

Supporting Student Teaching Through Virtual Classrooms

In the face of increasing difficulty placing teacher candidates in schools for their practicum, using a cyber practicum offers several advantages

By **Jiyeon Yoon**

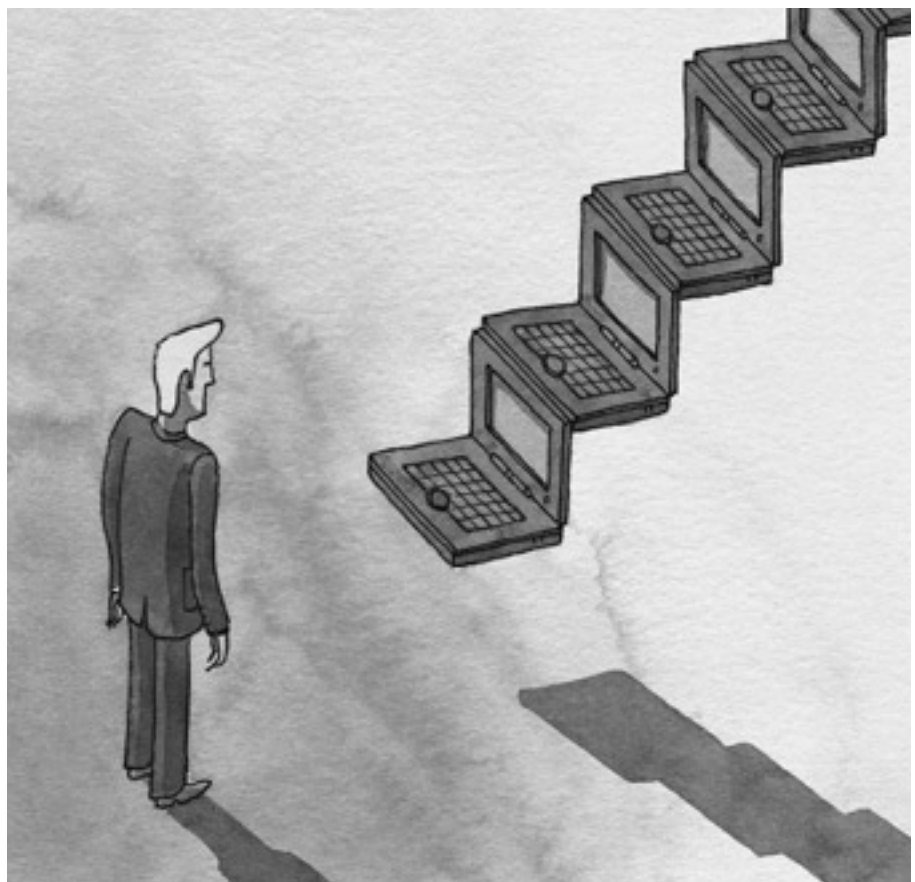
All teacher education programs require teacher candidates to have in-school practicum experiences. Placing student teachers in schools is not always easy, however, and it is getting harder. Institutions must find local schools willing to participate in the student teacher program. According to the field experience office at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, it is getting more difficult to find schools where the teacher candidates can practice because of the limited number of local schools and the increasing competition for spaces from competing institutions.

Even after schools agree to participate in the student teacher program, teachers at those schools must agree to work with the teacher candidates. These mentor teachers spend considerable time with the teacher candidates, helping them get oriented to the school and sharing what they have learned about teaching. They also supervise the student teachers in the classroom. Their participation in the practicum program requires teachers to invest additional effort and patience to work with student teachers.

Because of these challenges, many school administrators and teachers do not want teacher candidates in their schools. It thus becomes more difficult to find proper schools for the teacher candidates to practice teaching.

What to Do?

To address these problems, I propose using a cyber practicum in the form of a three-dimensional, online world



adapted for student teaching. With the cyber practicum, the teacher candidates create their own classroom spaces rather than sharing a supervising teacher's classroom. (Alternatively, the program administrators could create generic and specialized classrooms before student teachers enter the system.) The teacher candidates would create avatars (an interactive representation of a human in a virtual reality environment), develop

lesson plans, and teach in the virtual classrooms. The cyber practicum thus eliminates the need to place teacher candidates in practicum schools, although it does not eliminate the need for mentors and students willing to participate in the online classrooms, or the need for program administrators. Cooperative teachers and students could potentially live anywhere in the world as long as they had Internet access. The institu-

tion could create and administer its own cyber practicum or participate in a practicum created and administered by a consortium of institutions with similar program needs.

Once the supervising teachers register for the cyber practicum, they can choose a specialized area (science, social studies, language, art, and so on, and a specific grade level) and create their own spaces for supervising and communicating with teacher candidates. Supervisors can use chat rooms on the site to communicate with teacher candidates. They also create their own avatars. The use of avatars allows them to combine gestures, actions, facial expressions, visual cues, and lip-synchronized speech, making the conversations between the teacher candidates and the supervisors more realistic and engaging.

The traditional school practicum is an intensive experience with one group of learners, which usually limits the range of problems a student teacher faces. In

a cyber practicum, however, the teacher candidates can meet a variety of students—whoever signed up from anywhere around the world. Each student has his or her own account, and the teacher candidates can develop lessons targeting each student's needs. The cyber practicum supervisors review the lessons, and the teacher candidates revise them to address their suggestions.

Benefits and Concerns

The cyber practicum provides a virtual alternative to a real school setting. It could replace the school practicum or serve as a pre-practicum program, allowing teacher candidates to practice role-playing and lesson planning. The choice would depend on the teaching program's needs and the willingness of mentors and students to participate in the virtual classrooms. A key question is whether the cyber practicum would replace real classroom experience or simply provide additional training for

student teachers outside the physical classroom. Another question is whether students would "attend" virtual classes taught by the teacher candidates or just receive additional, outside-class help through the cyber practicum. Answering these questions requires research and close work with practicum administrators and participants, which I plan to undertake.

Cyber worlds attract attention in education because of their potential benefits: communication without limitations of time and space, realistic and engaging conversations through chat and using avatars, and effective, individualized teaching and learning in an interactive 3D environment. Given the problems facing teacher practicum programs, the cyber practicum offers an interesting solution. *e*

Jiyeon Yoon (jiyeon@d.umn.edu) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Minnesota, Duluth.