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## First Person: The Pandemic'S Silver Lining: Real Talk For Future Teachers

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FIRST PERSON

# The pandemic's silver lining: Real talk for future teachers

BY JAMIE HIPPI

For the last four years, I have taught the required arts integration course for elementary preservice teachers at a major southern university. I often hear that my students have looked forward to the class throughout their time in our program, even though it means coming to campus after a long day of student teaching in local schools.

The arts integration course is taken during the second semester of students' senior year, which is also their student-teaching semester. Placing the course in this semester allows students to immediately implement arts integrated strategies with real elementary learners.

At first, spring 2020 was no different from any other semester. I taught two sections of the course, both meeting weekly, one at 4:30 p.m. and another at 6:30 p.m. During the first month of class, we sang, choreographed, pantomimed, colored, danced, improvised, composed, sculpted, and sketched, all with the goal of learning how to make these activities part of regular instruction in elementary classrooms.

But when the university closed campus in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to find a way to teach the remainder of this highly interactive and experiential course over the internet. We would continue to meet weekly at the usual times, I told the students, and I promised them I would do my best to provide a valuable online experience.

Their responses floored me. Emails poured in, all of them asking some version of the question, "Dr. Hipp, can

we meet more than once per week?" I was dumbfounded. Of course I missed my students, but they seemed to miss so much more: their routine of coming to campus and feeling connected to the university, spending time with each other, and learning course content delivered in an engaging and collaborative manner. Some even claimed that they missed me!

I reached out to each section to determine convenient times for extra sessions. Some students requested early morning meetings over coffee, others lunch and afternoon sessions, and some asked that we gather on evenings or weekends. Some even wished to meet over spring break week. If students were willing to sacrifice their free time for this, I knew it must be important.

What, I asked, did they want from these extra sessions? "Real teacher talk," they said. They were about to graduate with degrees in elementary education, yet they were mystified by practicalities such as the teacher interview process, how to stock a classroom for the first time, and what activities to choose for the first day of school.

To be clear, students complete three semesters of education "block" classes before the arts integration course. By the time I teach them, preservice teachers have already taken courses in educational theory, classroom management, literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, educational technology, and more. How was it possible that they still felt underprepared?

They explained that many of their professors had never spent time

as elementary teachers in public schools. Professors who had public elementary experience had been out of the classroom for decades, but I had taught in elementary settings until the end of the 2016-17 school year and still consult monthly with elementary schools nationwide. They believed I could provide the link to the real world of teaching that they craved. So we continued to meet weekly as planned, covering the topics in the syllabus, but we also met for eight extra Zoom sessions. Five of those sessions were particularly well attended:

## *What administrators look for in teacher interviews*

Because I have never served as an elementary school leader I reached out to my principal and assistant principal colleagues for tips on preparing for an interview for a teaching position. My students hung on every word I shared. They had not yet considered compiling a portfolio of activities and favorite lessons from their field experiences and student-teaching placements. We also talked through behavior management situations and parent communication strategies so they would have ideas in place when these situations came up in an interview.

Perhaps the most surprising aha moment centered on professional attire. When I explained that (according to the school leaders I had talked to) flip-flops, jeans, and T-shirts were inappropriate for an interview, many students were stunned. Clearly, they would have some shopping to do.

My students were also relieved to hear that they could ask questions during an interview. The administrators had been very clear about this, I assured them, suggesting that they ask about the curriculum, request a tour of the school, or ask to meet with current teachers. Apparently, no one had ever explained to them that this was acceptable, even desirable behavior for a job candidate.

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### ***How to address a formal letter to a school administrator***

My university students often send me emails that begin with “Hey Prof,” “Hiya,” or some other less-than-professional greeting. I’ve always found this off-putting, so I thought it would be useful to show them how to determine which honorific is appropriate when addressing a school leader. While sharing my screen of the Louisiana Department of Education’s “Verify a Certificate” page, I explained which honorifics coincide with each listed degree. For example:

- Ed.D. and Ph.D. — Begin email with Dear Dr. (Last Name)
- Ed.S., M.A.T., M.Ed., B.A., B.S., etc. — Begin email with Dear Mr. or Ms. (Last Name)

Since this session, I have not received any more student emails starting with “Hey” or “What’s Up Prof. Hipp.” Further, students realized that the verification page also includes information about school administrators’ teaching certifications, including their subject areas and whether they’re nationally board-certified. My students were eager to use this information to personalize their job letters or develop rapport during an interview by pointing out shared professional interests.

### ***Stocking a classroom on a budget***

Every teacher spends their own money on classroom supplies, and I know from my own time in the elementary classroom that stocking a classroom library with varied genres and reading levels can add up quickly. My students loved learning about Scholastic’s periodic \$1 book sales and Amazon wish lists, which allow them to request specific books from people who want to help. We also discussed a variety of nonprofit foundations that fund classroom libraries. Some students also asked about big-ticket items, such as flexible seating, technology, makerspaces, and instrument sets, so I introduced them

to [adoptaclassroom.org](http://adoptaclassroom.org) and [donorschoose.org](http://donorschoose.org), and together we looked at a few local teacher projects that were well on their way to full funding.

### ***First and last day***

Because student teaching tends to be a semester-long experience, most student teachers miss either the first day of the school year or the last day before summer break, if not both. My spring 2020 student teachers had already missed the beginning of school, and because of COVID-19, they would also miss the final day of the 2019-20 school year. They had no idea what to do on these important days, they told me.

The first day (and week) of elementary school always involves a lot of logistics, so I shared a variety of logistical and organizational tips, such as making multiple peel-and-stick labels for each name from the class roster to attach to school supplies; creating charts with pictures of cars, school buses, and after-care vans reminding students (and the teacher) how they go home each day, and printing extra class rosters to take everywhere (lunch, recess, library, carpool duty, etc.), just in case they need to make a note about a student.

Instead of writing off the final day of school to a movie, I encourage teachers to engage students in meaningful and memorable projects and activities, such as asking them to create a video and bulletin board with advice for next year’s students. Not only did this become excellent reflection time for students (and provide me with useful feedback!), but it gave me material for a first-day activity to use 10 weeks later, at the start of the new school year.

### ***Discussion with practicing teachers***

I enlisted former students to share fresh perspectives from in-service teachers during a question-and-answer session. This was, by far, the most popular session. Our teacher guests shared early career insights and

a couple of laughs related to their alma mater. And my students asked some thoughtful and important questions:

1. Was there something you bought for your classroom that you haven’t used? What do you wish you would have purchased?
2. With our student teaching cut short due to COVID-19, I’m not sure I’m ready for my own classroom. Do any of you have experience with co-teaching or mentorship models, and would you suggest getting my feet wet that way?
3. Can you share how some of your interviews went before landing a teaching position?
4. I know I will be super young compared to the parents and caregivers of my future students. What are your suggestions for communicating with students’ guardians?

### ***An ongoing tradition***

These virtual sessions made a big impression on students, even ones who couldn’t participate in real time but watched the video recording later. Students told me they appreciated being able to talk about these concerns and to hear from others who had been in their shoes.

Although the teacher education curriculum is already crowded, it is incumbent upon teacher education programs to adequately address real-world, authentic issues. Practical application and timely strategies are equally as important as (or, dare I say even *more important than*) asking pre-service teachers to develop a teaching philosophy or discuss educational theory. A balance of theory and practice is essential to creating well-rounded teachers.

And, for me, I saw how a crisis situation can bring about useful innovations. Whether campus is entirely closed, partially closed, or completely open in the future, these “real teacher talk” sessions will forever be a recurring part of my classes. ■