by Purdue’s administration to the university community included one line about “clinical programs” and indicated that further guidance would be provided by departments/programs directly. However, instructors of field-based courses had trouble ascertaining how the overall guidance related to their specific courses occurring at off-campus sites rather than university campus classrooms. The guidance provided to instructors failed to address the challenges in converting field-based courses to online formats and the consequences that could have on students’ academic progress.
As instructors of field-based opportunities, we had basic questions such as: Do Purdue’s decisions about in-person instruction apply to field-based experiences? If field sites are still operating, can students continue their placements, and at what point should they be removed in order to protect health and safety? There were also more complicated questions about how to reconcile Purdue’s guidance in view of partnership agreements with field sites and requirements of licensing and accrediting bodies. For example, how do we apply the guidance in cases where students are receiving academic credit for field experiences and are employed by the field site? Will exceptions be made for graduating seniors accumulating field-experience hours toward professional licensure? Who has the responsibility and the authority to answer these questions and enact solutions? The absence of clear parameters for field experiences contributed to angst among instructors who were not only navigating an uncertain situation themselves, but were also attempting to support students who were concerned that their academic progress, degree completion, and post-graduation plans were in jeopardy.

Planning for emergency remote learning placed unique demands on EE instructors. The first demand relates to the scale of the adaptations. For example, in a lecture-based course, any changes in lectures, projects, and assessment following a move to remote instruction were made at the class level. In field-based courses, any changes that occurred had to be made at the student level, since students were commonly placed individually at a site, and sometimes doing substantially different types of work. Thus, instructors had to communicate with and make modifications for each student individually.

The second demand to consider is the complexity of the required adaptations. For example, modifications for each student also involved community partners and their external requirements/decisions. Although Purdue decided to move instruction online, community partners may have decided to remain open. Thus, students and faculty had to negotiate whether and how students would continue their field-based learning. We faced this situation, for example, with interns who were engaged in essential work providing state-mandated services to families in the child welfare system. Agencies had to find a way to continue this work throughout the pandemic, and their strategies did not necessarily align with the plans Purdue was implementing.

Alternatively, when Purdue moved to remote instruction, some organizations chose to shut their doors, leaving students without any option for remote work with community partners. For example, in March 2020, a national not-for-profit organization closed all its physical offices and discontinued its internship program in response to the COVID-19 crisis. As a result, college student interns were immediately left without the ability to continue their internships, even remotely.

Working with site supervisors, we, as instructors, brainstormed ways to make field experiences viable, keeping in mind the restrictions imposed by Purdue. Organizational sites varied in their capacity to conduct online or remote work and, subsequently, extend this work to students. Sites also varied in the level of precautions taken to ensure the health and safety of those employed. Initially, we worked with organizations to understand whether and how students could be safely maintained in their field placements. Adapting to these experiences while ensuring students’ safety was difficult and uncertain work particularly without guidance from Purdue health and safety experts who were best positioned to evaluate and approve such plans.
The third demand includes the timing and urgency of adaptations. The timelines, plans, and intentions of community partners did not always align with that of the university. We, as instructors, were tasked with ensuring each student continued successfully with their professional experience by meeting all educational objectives on an unchanged timeline while also managing relationships with community partners who had substantially different priorities. For example, students who were full-time in community P-12 classrooms completing their required student teaching received Purdue’s message about moving to emergency remote learning. But at that time, their school-based placements had not yet moved to their own versions of emergency remote learning. Student teachers are instructed from the beginning of their experience that they follow their placement school’s schedule rather than the University’s; hence, they were still full-time student teaching and the faculty were still full-time supervising them, in person. Eventually, even the P-12 schools moved to emergency remote learning. However, during the “mismatched” period of time, there was an increased level of uncertainty and stress on the students and supervising instructors trying to balance the different communications and varying schedules.

Finally, we should consider the volume of the work needed to implement these adaptations. At many universities, EE instructors tend to be non-tenure track faculty. At Purdue, these faculty commonly teach twice as many courses as tenure-stream faculty. The shift to emergency remote teaching meant non-tenure track faculty were managing twice the crisis-level workload. It is also important to note that non-tenure track faculty status intersects with a variety of other marginalized statuses. At Purdue, clinical faculty are slightly more likely to be an under-represented minority compared to tenure-stream faculty (10% vs. 8%, respectively) and far more likely to be female (58% vs. 30%) (Purdue University Data Digest 2020: Office of the Provost 2020 Clinical Faculty Town Hall). So, as the pandemic places disproportionate health risks on people of color and disproportionate caregiving burdens on women, these risks and burdens fall disproportionately on faculty who are carrying more, and more complex, teaching burdens.

**Our Immediate Educational Responses to Pandemic Conditions at Purdue**

An overall theme of the move to remote instruction at Purdue was the need to simultaneously prioritize both health and educational progress. At the time, the prevailing solution to protecting student health and safety of students in our programs was to move learning experiences online. When site partners struggled to maintain normal operations, went into self-preservation mode, or shuttered operations, we could not expect them to prioritize student learning and move work online. Students in our programs were not keen about completing their field experiences online. The field experience is viewed as a time to apply practical skills and gain professional experience related to one’s future career. For some students, the field site becomes their first job in their career field, whether they hold an employee status concurrent with being a trainee or are hired on after the experience concludes. It is therefore easy to see how the idea of completing the field experience online would be undesirable, untenable, and create a double bind for students who are considered essential employees or rely on the experience for financial survival.

Considering all this, we faced an impossible calculus of maximizing health and safety, academic progress, strong field site partnerships, and student well-being, all at the same time.

The shift in instruction was not just to emergency remote learning, it was crisis education. Instructors had little time to design effective educational strategies, given the time constraints
from notification of moving to remote learning to the due date for course launch coupled with feelings of anxiety and overwhelm regarding the pandemic. Under these challenging circumstances, EE faculty at Purdue University used various approaches to ensure effective learning, practical application, and professional growth continued for students. For example, capstone interns from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies were able to complete Spring 2020 internships despite COVID-19 via three different options: 1) ending internship early and reducing credit hours, 2) continuing the internship placement 100% remotely, or 3) ending the placement and completing a menu of online professional development activities.

For students who were planning summer and fall internships, we adapted the internship search and placement process to emphasize the evaluation of prospective internship sites for their capacity to supervise interns remotely if conditions required that. Eventually, we developed an exception process to allow certain narrowly defined internship placements to happen in person during the summer. All other summer internships were designed to be fully remote.

Students in the Early Childhood Education and Exceptional Needs (ECEEN) teacher education program, who were completing their full semester of student teaching in the spring, experienced an array of changes throughout the semester. Each program approached remote learning in substantially different ways. Some programs and schools had little to no contact with their own learners while others had regular online learning sessions, kept in close contact with families and children, and provided, in some cases, rather elaborate learning plans. As a result, the student teachers had various levels of contact with the learners in the classroom they had been with up to the time of the schools’ moving to remote learning. Hence, no two student teachers had a similar experience. Due to the variety of continued EE for these student teachers and in order to keep them engaged in professional development, similarly to the HDFS interns, a menu of professional development opportunities was provided and facilitated by the Purdue student teaching supervisor to fill the gaps left by lack of contact with the program and classroom of their placements.

Those of us leading EE experiences in spring 2020 relied on a process of adaptation that was individualized and iterative. We were constantly gathering information and seeking guidance from administrators, site partners, each other, and our broader professional networks. In hindsight, we can discern some general principles guiding our adaptations. We sought to continue to offer students professional growth opportunities throughout the semester. Whenever possible, we maintained the partnership with the host site, even as the work became remote. When that was not possible, we created alternative activities that could be conducted remotely without a partner site. The intention was to keep students engaged in practicing and reflecting on their professional skills. Sometimes direct practice became impossible, and analysis and reflection of case studies and examples had to fill the gap. These adaptations required more instructor time devoted to assignment design, assessment, student and partner site communication, and the professional development needed to ensure student success. Throughout this experience we struggled with the reality that an optimal learning experience for our students was no longer possible. At a key point in their education, students lost out on the richness of field-based educational experiences.
As instructors plan for another academic year, we must consider a wide variety of scenarios for how to educate as the pandemic presses on. Since we can now be somewhat more proactive rather than completely reactive, we are making plans to more effectively support students in experiential education during pandemic conditions. Lessons learned from the prior spring and summer terms are being applied. New technologies, such as, GoReact, have been explored for how they may expand and enhance practice, reflection, and supervisor feedback given a lack of or very different expectations of field placements. In HDFS, our strategy for the fall has been to temporarily eliminate smaller-scale, less essential field-based work in order to invest our resources in the substantial field-based EE that are capstone requirements for major and degree completion. In the Human Services program, this has meant temporarily eliminating a service-learning project from a junior-level course while investing substantial time in preparing students and placement sites to develop comprehensive contingency plans for remote or hybrid internships. In the early childhood education program, this has meant replacing in-person early field placements with virtual and distance methods for skill development and pouring resources into contingency plans for capstone student teaching experiences. However, the problem still exists: how do you provide a university student professional experiences when the logical place to practice is not available? We discuss this question in the following section.

**Long-Range Planning Considerations for EE Instructors and Site Partners with Purdue Programs**

With all the unknowns surrounding the pandemic and a return to normalcy, EE instructors will need to think beyond the 2020-2021 academic year about the viability of EE and how significant adaptations to EE will impact student outcomes as well as workforce needs. Field-based learning offers students opportunities to enhance their employability through the development of professional knowledge and skills, exploration of different career paths, and preparation for future career roles. Educational research indicates that early career mentoring and induction into the career positively influences new teachers’ transition into professional life and early career success (Beck and Kosnik 2002; de Paor 2018). For site partners providing the mentorship, early access to well-trained students seeking to enter the workforce conveniently expedites employee recruitment and training efforts. But, when the depth, quality, and continuity of the EE is altered, student employability may be compromised, and workforce demands may go unmet. Take for example the early childhood education teacher education program at Purdue University that prepares early childhood educators for myriad opportunities in working with young children and families. By year two of this four-year program, students are engaged in part-time field-based activity where they practice their skills caring for and engaging in instruction and intervention with young children. Yet, due to the pandemic this spring, students completed less than half of the required time and expectations for their field placements. In the fall, as mentioned above, these same students will not have traditional in-person early field experiences. What happens, then, when these students are seeking employment after graduation having missed out on so much learning, mentoring, and preparation in their early semesters? Will students’ level of preparation match the minimum expectations of employers? If students are not as fully prepared to independently take on professional roles, what responsibility does the program have to ensure professional success for these alumni? Will employers modify their onboarding and training processes to accommodate employees whose academic preparation was altered because of the pandemic? How do academic programs, EE site partners, and employers individually and collectively own their parts in supporting students’ professional success? The uncertainty of what
is ahead for our students makes it difficult to predict and support their transition into their professional lives.

EE site partners have been no less affected by the circumstances wrought by the pandemic and are themselves figuring out what the future holds for their organizations amid a rapidly changing service delivery landscape. Uncertainty about organizational outlook, the shift of work to essential duties, resource exigencies, and other pressing concerns may make it difficult for site partners to commit to offering EE experiences. Though sites may have come to rely on the benefits of hosting students’ EE experiences, the return on investment may no longer be convincing or consequential due to other mission-related priorities. As a result, there is a real danger of field site partners reducing or even eliminating their EE offerings. Academic programs will need to think creatively about how to respond to these potential shortages. Students may not be able to go “out” into the field to gain EE experiences, but perhaps real-world EE experiences can be created within the university. Large universities, such as Purdue, operate with all of the same core functions found in societal institutions from business to social services. And, with all the planning and responding to COVID-19, there may be new roles and responsibilities that could represent meaningful, field-relevant learning opportunities for students such as, contact tracing or supply chain management. Insofar as student learning and development is an educational priority, actively building capacity for offering campus-based EE seems like a worthwhile endeavor for universities and EE instructors to undertake. In structuring these positions, consideration should be given to compensating students in whole or part for their work. In education and social service fields especially, EE commonly involves full-time work for little to no pay. The lack of compensation adds a thick layer of burden for students already balancing work and school and those living with financial constraints.

On the workforce side, employers will likely need to adjust their preparation expectations of job seekers who completed their academic training during the COVID-19 era. Applicants will be no less high quality than before; but they will have had fewer opportunities for professionalization due to whether and how EE was available. Employers should prepare to invest additional training, development, and mentoring resources in their new employees so that they can effectively fulfill their job roles and be on track for career advancement. Field-specific training and professional development has always been the responsibility of employers and would be no different from what employers would offer other entry-level employees. What is different is that our professional preparation programs may now be constrained in their ability to facilitate a streamlined recruitment and training process for employers. EE faculty, campus career services consultants, and employers would benefit from discussing each other’s efforts and identifying the supports that students will need to make a successful college to career transition.

Considerations for Higher Education Institutions and Systems
As we look ahead to the immediate and long-term future, higher education will continue to face substantial challenges presented by COVID-19 and its consequences. Individual faculty on a course-by-course basis cannot solve those challenges. They are systemic issues and require systemic solutions.

Substantial, and often invisible, work is required to continue each university’s teaching and learning mission through the pandemic, and this work requires resources. Current reports widely
acknowledge the financial resources necessary (Ali 2020; Chronicle of Higher Education 2020). For example, as of early July, public colleges in the state of Kentucky had accrued $145 million in pandemic-related expenses (Rogers 2020). However, more than money is required. Since the onset of the pandemic, faculty, administrators, and other employees of higher education have been operating in crisis mode. That is perhaps not surprising, for this is indeed a crisis. But, operating in crisis mode for a period of months with no end in sight is unsustainable. Add to this that the crisis is not limited to one’s professional responsibilities. Parents with children at home are expected to continue their work despite the closure of childcare programs and P-12 schools. Older or otherwise at-risk loved ones require care and support. And, of course, systemic racism and police brutality, though never absent, are once again omnipresent and un-ignoreable causing additional stressors in the lives of faculty. As previously mentioned, non-tenure track faculty who regularly teach field-based EE courses are more likely to be women and more likely to be faculty of color speaking to a stronger connection to and impact by the compounding national and world issues. This intersectional perspective would remind us that these other crisis conditions are not extraneous concerns.

Universities should be taking action that helps to make educating in crisis conditions more sustainable for the long haul. Faculty need breaks, opportunities for self-care, and support in navigating traumatic aspects of this experience. Many pedagogical leaders have called for trauma-informed teaching practices in the wake of crises (Gutierrez and Gutierrez 2019; Imad 2020). There is likely to be a traumatic element to the return to campuses, as students and faculty alike confront visible, constant reminders of the threat of the virus. Since the onset of the pandemic, faculty have functioned as educational first responders, engaging in substantial care work to help students manage the ways the pandemic has disrupted their education, their career plans, and their lives.

This work is demanding, and it calls for recognition and support. For example, universities could plan for smaller faculty supervision loads for current and subsequent semesters. This is particularly needed for those faculty who supervise EE in programs such as education where students will undoubtedly need added mentoring and support in their capstone student teaching experience since their early field-based EE was cancelled and/or greatly altered. This early field-based work allows for guided practice prior to their full-time student teaching experience, building professional skills in preparation for their capstone student teaching. Current students in education majors will have far fewer practical hours than those who have completed programs before them, leaving them potentially less confident in their professional abilities. Some colleges and units were able to compensate for course redevelopment but that was not campus wide. Faculty worked tirelessly throughout the summer with varied levels of compensation to prepare for the fall semester under strict new guidelines for social distancing and safety policies. What will faculty do to accomplish the daunting task of course redesign during a full fall semester if spring semester is also to be altered? Many universities are planning for longer winter breaks. However, will this extended break be another block of time where faculty will spend time redeveloping coursework in preparation for spring semester without added compensation?

If colleges and universities want faculty to be effective in redesigning instruction and carrying it out in pandemic conditions, then they must address the need for balance. Not everything can be a priority. Tenure stop-clock policies are one way colleges have tried to address this (Gomollón-
Bel 2020; Pettit 2020), but they also have drawbacks (Manchester, Leslie and Kramer 2013; Quinn 2010) and are not inclusive of most instructors (neither those with tenure nor those in non-tenure track positions). Universities must adjust their systems so that faculty are rewarded for addressing the most pressing priorities including rapid but educationally effective changes to hybrid and remote learning and the essential emotional work of addressing student well-being throughout the crisis. At the same time, faculty should not be penalized for reduced accomplishment in those areas that are not urgent at this time.

Finally, systemic considerations ought to include the longstanding systems of faculty governance and academic freedom. As experts in their discipline, faculty are in the best position to determine the most effective ways to teach it. Principles of academic freedom and shared governance have long emphasized that faculty have the right and responsibility to make curriculum decisions (American Association of University Professors n.d.; Euben 2002; Levinson 2009; Messier 2017). In the midst of a pandemic that has changed so much, this principle is unchanged. Once each university has decided how best to protect the health and safety of its students, faculty, staff, and neighbors -- which is its responsibility -- then the faculty should be empowered to decide how best to teach given the changes and limitations imposed by social distancing and other necessities. The answer to “how best to teach” will be different for field-based EE than for a lecture-based survey course, for example. For faculty to be truly empowered to select the teaching settings and methods best suited to the learning goals of their courses, universities should strive to make health-and-safety decisions that can be applied broadly; to clearly communicate the bounds of those decisions; and, to provide faculty with the guidance necessary to adapt general university policies to specific pedagogical settings, including the right to appeal for exceptions when appropriate.

Conclusions
The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the present reality, and likely the future, of higher education. So, too, has it changed the world of work for which our students are preparing. A particular strength of field-based EE is the way it combines the settings of work and education. Therefore, we encourage EE instructors to take advantage of this intersection. Explore the changes being experienced in relevant career settings and consider how you can employ new technologies, methods, and strategies to design your EE experiences to prepare students for these new realities such as using Google classroom, Flipgrid and other social learning platforms for education majors; tele-practice tools for Human Services majors; and, the myriad virtual meeting platforms. This is not an individual-level challenge, however, and it will not be solved by individual instructors alone. Higher education systems must recognize the comprehensive and colossal impact of the loss of practical application aspect of the professional preparation experience and provide the resources, guidance, and support needed to allow field-based EE to adapt to pandemic conditions while continuing to provide students with authentic experiences for professional skill development.

References


