

## **Let's Go to Camp: A Model for Clinical Practice**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes an alternative venue clinical experience that provides advanced literacy specialist candidates and preservice teacher candidates at a small liberal arts university context for advancing their roles and understanding of effective teaching. The article situates our conceptual and pedagogical understandings of teaching and learning in a body of theoretical work, upon which we have relied to craft the clinical experience. This article also describes the multi-layered field experience, and shares lessons learned from the course instructors, literacy coaches, and preservice candidates. Finally, we discuss next steps in our quest to improve clinically rich practice.

***Keywords:* alternative venue clinical experience, literacy coaching, preservice teachers, dispositions**

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Many challenges face teacher educators as we seek to create clinically rich fieldwork experiences and community partnerships that will prepare new teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to meet the expectations of teachers in the 21st century. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standards require effective clinical partnerships asserting “effective partnerships and high-quality clinical practice are central to preparation so that candidates develop the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to demonstrate positive impact on all P–12 students’ learning and development” (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2016, p. 24). Although CAEP focuses on preservice teachers, as university faculty, we are deeply concerned about translating these experiences to include candidates in our professional programs, while at the same time fulfilling real community needs. As such, we seek to craft clinically rich field experiences that fulfill two goals: (a) provide aspiring teachers and teacher-leaders opportunities to develop professional abilities in a real-world setting, while also (b) serving the community.

The goal of this paper is to describe an alternative venue for a clinical fieldwork experience that has provided our advanced literacy specialist candidates and graduate preservice candidates the context for advancing their respective roles and for building their understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective teaching. Concurrently, this venue also addresses the needs of struggling readers in our community. The field experience we describe is born out of the ongoing work of teacher educators at a small liberal arts university in the northeastern United States and a collaborative effort between the university and a neighboring urban school district. First, we situate our conceptual and pedagogical understandings of teaching and learning in a body of theoretical work upon which we have relied to craft the field experience. We next describe the multi-layered field experience. Then, we share lessons learned, through the reflections of the course instructors, preservice candidates, and literacy coaches. Lastly, we discuss the next steps in our quest to improve clinically rich practice to

teach the leadership dispositions and technical skills necessary for our advanced literacy candidates and preservice teachers to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Although this is an alternative venue experience, we believe this model can be replicated by other programs. We believe this model can be relevant to others charged with training teachers and who are interested in servicing community needs.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

The principles of constructivism undergird the framework of the fieldwork experience at this small liberal arts university in the northeastern United States. Constructivism has a long and well documented history, although many different perspectives coexist within it (e.g. Bruner & Austin, 1986; Freire, 2000; Piaget 1951; Von Glaserfeld, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2000). According to Fenwick (2000), all views share one central theme: “a learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world” (p. 248). Social constructivism adds to this notion, explaining learning as a collaborative process. In this view, learning is considered a process where knowledge is co-created through social interaction (Lipponen, 2000). To facilitate knowledge construction, the role of the teacher is not to transfer knowledge, but to create an environment for students to construct knowledge. Therefore, the learning context becomes critical for the facilitation of socially mediated learning.

Rooted in the constructivist paradigm is the phenomenon of “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983, p. 59), which emphasizes the ongoing learning of professionals whereby “...practitioners learn by noticing and framing problems of interest to them in particular ways, then inquiring and experimenting with solutions” (Fenwick, 2001, p. 12). According to Schön (1983), reflection-in-action is a rigorous professional process involving acknowledgement of and reflection on uncertainty and complexity in one’s practice leading to “...a legitimate form of professional knowing” (p.69).

Reflective practice is seen by many teacher educators to be the

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core of effective teacher preparation programs and the development of professional competencies. To this end, Loughran (2002) notes that it is through the development of knowledge and understanding of the practice setting and the ability to negotiate and respond to such knowledge that the reflective practitioner becomes truly responsive to the needs, issues, and concerns that are critical to shaping practice. Furthermore, Myers (2012) asserts that it is through the process of reflection that beginning teachers begin to connect theory to practice and to develop more sophisticated conceptions of teaching and learning. Thus, fostering reflection and nurturing reflective practitioners has become a critical focus for teacher education programs. Together these elements are actualized through the context of the fieldwork experience, allowing teacher candidates opportunities to link theory with instruction, assimilate new learning through instructor guidance, self-reflect, and work through problems collaboratively, as they acquire essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of professional educators.

### **The Multi-layered Context**

Two settings, a small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States, and an urban elementary school also in the northeast, are the context for this study. Due to budgetary cuts, the school district approached the liberal arts college in 2010 about creating a summer reading program to address summer learning loss. The Primary Enrichment Program (PEP) was developed based on these conversations. The PEP Program provides the district's elementary students completing kindergarten to grade three, support services to help increase or maintain student reading levels. The program's goal is to provide response to intervention (RTI), tier 2 students with remediation during their two-week summer enrollment. These students are ethnically, culturally, and socioeconomically, diverse, and represent three of the eight elementary schools in the district. A total of forty children are invited to participate in the PEP summer program (hereafter referred to as the PEP Camp).

The authors have been involved in the PEP Camp for three years. Over time the PEP program has evolved into a multi-layered

partnership with various roles represented by district administration, university faculty and administration, graduate level preservice candidates, and graduate level advanced literacy candidates (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** *Roles and Responsibility of District, University Faculty and Administration, and Candidates*

<b>School District</b>	Identify eligible students and invite these students to participate. Provide bus transportation (school to university). Provide files for each child -latest DRA and AIMS summary. Provide several guest readers during Camp.
<b>University Administrator</b>	Liaison between school district, university and families. Organizes field trips & guest readers. Provides snacks, study bags for students and supplies candidates need for lessons.
<b>University Faculty</b>	Prepare & train preservice candidates in assessment and instructional techniques as part of foundational course requirements. Prepare and train Advanced candidates to act as literacy coaches. Present during Camp to support candidates.
<b>Preservice Candidates</b>	Assess camp participants and/or analyzed information from school Develop an engaging instructional program based upon children's strengths and needs. Prepare materials for instruction. In pairs or teams, plan whole group portions of the day.
<b>Literacy Coaches</b>	Supported preservice teachers in assessment and instructional techniques. Provided modeling and scaffolding as necessary Provided preservice candidates with resources, reference lists, etc. Observed preservice candidates; shared observations with faculty and observed candidate Facilitated some debriefing sessions

Graduate candidates in advanced literacy and the early childhood/childhood preservice teacher education programs at the liberal arts university prepare and facilitate the PEP Camp sessions that occur on the university campus. The advanced literacy candidates are certified teachers seeking certification and have nearly completed their program, making them eligible to participate in a special topics course entitled *Literacy Coaching*. The preservice teachers (PSTs) are working on their initial teaching certification in a master's degree program and have completed their foundation courses including *The Foundations of Reading*. Two university

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faculty provide oversight of the candidates. One faculty works directly with the PSTs, while the other works directly with the literacy coaches.

School district personnel are involved in planning the camp and for facilitating transportation to the campers. Meetings are held in the spring that involve university administration and faculty as well as school district administration, to strategize recruitment of the campers and compile useful information such as assessment data. Throughout the PEP Camp, district personnel visit daily providing support for their students and the candidates.

The camp takes place over the course of two weeks, running from 9:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. The camp experience includes elements of a balanced literacy program such as interactive read-alouds, guided reading and writing, independent reading, and writing. Field trips utilizing campus facilities, such as the post office, an art museum, or a youth theatre performance, provide opportunities for oral language and listening skills development.

Each day, the PEP Campers meet as a group for a welcome activity and snack. Then the campers join their pre-assigned small groups for 90 minutes of instruction. Small groups include five children, two preservice candidates, and one literacy coach. After small group instruction, the campers meet again as a whole group for an interactive read-aloud from a community “celebrity.” The day concludes with another whole group activity or game that supports literacy development.

The advanced literacy specialist candidates act as literacy coaches, providing support for assessment and instruction, and for professional development as well. For example, prior to the camp session, the advanced literacy specialist candidates provide a workshop on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) for the PSTs. During the camp, the advanced literacy specialist candidates are assigned a specific group and are responsible for supporting their assigned PST through consultation, providing resources, and if asked, modeling or assisting with administering Developmental Reading Assessments (DRAs). The literacy coaches also encourage

the PSTs to differentiate instruction, explore multiple instructional approaches and work through paradigmatic barriers and personal bias (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; International Reading Association, 2007). The result is an organic, dynamic experience contextualized within authentic practice, which allows for social interactions, as described by Lambert et al. (2002) between novice (student) and expert (candidate) that extends and transforms knowledge.

During the small-group instructional time, PSTs are encouraged to explore elements of a balanced literacy program. Instructional materials prepared by the PSTs are aligned to the New York State Common Core Standards and are catered towards each camper's individual strengths and areas in need of improvement. Heavy emphasis is also placed on literacy skills development, career exploration and cultural awareness. In addition, campers' interests are considered. For example, based on information illuminated by interest and attitude surveys provided by the district, one group incorporated a superheroes theme into instruction for a group of 2nd grade boys. The week's lessons included working with onomatopoeia, writing comic strips, investigating cartoon and historical heroes, and other elements.

### **Lessons Learned**

#### **Methods**

Across three years, a total of twenty-eight PSTs and twelve literacy coaches have participated in the PEP Camp. Data has been collected across three years and includes Daily Guided Reflections (DGRs), as well as a final reflection. Daily Guided Reflections were responses to several open-ended questions including the following:

- What went well/not-so-well today?
- What would you do differently?
- How are you understanding professional collaboration?
- What is going well/not-so-well for you relative to professional collaboration?

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- What is a concrete way you are growing as a teacher/teacher-leader?
- In what ways is this experience shaping your practice?

The final reflection was also open-ended in that PSTs and literacy coaches were asked to reflect on the overall experience. They are also asked about how they have grown in terms of their professional development, and how their practice has changed as a result of the experience.

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) including *open*, *axial*, and *selective* coding procedures—raw data was coded, then grouped by similar codes, as recommended by Creswell (1998). Verification procedures included triangulating the data through intercoder agreement, as well as reviewing and resolving disconfirming evidence (Creswell, 1998; Creswell & Miller, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Analyses provided valuable insights from the perspectives of the literacy coaches, PSTs and course instructors. What follows is a description of lessons learned from the lenses of the literacy coaches, PSTs, and course instructors.

### From the Lens of Literacy Coaches

**Building solid relationships is the foundation for successful literacy coaching.** As per the literacy coaches, the most critical lesson learned during the PEP Camp is that building good relationships is the foundation for successful literacy coaching. One of the coaches expressed it in this way:

After reading the articles and books (on literacy coaching), I came to realize that the relationship between a coach and almost everyone else in the building affects how well they are able to do the work of their role...A coach has to find a balance between being an authority on reading, being a coach to help other teachers improve their skills as teachers of reading, and not coming across as superior. Each relationship with teachers is different...After participating



in the PEP Camp as a literacy coach, I saw just how true and challenging relationships with other teachers can be. Some teachers may only want to consult with the coach on their time. Some teacher may want to be coached intensely and take up all the coach's time. Other teachers might not like the idea of "being coached", but see the resources the coach has as valuable enough to look the coach up on their own time...figuring out the right balance while developing effective relationships is tricky.

This lesson corroborates results from a national survey of literacy coaches conducted by Calo, Sturtevant, and Kopfman (2015). Randomly seeking the perceptions of 1,900 literacy coaches, representing a wide range of contexts, and receiving 270 responses, they conclude that being a literacy coach today is as much about character, or coaches' dispositions, as it is about competence (Covey, 2001, 2007; Fullan, 2007). Furthermore, participants reported that to be effective literacy leaders they needed dispositions that included the ability to build trust, collaborate, be flexible, and have a positive attitude.

Calo et al. (2015) also point out that while participants reported these attributes greatly impact their role as literacy coach, few participants received specific training in how to develop these abilities. In contrast, our candidates expressed that the PEP Camp provided them with a 'microcosm of the real world' enabling them to develop, discuss, and reflect on the abilities as perceived as being critical to effective literacy coaching. One of the coaches expressed it this way:

I had concluded [before PEP started] that coaching was maybe too much for me to handle. After going through camp, seeing, and facing the different challenges I read about, I know that I can not only 'handle' being a coach. My career plans and goals in the education field have changed from wanting to be a special education or English teacher to wanting to be a literacy coach.

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Indeed, Loughran (2002) writes,

It is through the development of knowledge and understanding of the practice setting and the ability to recognize and respond to such knowledge that the reflective practitioner becomes truly responsive to the needs, issues, and concerns that are so important in shaping practice (p. 9).

The context of the PEP Camp has provided our advanced literacy specialist candidates with opportunities to link theory with instruction, assimilate new learning through instructor guidance, self-reflect, and work through problems collaboratively, as they acquire the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of literacy leaders.

### **From the Lens of the Literacy Coaching Course Instructor**

**Dispositions need to be thoughtfully considered and embedded into the literacy coaching course.** Not only are technical skills critical for effective literacy coaching, but as one candidate put it: “You need to be a relationship genius!” Effective relationships are the foundation for effective coaching, yet teaching the dispositions necessary for developing these abilities is easier said than done. For example, although care was taken to clearly define the role of the literacy coaches which was to create a warm, welcoming, atmosphere for collaboration, and provide myriad resources for the PSTs, it took a few days for the PSTs to answer, in their own minds, the questions: Who are these coaches? What role do they play? And, how am I to work with them?

We found the openness to collaborate with the coaches varied in degree across the PSTs, much as practicing literacy coaches describe the situation in school contexts. Thus, the coaches and the second author spent a good deal of our 45-minute morning debriefing time talking through “how” to develop trust, which ultimately undergirds effective relationships. Those conversations were critical to the scaffolding process (Moran, 2007). One coach describes it this way:

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look

at it, I was able to work with a group who was not receptive to my coaching, help, or guidance. I quickly learned how difficult it is to try to help someone who is closed off to the process. The feeling of being observed and 'critiqued' was overwhelming for those new to teaching. I learned through the experience, and particularly the daily debriefings with the other coaches and our professor, that the best thing you can do when dealing with teachers who are hesitant about collaborating is to reiterate each and every day that you are only there to learn alongside them and grow together. As the Camp came to an end, I did see a shift in the one preservice teacher who was initially reluctant to consider any of my suggestions. My constant reminders that we are in it together and my openness to work within his comfort zone showed this teacher the last thing I wanted to do was judge.

### **From the Lens of the PST Instructor**

**Debriefing sessions allowed for the powerful modeling of structured professional development.** Embedded into every camp day, is an hour-long debriefing session that includes the two faculty, literacy coaches, and the PST. Facilitated by the literacy coaches, this structured debriefing provides the candidates with opportunities to engage in "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 1983, p. 59). For example, PSTs often share the challenges and triumphs discovered during the instructional session and particularly effective instructional techniques, which then serves as the foundation for whole-group brainstorming on a particular student or issue. Inevitably, a lively, collaborative conversation ensues where PST and literacy coaches work as a team to problem-solve issues, as well as to consider pedagogical theory raised during self-reflection. A PST stated that during Camp, "I was able to practice collaboration with others I had no previous relationship with. I became more reflective of not only my teaching style but my personality and how to turn my weaknesses into my strengths." This deliberate reflection provides the PST teachers with a process to develop professional judgment.

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Casey (2014, p. 231) notes:

This deliberate process of reflection is necessary because new professionals cannot rely on intuition or “gut” in the same manner as an expert. While the seasoned professional integrates seamlessly thought and action, the new professional must de-couple the action from the thinking about the action; the new professional must consciously activate a process to guide the rendering of professional judgment.

Encouraging the PSTs to reflect on their practice and its impact on student engagement and learning was a constant theme during the debriefing sessions. The PSTs began thinking about their practice. After one debriefing, one PST wrote,

Yesterday there was some constructive feedback about classroom management techniques. It was also mentioned that this [camp] is a safe place in which to try new things. With that in mind, last night I reflected upon ways to target individual assessment of student reading while maintaining a managed group.

Thus, the collective experiences of the group, coupled with the expertise of the literacy coaches, result in much richer problem solving and the development of instructional resolutions. In sum, the debriefing discussions provide the socially mediated learning experiences that research substantiates as critical to teacher learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

One of the coaches described it in this way:

As a literacy coach, I learned how powerful discussion is. After PEP Camp, each day, there was a debriefing session. Some of the debriefing sessions brought tears to my eyes because it was amazing to hear how much the teachers were helping the students improve their reading skills in such a short time and recognizing the role the other coaches and I played in this.

### From the Lens s of the Preservice Teachers

**Teaching is not a solo activity.** According to the PSTs, the most critical lesson they learned is that teaching is not an isolated activity. One of the preservice teachers summarized this lesson:

I can't think of a better environment in which to start the process of teaching and managing a classroom. The small group numbers, ample support from peers/coaches/professors and overall warm, open and accepting atmosphere has allowed me to test my skills, try new things and feel confident and eager to take the next step.

This lesson echoes recommendations included in *Transforming Teacher Education Through Clinical Practice: A National Strategy to Prepare Effective Teachers* (2010). This Report states that preservice teachers need to “learn in an interactive professional community” (p. 5) stressing the need for preservice teachers to learn how to collaborate and receive feedback.

The context of Camp and the demands of “being the teacher” differed from the PSTs’ previous field work. In their earlier field experience the PSTs were in elementary classroom settings where they primarily worked with small groups of students providing practice or individualized instruction. For the camp, they were the teachers, not assisting in someone else’s classroom. This allowed the preservice teacher candidates to see how teachers must work with other educational professionals and paraprofessionals to impact children’s learning. As one PST stated, “Based on my experience of camp my vision and understanding of teaching has changed. I realize that it is more of a team setting rather than solo.” This statement illustrates how the camp experience allowed the PSTs to begin to understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they would need to be part of a professional teaching community.

The camp experience also allowed the PSTs to become active members of a learning community. The Blue-Ribbon report (2010) notes that experts state that school embedded experiences help preservice teachers and, “will provide the prospective teacher with real responsibilities, the opportunity to make decisions and to

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develop skills to analyze student needs and adjust practices using student performance data while receiving continuous monitoring and feedback from mentors” (p.10). Camp was not a school based field experience but having to assume the roles of literacy coaches and teachers provided candidates with many opportunities to make decisions, analyze student needs, and adjust their practice to ensure the children were engaged. Because this occurred in an alternative venue that became a microcosm of a school, candidates were involved in clinically rich practice.

### **Next Steps**

As we reflect upon the collective learning of the PSTs, literacy coaches, and university instructors, as well as the evolution of the fieldwork experience the PEP Camp has provided, there are areas we will focus further development. For example, because the context becomes a microcosm of the “real world,” leadership theory needs to be thoughtfully embedded into the coaching course. For next summer, the instructor plans to explore some of Steven Covey’s work, including *The Four Roles of Leadership* (2001). Because Covey has worked with leaders in business and education alike, an exploration of his work will provide the aspiring Literacy Coaches foundational theory upon which to build.

Secondly, considering our analysis of the reflective data collected from both the literacy coaches and the PSTs, we have realized that models of collaboration need to be incorporated more explicitly into coursework across both programs. From the coaching course perspective, we will continue to focus on the importance of relationship building, the basis of which is trust and effective communication. One of the ways we hope to build trust with the PSTs is to begin the summer with a needs survey. This way, literacy coaches can more effectively work with individual PSTs as well as with the collective whole. From the perspective of the preservice teaching course, when reading programs are addressed in literacy foundations and methods courses, working with literacy coaches needs to be discussed. This will help the PSTs focus on relationship building, including asking for assistance and using feedback.

### Conclusion

Clinically rich fieldwork experiences in alternative venues offer myriad opportunities for service to the community, while simultaneously providing teacher candidates with an authentic context by which to develop the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to for teaching competence. However, time and care must be taken in the development of these partnerships. When the university-community partnerships are nurtured with forward thinking, cohesive policy, and commitment on both sides of the fence, as has been the case with the PEP Camp, the result is a win-win.

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