

THE ESSENCE OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL PRACTICUM:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN A VIRTUAL SCHOOL

By

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To Mat, my family and friends

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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By  
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Chair: Kara Dawson  
Cochair: Catherine Cavanaugh  
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Situated in the theoretical perspective of phenomenology, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of three pre-service teachers who participated in a practicum in a virtual school located in the southeastern United States. Each of the three pre-service teachers were paired with online teachers and completed four weeks of training. During their four-week training, their experiences were documented via four phenomenological interviews. Using phenomenological analysis, the interview data were analyzed, resulting in the essence of the virtual school practicum.

The essence of the virtual school practicum was made up of six shared horizons, including (1) communication with supervisor teacher, (2) information systems at the virtual school, (3) modification of course content, (4) Elluminate, (5) balancing act, and (6) unmet expectations. The results have implications for pre-service teachers, teacher education programs, virtual schools, education policy makers, and teacher certification organizations. Implications of virtual school practica are shared, and suggestions for future research are provided.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

During my doctoral program at the University of Florida, I have had many opportunities to conduct research, the majority of which focused on virtual schooling. A form of online learning, virtual schooling has been in existence for over 20 years. Virtual schools deliver education entirely or partially via online methods to students in kindergarten through twelfth (K-12) grades.

In addition to virtual school research, I had the privilege of teaching and working with some of the brightest teacher hopefuls in an introductory technology course, housed in the educational technology program. As a teacher educator, my role is to be aware of the unique skills and preparatory experiences needed to develop quality teachers. Each semester, a growing number of my students were interested in becoming virtual school teachers or at least wanted to find out what it was like to teach K-12 students online.

At the same time, my advisors were conducting a professional development opportunity for in-service teachers who wanted to learn how to teach online. They were thinking about offering that same opportunity to pre-service teachers. The difference for the pre-service teachers was that the practicum would not be credit-based; so the pre-service teachers would be volunteering to take part in the experience. Despite this, we felt it was important to offer this opportunity to the pre-service teachers; we offered the virtual school practicum in spring 2009, and this study is the result of that experience.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the essence of a virtual school practicum as expressed by three pre-service teachers who took part in the experience.

## **The Research Question**

The following research question guided the study: How do pre-service teachers experience a practicum in a virtual school?

## **Background**

Virtual schooling originated from distance education, which began in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. From post to radio to television to the Internet, emerging technological innovation has changed the education landscape (Clark, 2007). From then until now, the facility-based, schedule-strict, boundary-laden, inflexible classroom is making way for the more flexible, space- and time-independent, user-centric learning environment (Partnership, 2009; eSchool News, 2009). One such learning environment, the focus of this dissertation, is virtual schooling.

Virtual schooling, a form of online learning, was a topic filed under education reform in the 2008 presidential campaign. Virtual schools have been seen as a much-needed disruption to affect change and rethink ways educators can improve both schools and student achievement (Technology Counts, 2009; Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). In 2009, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) released a meta-analysis finding that “online learning appears to offer a modest advantage over conventional classroom instruction” (p. xvii). Possessing the potential to be 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments (Partnership, 2009), virtual schools provide a solid connection between learning and the real world, enabling education to be more

meaningful and authentic (Jonassen, Howland, Marra, & Crismond, 2008) for future generations of K-12 students who need to become tomorrow's global citizens.

Helping to facilitate tomorrow's global citizens are today's teachers. Teachers need to be ready to facilitate their students' learning in this 21<sup>st</sup> century education system (Wehling & Schneider, 2007). Teacher education programs have the responsibility to prepare teachers to facilitate this new education landscape that offers blended (combination of face-to-face and online learning) and online (100% online learning) learning opportunities. Teacher education programs vary in regard to what they provide their students, however, most consist of some field experience, such as practica and internship opportunities that match students with current teachers who are practicing in brick-and-mortar schools.

In the last three years, a handful of teacher education programs have started offering virtual school practica (Iowa State University, University of Florida and University of Central Florida (Compton, Davis, & Mackey, 2009; Prabhu, 2009)), where pre-service teachers are paired with a virtual school teacher and immersed in the virtual school environment for four to sixteen weeks. These practica will increase in number as time goes on; to understand how practica translate in virtual schools, this study was designed to document the lived experiences of three pre-service teachers who took part in a four-week practicum set in a virtual school.

### **Significance of the Study**

Because there are a limited number of attempts to study these virtual school practica experiences, this study helps set the stage for future research. This study is also significant for many constituents: (1) for teacher education programs, who need to prepare teachers to become the instructional designers of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning



environments, where learning aligns with the real world, outside of the classroom; (2) for education policymakers, who need to recognize and act on certification policy regarding online certification as a viable option for teachers; (3) for pre-service teachers, who need to be prepared to teach online; and most importantly, (4) for K-12 students, who will become tomorrow's globally-responsible citizens.

### **Summary**

The Introduction sets the framework for the importance of this study as it pertains to the preparation of pre-service teachers to enter the ever-changing teaching and learning environment. This study will support the conversation that is transpiring among education constituents regarding the need for teacher training for blended and online learning environments. The results of this study will extend this conversation to include the need for certification requirements to change to acknowledge virtual school practice as imminent for pre-service teachers' professional development.

The remainder of this manuscript includes four chapters. Chapter 2, the Literature Review, discusses the topics and research that helped to inform and warrant the development of this study. The Methodology chapter, Chapter 3, is a detailed overview of the theoretical framework, study design (including context and background, participants, data collection), data analysis, validation, and limitations (including setting, participant sampling, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and researcher subjectivity). Chapter 4, Results, provides the data analysis results. And Chapter 5, the Discussion, provides an overview of the results and implications of those results as they pertain to practice, research and policy. Chapter 5 also provides suggestions for future research.

## Operational Definitions

- **Pre-service Teachers** – Undergraduate and graduate students who are enrolled in a teacher education program designed to prepare them to become teachers in K-12 classrooms.
- **Brick-and-Mortar School** – Also known as traditional schools, these are schools that operate in a building on a time schedule.
- **21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Environments** – Learning environments that support students to learn through real-world, problem-solving, project-based means. 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments foster collaborative and cooperative learning.
- **Blended Learning** – Also known as hybrid learning, this learning offers a combination of online and face-to-face learning methods.
- **Online Learning** – Also known as e-learning, this is learning that is done using a technology tool – computer, handheld device, etc.
- **Virtual School** – A school that is not building-dependent that operates primarily via online methods.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional school practica experiences are a key part of teacher professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Research has suggested that practica experiences in virtual schooling are important as well (Compton, Davis, & Mackey, 2009; Davis, Compton, & Mackey, 2009). Literature exists that documents pre-service teachers' experiences in their traditional school practica (Freese, 1999; Mule, 2006). Unfortunately, only one study has been published that explores a virtual school practicum (Compton, Davis, & Mackey, 2009). The current study specifically documents the lived experiences of three pre-service teachers in a virtual school practicum. Understanding how pre-service teachers experience their virtual school practica is important to educational research because it is important to contextualize how field experience translates in a virtual school. It also informs teacher educators and policy makers about the importance of offering diverse learning opportunities for future teachers as well as giving teachers the chance to learn what it is like to teach online.

This chapter explores the current state of teacher preparation for online instruction. The chapter is organized into five sections; the first section provides a general overview of K-12 virtual schooling; the second section presents the standards that outline best practices in online teacher preparation; the third section reviews recent research regarding qualities of effective online teachers; the fourth section discusses teacher preparatory programs for online instruction; and the fifth and final section provides background information about the logistics of the virtual school practicum that was researched for this study. The literature review will provide an understanding of the

preparation necessary for online instruction and a basis for the importance of advocating for virtual school practica experiences in teacher education programs.

### **The Emergence of Virtual Schooling**

Virtual schooling is a fast-growing option for K-12 students in the United States (U.S.). As of 2009, 45 states had supplemental online learning programs or full-time programs, and some had both (Watson, Gemin, Ryan, & Wicks, 2009). Offering flexibility of time and place, and guided, individualized, student-centered instruction (Watson et al., 2009), K-12 online learning suits the needs of many students.

Praised by school administrators in a 2008 public school district survey, online learning is serving individual needs of students and providing a “lifeline” of education to those students who are not able to partake in the specific courses that will enable them to become tomorrow’s global citizens (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). In that same report, 75% of responding school districts offered online or blended courses (This estimate increased 10% since their 2005-2006 study.), 66% had students enrolled in online or blended courses and anticipated these enrollment numbers to increase, and the total number of K-12 students enrolled in online courses was projected at 1,030,000 (This estimate increased 47% since their 2005-2006 study.) (Picciano & Seaman, 2009).

In addition to the public school district survey, a recent U.S. Department of Education meta-analysis compiled and analyzed online and blended learning literature. This report found that “classes with online learning (whether taught completely online or blended) on average produce stronger student learning outcomes than do classes with solely face-to-face instruction” (p. 18). The meta-analysis also reported “instruction combining online and face-to-face elements had a larger advantage relative to purely face-to-face instruction than did purely online instruction” (p. xv). As can be seen from

these and many other reports, online and blended learning are becoming vital components in education across the U.S. and around the world. Online learning continues to grow exponentially, and by 2011, estimates predict over eight million students will use some form of online learning (whether full-time or supplemental programs) (Greaves Group & Hayes Connection, 2006).

Blended and online learning have also been referenced as 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments (iNACOL & Partnership, 2006). To understand what constitutes a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment, it is necessary to understand what 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Partnership, 2009) are and how they can be taught effectively. 21<sup>st</sup> century skills center around three overarching topics, including “Life and Career Skills,” “Learning and Innovation Skills,” and “Information, Media, and Technology Skills.” Within “Learning and Innovation Skills,” students need to be able to learn and practice creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration. Under the umbrella of “Information, Media, and Technology Skills,” students need to be able to hone skills pertaining to information literacy, media literacy, and information and computer technology literacy. Encompassing the “Life and Career Skills,” students need to exhibit flexibility, adaptability, initiative, self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity, accountability, leadership, and responsibility. Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to have a solid understanding of the core subjects, including English, reading, language arts, world languages, arts, mathematics, economics, science, geography, history, government, and civics (Partnership, 2009). In addition, they need to have an understanding of the interdisciplinary applications of these content areas when it comes

to global awareness, as well as be literate in finance, economics, business, entrepreneurship, civics, and health (Partnership, 2009).

In order to foster these skills in students, pre-service teachers need to learn how to cultivate a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment. iNACOL and the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills partnered to write *Virtual Schools and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills* (2006) to emphasize how virtual schools have the potential to be 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments. This report speaks to the need for educators to rethink education to align learning environments with real world demands. These learning environments are flexible and can be utilized anytime, anywhere. By doing so, it is theorized that students will become more marketable for the careers they will be competing for in the future, many of which are yet to be created. While 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are not completely dependent on technology, most of the skills that are involved would be enhanced if supplemented with technology. For example, regarding information and communication skills, with SmartPhones, iPads, and netbooks, students are able to take their learning any place and be connected to research tools (such as the Internet, presentation software, information databases), information management platforms (such as wikis, blogs, documents), and sharing capabilities (e-mail, social networks). Using technology to enhance students' learning environments, virtual schools are doing their part to empower students to be 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and global citizens, ethically- and morally-aware individuals who see how their actions and decisions impact the world around them (iNACOL & Partnership, 2006). Whether teaching these global citizens in an online or blended learning environment, teachers need to be ready to facilitate their students' learning in this 21<sup>st</sup> century education system (Wehling & Schneider, 2007).

Standards on how online teacher training should be focused have been prepared by various organizations and are discussed in the next section.

### **Review of Standards For Online Teacher Preparation**

To prepare teachers to be qualified to teach in these new learning environments, standards were created by many organizations to ensure quality online teacher preparation practices. Included in these are the International Society for Technology in Education's (ISTE) *National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS\*T)* (ISTE, 2008), the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) *Essential Principles for High-quality Online Teaching* (SREB, 2006), the National Education Association's (NEA) *Guide to Teaching Online Courses* (NEA, 2006), and the International Association for K12 Online Learning's (iNACOL) *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching* (iNACOL, 2008). Since their original release in 2000, the ISTE NETS\*T standards have been adopted in all 50 states in addition to guiding the education policy in other countries (ISTE, 2007) and not only pertain to online instructors but also to brick-and-mortar teachers. iNACOL's *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching* (2008) were informed by a range of effective practices and research sources (Ferdig, Cavanaugh, DiPietro, Black, Mulkey, & Dawson, 2009). The iNACOL's standards have been adopted by states like Utah, Georgia, and Wisconsin since they were released.

Table 2-1 contains a breakdown of the similarities among and differences between these standards. As can be seen from Table 2-1, there are many standards that are shared by three or four of the organizations. These include the need for teachers to have technological skills to teach online, the ability for teachers to specify learning objectives and design activities and assessments around those objectives, the commitment to individualize instruction for all learners, the knowledge that student

success is extremely dependent on the teacher and his/her design of the course, and the desire to collaborate with everyone in the community, school, and profession to promote culturally- and globally-aware citizenship. Some of the standards were highlighted as being important to two organizations, and these include the need for online teachers to meet state teaching standards and secure academic credentials, design for active learning, demonstrate high-quality communication skills, promote collaborative learning, build a community of learners, share information regarding student progress, and model and teach legal, safe, and healthy technology use.

A few specific standards came from single organizations. ISTE, for example, expects teachers (online, blended, and traditional) to contribute to the profession, school, and community by exhibiting leadership when it comes to integrating technology into the curriculum. In addition, ISTE finds importance in teachers evaluating and reflecting on educational research and teacher practice to maintain their continued focus on student success and the use of effective tools to achieve that. In order to keep up-to-date, ISTE suggests teachers participate in learning communities, both locally and globally, in order to find unique ways to increase student learning. ISTE encourages individualization and personalization of activities and assessments based on students' learning styles as well as promoting student reflection for deeper analytical understanding. Teachers that meet ISTE standards are innovative thinkers who engage students with real-world issues and encourage students to think outside the box by finding authentic, creative ways to solve problems using digital tools.

SREB wants teachers to make students feel supported. They expect online teachers to monitor and facilitate online interactions between students and provide



appropriate standards for students to meet regarding these interactions, ensuring that students feel comfortable and safe interacting with one another. SREB states that online teachers should request assistance from others in order to better support student learning. In addition to other support, SREB feels that online teachers should assess students prior to beginning instruction. Security of student data and work, as well as monitoring for academic dishonesty, is important to SREB. Online teachers under SREB standards are expected to help students with technical issues, assist students in understanding course requirements, and guide students with their time management. To do this, they must monitor courses and ensure that students participate actively. iNACOL developed their online standards using SREB and added specifically that online teachers need to have experienced online learning from the perspective of a student.

NEA standards emphasize the need for online teachers to complete professional development specific to online teaching. Online teachers should also maintain high standards for their students while creating a learning environment that is student-centered and flexible. NEA also feels that online teachers need to be self-starters who are motivated to do work with little to no supervision. They should also possess a sense of humor along with a voice that is 'heard' by their online students.

Sharing various similarities and differences, these standards ensure a quality learning experience for students who are taught by online teachers. The standards indicate what future teachers need to be able to do in order to promote meaningful learning in online and blended learning environments. In addition to these standards, online teachers must be "highly-qualified" (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001:

Qualification for Teachers and Professionals, 2004) and possess certain qualities to be effective in this new environment, and the following section discusses research on this topic.

### **Qualities of Effective Online Teachers**

Along with the standards from NEA, SREB, iNACOL, and ISTE, teacher quality is guided by national education policy. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act called for “highly-qualified” teachers (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Qualification for Teachers and Professionals, 2004). According to Caroline Chauncey (2005), the NCLB did not clearly define the qualities of “highly qualified” teachers. In 2003, Darling-Hammond and Sykes responded to the NCLB’s call:

On both equity and adequacy grounds, qualified teachers comprise a critical national resource that requires federal investment and cross-state coordination as well as other state and local action. No Child Left Behind provides a standard for equitable access to teacher quality that is both reasonable and feasible. Meeting this goal, however, calls for a new vision of the teacher labor market. (p. 3)

One of these new visions is online learning, considering its ability to help provide equitable access to high quality teachers in an era where distributed, ubiquitous learning is pushing to be the norm. For the teacher labor market, the new vision would be preparing teachers who will not only be capable of teaching face-to-face but who will also be able to teach in hybrid settings or purely online. What qualities do these teachers possess? What do they need professionally to succeed?

For online teachers specifically, a recent study by DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, and Preston (2008) found that quality online teachers need to provide extra support and understand course pacing. They also need to be willing to explore new technologies, possess exemplary organization skills, and use technology effectively. They have to

possess strategies in addressing inappropriate behavior in the online environment, have an appreciation for and an abundance of knowledge of their subject area, and be willing to constantly monitor and ensure their students' safety in the online classroom. Online teachers should be able to motivate students, establish deadlines for assignments, offer supplemental work for students who need help, monitor student progress, and maintain flexibility in time. They should have an understanding of different learning styles, be available to their students, be willing to self-evaluate by using data-driven strategies, assess students in meaningful ways, and acknowledge and use students' interests in their course(s). Most importantly, they need to form meaningful and supportive relationships with students, build and facilitate community to enhance the learning environment, provide timely feedback, and address technology access issues for students (DiPietro et al., 2008).

Another study examined what virtual school teachers look for in potential teacher colleagues. Kennedy and Cavanaugh (2010) found that a passion for kids (spanning from mutual respect, individualization, and understanding, to the ability to make personal connections), an awareness of self (including reflexivity, self-motivation, and self-initiative), and a willingness to accept and adapt to change (together with lifelong learning, flexibility, and time management) were vital. Kearsley and Blomeyer (2004) shared their ideas for effective online teaching including providing prompt feedback, preparing engaging learning activities, motivating students, allowing for student-to-student interaction, and promoting critical and reflective students. Fuller, Norby, Pearce, and Strand (2000) found that an online instructor should be willing to be on the computer at least one to two hours every day, appreciate one-on-one interaction, allow

for flexibility, and provide a lot of feedback. Various combinations of these qualities are sought by employers who are looking for teachers to teach in online and/or blended environments.

Professional standards, like the ones that were shared in the previous section, emphasize the importance of teacher professional development to help ensure the quality and consistency of instruction in K-12 online education (iNACOL, 2008). Research publications, such as the ones shared in this section, urge preparatory programs to teach online pedagogy and instructional design geared toward making online learning environments interactive and accessible (Yang & Cornelius, 2005). Despite the standards and the research regarding teacher preparation for online instruction, few teacher education programs have addressed the need to prepare online educators. Based on the current and projected numbers of K-12 online learners, there is a critical need for pre-service teachers to undergo a developmental experience that prepares them to teach in an online setting, whether it is for a virtual school setting that offers fully-online instruction or a brick-and-mortar setting that offers blended learning experiences.

### **Teacher Preparation Programs and Online Instruction**

Colleges of education prepare teachers based on a set of recognized standards such as those published by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2007). NCATE, established in 1954, has a mission to “help establish high quality teacher preparation” (NCATE, 2007). NCATE is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as an accrediting body for teacher preparatory programs. It has the responsibility of setting guidelines for teachers to meet in order to achieve teacher certification. They also have

guidelines for teacher education programs to stay accredited in order to meet national standards of what teachers should be prepared to do upon their graduation. However, the NCATE preparatory processes do not account for online teaching (NCATE, 2008). In the 2008 version of their Standards, NCATE's language is broad regarding teacher preparation for teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Any mention of "online" learning referred more to how the faculty member who is teaching pre-service teachers online should conduct course delivery, including their use of "multimedia tools, digital resources, and distance learning systems to promote and increase personal/professional development" (NCATE, 2008, p. 52).

As early as 2003, researchers were voicing their concerns regarding the need for teacher education programs to be responsible for preparing pre-service teachers to teach online (Irvine, Mappin & Code, 2003). Yet, current national and state teacher certifications recognize internship credit for traditional, brick-and-mortar schools only and do not include virtual schools. Despite this, iNACOL and its many constituents across the country have moved towards a "new vision of the future of education" (Davis & Rose, 2007, p. v). One of the crucial developments centers on providing pre-service teachers a chance to learn to be quality, effective online instructors via professional development and powerful mentoring experiences. Within these experiences, potential quality, effective online instructors need to focus more on learning online pedagogy and support as compared to acquiring skills in technologies they will use (Lowes, 2007). Since the environment is new, teachers will be challenged by reflexive questions about the past, present, and future of the education system, as it is changing dynamically and rapidly. While these questions will be hard, new teachers need this challenge because

they are “pedagogically critical thinkers” (Grossman, 1992, p. 177) who have the capacity to be change agents. Why is this professional development so important? A meta-analysis (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007) found that “teachers who receive substantial professional development – an average of 49 hours in the nine studies – can boost their students’ achievement by about 21 percentile points” (p. i). Potentially, if more training emphasizes developing teachers to teach online, students’ achievement will increase as well.

To establish concern for teacher training in online instruction at a national level, a FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education) grant was awarded to the Iowa State University (ISU) to start Teacher Education Goes Into Virtual Schooling, or TEGIVS (Davis, Roblyer, Charania, Ferdig, Harms, Compton, & Cho, 2007). In a 2009 presentation at the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (2009), Davis, Compton, and Mackey (2009) questioned “How can it [field experience with a Virtual School Teacher] be done?” The ISU research team continues to push for education policies’ acknowledgement of the need for virtual school teacher field experiences. And in 2009, Compton, Davis, and Mackey reported on a virtual school field experience that they conducted in Fall 2007. This field experience was conducted between ISU and Iowa Learning Online.

In addition to TEGIVS, the Going Virtual Series sponsored by Boise State University and iNACOL is making strides to help pre-service teachers see the merits of virtual and blended learning environments (Rice & Dawley, 2007; Rice & Dawley, 2008; Rice, Dawley, Gasell, & Florez, 2008; Rice & Dawley, 2009). They are conducting on-going research regarding what it takes to be effective, “highly-qualified” online

instructors (Rice & Dawley, 2007). Phases One and Two of their study explored what training is currently available for teachers who teach in online learning environments. So far, they found that training differs across the country and that no one model is the same. They are in Phase Three of their study now, focusing on evaluating current training programs to see what needs are being met and which are not.

These programs develop teachers professionally (Walkington, 2005; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). As early as the nineteenth century, teacher educators had many views on the process of teaching teachers to teach (Borrowman, 1956). Teacher education programs like the ones mentioned above typically require pre-service teachers to participate in practica (Cattley, 2007). There are many models and structures of practica; examples of these include observational learning (Koran, Snow, & McDonald, 1971), internships (Gardner & Henry, 1968), microteaching (Allen & Eve, 1968), field experiences (Zeichner, 1984), self-evaluations (Beijaard et al., 2000), reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995), immersion (Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007), and mentoring (Ballantyne & Hansford, 1995).

This study's practicum is a field experience, which has been key in teacher education as it aids in the development of pre-service teachers (Aiken & Day, 1999; Buck, Morsink, Griffin, Hines, & Lenk, 1992; Harlin, 1999; Wiggins & Follo, 1999). In the 1970s, the U.S. state departments of education mandated teacher education programs to add field experience as a component in the certification process (Moore, 1979). Field experiences have come to be known as a vital piece in teacher preparatory programs (Joyce, Yarger, Howey, Harbeck, & Kluwin, 1977). While field experiences have

traditionally occurred in face-to-face, brick-and-mortar classrooms, a few programs have begun to push for and offer field experiences in virtual schools.

For instance, as mentioned before, ISU offered a virtual school field experience in fall 2007 (Compton, Davis, & Mackey, 2009). This virtual school field experience matched two pre-service teachers with one virtual school teacher. The pre-service teachers were enrolled in a one-credit course that allowed them to work with the virtual school teacher via guided observation and with the online K-12 students via virtual interactions. The pre-service teachers used reflection journals, discussion forums, and interviews to reflect on their practicum experience. Via the study and their involvement in the virtual school field experience, the pre-service teachers experienced a growth of understanding about virtual schooling and formed new personal theories regarding K-12 online learning.

In addition to ISU, the University of Central Florida (UCF) began offering their pre-service teachers virtual school field experiences in spring 2009. Their program is a seven-week long experience that UCF pre-service teachers participate in with the Florida Virtual School. No research has resulted from this program yet, however, the chair of the Teaching and Learning Principles department at the UCF College of Education said, "We want to be thinking ahead of where the education industry is now. This program will give our students an edge, because they will not only know how to teach a traditional class, they will know how to do it virtually" (UCF, 2009, p. 1).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the essence of a virtual school practicum as expressed by three pre-service teachers who took part in the experience. The following research question guided the study:



How do pre-service teachers experience a practicum in a virtual school?

The next section describes the logistics of the virtual school practicum including the support staff, schedule and activities, and the technologies used.

### **The Virtual School Practicum**

This study took place in a teacher education program located in a large research-intensive university in the southeastern United States. The teacher education program is progressive in that it is one of the first programs to offer its pre-service teachers a chance to participate in a virtual school practicum within a state-led virtual school. Keeping pace with the ever-changing needs of the education field, this teacher education program has undergone many theoretically-led reforms since the mid-1970s (Bondy & Ross, 2005). The current version of the program is a five-year-long master's degree in education at the end of which students are endorsed for certification in elementary education. Its mission is to help future teachers learn how to be change agents for education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This teacher education program formed a symbiotic relationship with a state-led virtual school within the same state. This virtual school has been in existence since 1997, and its mission is to offer K-12 students individualized, supportive education at convenient times and places. They started off as a two-district consortium; they quickly grew into a state-wide, internet-based public high school and have expanded their horizons to offer courses around the world. Their mission centers around the student, and instruction is differentiated based on each student's unique situations, learning styles, and developmental needs. There are many types of virtual schools. The virtual school in which this study was conducted is very unique in its business model. This virtual school is a supplemental school, which means students take classes through the

virtual school in addition to the classes they take at a traditional face-to-face school or in home schooling. Unlike most virtual schools, this school operates as its own school district and receives funding from public full-time equivalent (FTE) dollars. This funding depends essentially on the success of the students, so teachers at the virtual school have to put a great amount of their effort into tracking student progress and making sure students have everything they need in order to pass a course (Watson et al., 2009).

The teacher education program and the virtual school worked collaboratively to design a structure for the virtual school practicum that the pre-service teachers could participate in. The teacher education program that participated in this study neither gives participants a certificate for participation nor provides them graduate school credit for their involvement in the virtual school practicum; instead, the pre-service teachers volunteered to take part in the practicum and completed it in addition to their traditional school internships.

The most important part of this study is the three pre-service teachers and their experiences. The pre-service teachers are described briefly here. Their full introductions are available in Chapter 3. The three participants were all in their early to mid-twenties and were ready to hit the ground running in the field of education. Two were female while one was male. One of the females, Rita, was African-American while the other, Sue, was Caucasian; and the male, Josh, was Caucasian as well.

### **Support Personnel in the Practicum**

During the virtual school practicum, the pre-service teachers worked with multiple virtual school staff whose roles are described here. First, the internship coordinator, was instrumental in organizing the virtual school practicum and ensuring that all constituents involved were informed of their responsibilities. The internship coordinator was also

responsible for hosting many of the Elluminate events and sending out weekly emails to the pre-service teachers and researchers regarding what the events for that week entailed.

The supervisor teachers (STs) were paired with the pre-service teachers. Each pre-service teacher was assigned one ST. An initial face-to-face meeting between the pre-service teachers and their STs was scheduled for a few weeks before the practicum started. This face-to-face meeting was a way to 'break the ice' and also a way to exchange contact information and discuss some of the technical information about the practicum. Rita was paired with an algebra 1 instructor. This teacher had been teaching at the virtual school for three years and had, on average, about 150 students at a time. She taught math, including calculus and algebra 1, in traditional schools for nine years at both junior high and high school. When she worked at the traditional school, she taught an average of five classes a day with about 26 students per class.

Josh was also paired with an algebra 1 teacher who had been teaching with the virtual school for one-and-a-half years. On average, she had about 100 students in her course at the virtual school. She was a traditional school teacher for 12 years. At the traditional school, she taught math to seventh and eighth graders and averaged five classes a day with approximately 20 students per class.

Sue was paired with a social studies instructor. This instructor had been teaching at the virtual school for nine years and had taught various social studies courses, including world cultures. The average number of students in her course at one time was about 150. She taught at a traditional school for nine years before joining the virtual school. At the traditional school, she taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade social

studies and language arts, and averaged six classes per day with approximately 20 students per class. The STs were responsible for mentoring the pre-service teachers so that they could get a full understanding of what it would be like to be a virtual school instructor. The STs' names have been omitted to protect their identity.

In addition to the virtual school staff, the pre-service teachers were enrolled in a technology seminar course housed in their teacher education program, and this course was run by a professor of educational technology. For the purposes of this study, this professor will be called the technology seminar instructor. The following section outlines the structure and activities of the virtual school practicum.

### **Schedule and Activities**

The virtual school practicum was designed using the NETS\*T standards as were outlined earlier in this chapter. In Table 2-2, these standards are matched with activities that the pre-service teachers participated in during the virtual school practicum. Also included are approximate time commitments for each activity.

There were two orientations that the pre-service teachers partook in. The first was a face-to-face orientation that took place at the teacher education program before the virtual school practicum began. At this orientation, the pre-service teachers met face-to-face with their STs. This was also where the pre-service teachers and the researcher of this study were fingerprinted for background check purposes. Background checks were necessary for this study because the state law requires all school districts to conduct background checks for any employees, contractors, and consultants who are potentially in contact with students. The second orientation took place during the first week of the practicum. The STs, internship coordinator, and pre-service teachers

gathered virtually, via Elluminate web-conferencing software, to go over the virtual school practicum.

In addition to being oriented to the practicum, the pre-service teachers had the chance to become oriented with the virtual school by completing the virtual school introduction course. The virtual school introduction course was a course specially designed for the virtual school practicum where the pre-service teachers navigated through 10 modules dealing with various topics that pertained to the virtual school and its day-to-day operations. The 10 modules included: (1) Overview of learning outcomes; (2) Introductions; (3) Establishing workspace/schedule in the virtual school environment; (4) New student registration process and tracking students' progress; (5) Communication in the student management system; (6) Orientation to course management system; (7) Communication and assistance in the virtual school environment; (8) Content-specific training and assessing students; (9) Mentoring and professional development in the virtual school environment; and (10) Modules overview.

Getting to know the virtual school even more, the pre-service teachers explored the virtual school via a cyber scavenger hunt. This scavenger hunt was a short worksheet enabling the pre-service teachers to navigate the virtual school's website to find out more about the nature of the organization. Additionally, the pre-service teachers were able to get a bird's eye view of the training for new teachers. The virtual school's New Employee Orientation (NEO) was a web-streaming window into what NEO is like for new teachers at the virtual school. Pre-service teachers were able to take part vicariously through real-time, web-streaming software instead of having to physically attend the three-day, face-to-face intensive training.

Additional training opportunities during the practicum included welcome calls, student assessments, and information sessions on academic integrity, Internet safety, legal issues, and virtual school funding. During welcome and follow-up calls, pre-service teachers could work with their STs to make welcome calls to their new students and follow-up calls to students who were currently taking their course(s). The pre-service teachers were also scheduled to assist in assessing the K-12 students' work alongside their ST. The Elluminate information session regarding academic integrity was scheduled to take place during the fourth week of the practicum. During this session, the pre-service teachers saw what tools the virtual school uses to combat cheating in the online world (e.g. TurnItIn.com, researching IP addresses, tracking who created documents, taking final exams face-to-face) and the levels of consequence progression for academic integrity violations. During the information session on Internet safety, legal issues, and virtual school funding, which also took place during the fourth week of the practicum, the virtual school administration covered vital information about how the school was created, how it currently operates, how they protect students' privacy, how it upholds its anti-bullying policy, how they make sure links in the courses do not lead to inappropriate sites, and how they ensure that teachers are qualified, certified, and have been through fingerprinting and drug-testing.

### **Technologies Used by the Virtual School**

The pre-service teachers were also introduced to technology systems that their STs use on a daily basis, including Elluminate, an online classroom management system, and the student information system. Elluminate, as seen in Figure 2-1, is an online web-conferencing tool that was used to deliver curricular and informational sessions throughout the four-week virtual school practicum. It was also where the pre-

service teachers were able to create their own virtual office, where they could host meetings with their STs, other virtual school staff, and fellow pre-service teachers.

The online classroom management system is where the virtual school courses are housed. This is where virtual school teachers set up course websites, syllabi, and calendars for the students to follow. The pre-service teachers were able to access this system to enter their ST's course.

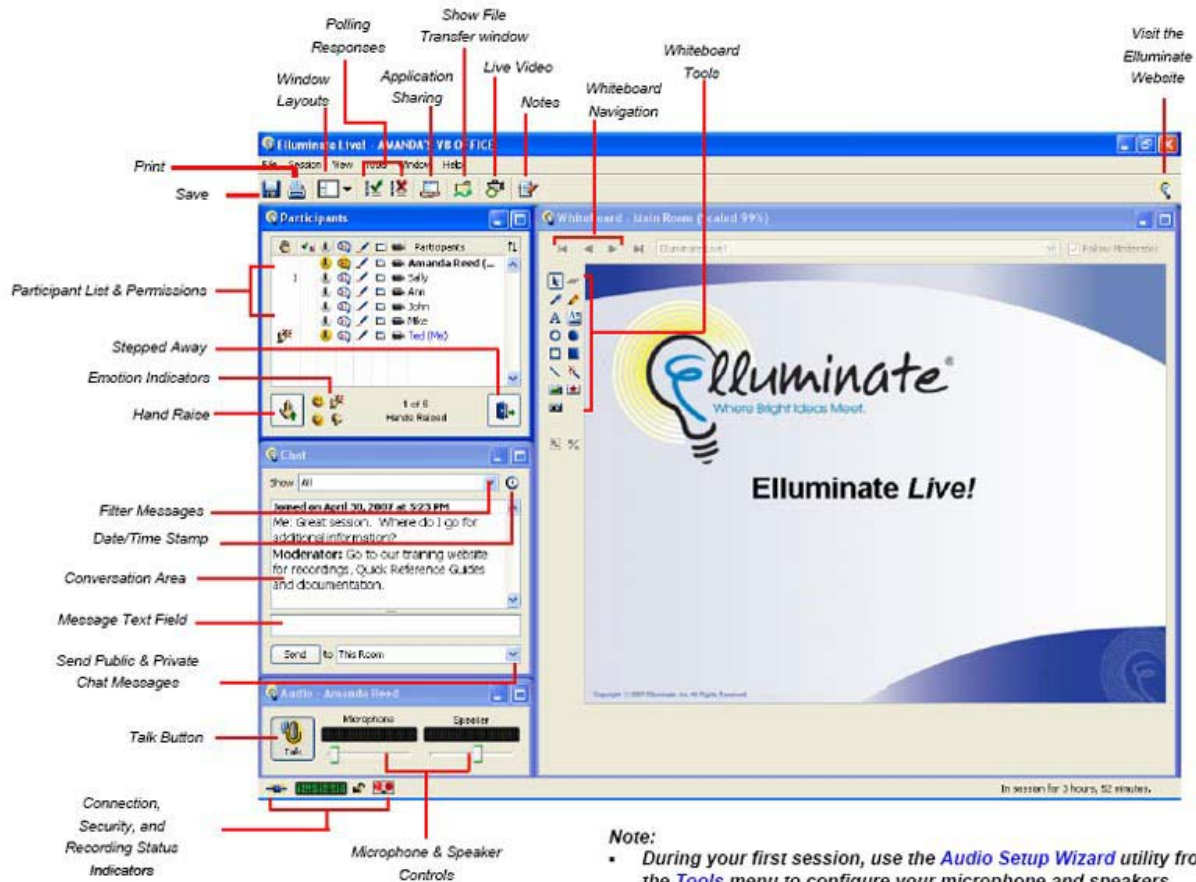
The student information system is a database used by the virtual school to log student work and grades. Pre-service teachers were not given direct access to this system due to legal reasons. However, the STs could model their use of the system alongside the pre-service teachers.

Because the virtual school practicum was voluntary, the pre-service teachers were not assessed by the researcher or the technology seminar instructor. However, the pre-service teachers were assessed informally by their STs and the internship coordinator by way of quizzes administered within the virtual school introduction course.

### **Summary**

The literature that helped frame and warrant this case study documents the shortcomings of teacher preparatory programs and national certifications. These shortcomings are mainly a result of the traditional nature of programs and their lack of acknowledging the importance of preparing teachers for 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning, a new environment where teaching and learning occurs in non-traditional settings, including fully-online and blended environments. The next chapter gives an overview of the methods that were used in this phenomenological study.

## Participant Quick Reference Guide



**Note:**

- During your first session, use the **Audio Setup Wizard** utility from the **Tools** menu to configure your microphone and speakers.
- Some features may not be available depending on your version of **Elluminate Live!** and configuration

Figure 2-1. Screen shot of Elluminate Software



Table 2-1. Cross-reference of online teaching standards

Standards		Organizations			
		ISTE	SREB	iNACOL	NEA
Qualifications, professional development, & credentials	Has prerequisite technology skills to teach online, uses content management system	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Meets core professional-teaching standards as designated by state licensing agency, with necessary academic credentials		✓	✓	
	Contributes to effectiveness, vitality, and self-renewal of profession, school and community; exhibits leadership, demonstrates vision of technology infusion, participates in shared decision making and community building, and develops the leadership and technology skills of others; evaluates and reflects on current research and professional practice on a regular basis to make effective use of existing and emerging digital tools and resources in support of student learning; participates in local and global learning communities to explore creative applications of technology to improve student learning	✓			
	Experienced online learning from the perspective of a student			✓	
	Completed professional development specifically geared to teaching online				✓
	Specifies learning objectives; designs activities to measure mastery of the stated objectives	✓		✓	✓
Curriculum, instruction, and student achievement	Uses fair, adequate, authentic, appropriate, multiple and varied methods, both formative and summative, to assess students	✓	✓	✓	
	Complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act by incorporating adaptive technologies to meet individual student needs		✓	✓	✓
	Uses online resources effectively to deliver instruction	✓	✓		
	Plans, designs, and incorporates strategies to encourage active learning	✓		✓	
	Demonstrates high-quality communication skills		✓		✓
	Adapts web-based course(s) to meet students' needs; promotes student participation and interaction; provides students with timely feedback, prompt responses, and clear expectations		✓	✓	
	Promotes collaborative learning to deepen learning experiences and build community			✓	✓
	Customizes and personalizes learning activities to address students' diverse learning styles, working strategies, and abilities using digital tools and resources; promotes student reflection using collaborative tools to reveal and clarify students' conceptual understanding and thinking, planning and creative processes; promotes, supports, and models creative and innovative thinking and inventiveness; engages students in exploring real-world issues by designing authentic problems using digital tools	✓			
	Makes clear to students his/her availability and willingness to support them; facilitates and monitors appropriate interaction among students; provides and enforces appropriate standards for student behavior; requests others' assistance in supporting students' learning; assesses students before beginning instruction by pre-assessing frequently; ensures students know one another and feel comfortable interacting online		✓		

Table 2-1. Continued

Management	Understands that student success is an important measure of course success, uses data and assessments to modify instructional methods and content to guide student learning	✓	✓	✓
	Shares and communicates information about student progress with mentors, principals, and parents	✓	✓	
	Models, guides, and encourages legal, ethical, safe, and healthy behavior related to technology use	✓		✓
	Ensures that students' work and data are secure; monitors students to ensure academic honesty; helps students with technical issues; coordinates and assists students in understanding course requirements and procedures for working online; guides and monitors students' management of time		✓	
Evaluation	Accepts and follows policies and procedures to monitor courses; ensures that students participate actively in the course		✓	
	Exhibits student-centered and flexible characteristics while maintaining high standards			✓
Character	Collaborates with students, community members, peers, parents, and student support staff, including other teachers, by modeling desired behavior that encourages student participation and success in the online course in a culturally-aware manner	✓		✓
	Possesses a sense of humor and is able to project their personality through developing an 'online voice'; exudes motivation and self-initiative by working effectively and efficiently without constant supervision			✓

Table 2-2. Week-by-week breakdown of the Virtual School (VS) Practicum

Week	Topic	Activities and Standards Met
1	Orientation (~18 hours)	(1) Virtual school introduction course: Modules 1-5 (NETS*T – 3, 4 & 5) (2) VS scavenger hunt (exploring VS website) (NETS*T – 1 & 2) (3) Observe VS New Employee Orientation (NEO) (NETS*T – 5) (4) Check-in call with supervisor teacher (ST) (NETS*T – 3)
2	Technology (~12 hours)	(1) Virtual school introduction course: Modules 6-10 (NETS*T – 3, 4 & 5) (2) Orientation in Elluminate (NETS*T – 2, 3 & 5) (3) Create virtual office & meet with ST (NETS*T – 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5) (4) Online classroom management system with ST (NETS*T – 1 & 3) (5) Observe 2 welcome calls and log them with ST (NETS*T 3 & 5)
3	Online classrooms (~12 hours)	(1) Participate in 5 welcome calls and log them (NETS*T 1, 3 & 5) (2) Overview of assessment procedures with ST (NETS*T 1, 3 & 5) (3) Assessment modeling by ST (NETS*T 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5) (4) Assess work with ST's assistance (NETS*T 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5) (5) ST models and explains time management
4	Legal and ethical issues in online education (~12 hours)	(1) Elluminate session on academic integrity (NETS*T 2, 4 & 5) (2) Elluminate session on Internet safety, legal issues pertaining to online education, and funding of VS (NETS*T 5)

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section describes the theoretical perspective. The second presents the study design by outlining the methods used to sample, collect, and analyze data, and validate the results.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to differentiate between the theoretical perspective, data collection method and data analysis method. Any mention of phenomenology will refer only to the theoretical perspective. When the data collection method is mentioned throughout the study, it will be referred to as the phenomenological interview. When the data analysis method is mentioned throughout the study, it will be referred to as phenomenological analysis.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the essence of a virtual school practicum as expressed by three pre-service teachers who took part in the experience. The research question that guided the study is:

- How do pre-service teachers experience a practicum in a virtual school?

The research question provided guidance as to which theoretical perspective was most suitable to use. Phenomenology allows for the lived experiences of the participants to be described in a narrative context based on their realities and feelings within the experience. Thus, this study explored the lived experiences of three pre-service teachers and led to the discovery of the essence of their virtual school practicum.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is situated in the theoretical perspective of phenomenology. Historically, “phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994) is based on the Greek word “phaenesthai” which means “to flare up, to show itself, to appear” (p. 26). The theory of

phenomenology concentrates on gaining an understanding of a phenomenon based solely on the participants' experiences and the ways in which those participants make meaning of their experiences. To a phenomenologist, each experience is an intentional one (Kockelmans, 1994; Moustakas, 1994).

The participants in phenomenological studies are considered co-researchers, a concept that was added to phenomenology by Moustakas. Having participants be co-researchers is important to Moustakas because he feels the participants' experiences should be conveyed by them; essentially, their meaning-making of their experiences are the heart and soul of the study. The participants are told the purpose of the study before they experience the phenomenon. They are given the research question ahead of time so they can understand the purpose of the study and understand what the phenomenon is. As co-researchers, the participants are asked to constantly and consistently reflect on their experiences. The participants' reflections are crucial to the study because those reflections are what help to elicit rich descriptions of the phenomenon. Also a co-researcher, the researcher's subjectivity comes through in the interpretative part of the analysis, especially when imaginative variation, a technique unique to phenomenology, is used. This technique allows the researcher to further investigate the participants' experience, asking 'how' and 'why' the participants experience the phenomenon the way they do. According to Van Manen (2001):

In phenomenological research the emphasis is always on the meaning of lived experience. The point of phenomenological research is to "borrow" other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (p. 62)

## **The History of Phenomenology**

Phenomenology was formerly introduced in the mid-eighteenth century by known philosophers like Oetinger, Hume, Lambert, Kant, Hegel, Brentano, and Stumpf. However, before it had its official nomenclature, ages before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenology was practiced by many, including Hindu and Buddhist philosophers. Over the years, many varying meanings of phenomenology have been shaped and expanded upon. Even today, debates on what phenomenology means leave philosophers taking sides. When speaking of sides to the debate, there are typically three – Sartrean, Heideggerian, and Husserlian.

Sartre's phenomenology is described through his work on existentialism. In Sartre's existential phenomenology, the object is the phenomenon. The person does not exist unless he/she interacts with the phenomenon (Sartre, 1938). By interacting with that phenomenon, that person comes to understand his/her existence, his/her ability to make choices, to be free. For Sartre, "I" does not exist unless attached to an object (Sartre, 1943).

In the Heideggerian interpretation of phenomenology, called hermeneutical phenomenology, a person is part of the world, and he/she cannot interpret anything without understanding the contextual being of his/her role in the world. Heidegger rejected the idea that in order to be, one must perceive phenomenon around him/her to exist. For Heidegger, a person relates to phenomenon around him/her by performing personal practical activities within the context of the phenomenon while in the presence of others (Heidegger, 1927).

And finally is Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, focused on the phenomenon as perceived by the participant. This study follows Husserlian

phenomenology. In Husserlian's phenomenology, if a person is intent on a phenomenon, is conscious of that phenomenon, then he/she can describe the essence of that phenomenon (Husserl, 1931). The way in which a person perceives a phenomenon helps to define the meaning of the phenomenon in their specific experience with it. Transcendental in nature, Husserl's phenomenology, draws on a few key concepts that provide an understanding regarding how data for this study was collected and analyzed.

### **Key Concepts in Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology**

In Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, epoche, intentionality, noema, and noesis are concepts that are necessary to comprehend. A description of each follows.

#### **Epoche**

Being aware of consciousness itself is the basis of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Being able to suspend judgment while being conscious of a phenomenon is epoche. Epoche serves the researcher "a warning to be alert" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85), reminding he/she to stay true to the participants' experience of the phenomenon. Epoche urges the researcher to let go of knowing all, of understanding all, allowing for the experiences to arise from the data. For the purposes of this study, I have made myself aware of any and all judgments I have by noting my personal thoughts while analyzing and writing up the results of the study. To do this, I kept a notebook of my thoughts as I continued to review the interviews, especially in the initial stages of reducing the data. Once the data were reduced, I had to be mindful of the possibility of imposing my interpretations again when I was working on identifying the meaning units and horizons and when I was writing up the textural descriptions. Once finished with the textural descriptions, I was able to pull that notebook out and

work on the structural descriptions, where I could concentrate on incorporating my interpretations by using imaginative variation, a method that was introduced earlier in this chapter. Imaginative variation will be discussed in more detail in the data analysis section.

### **Intentionality**

A phenomenon is some object that a participant becomes conscious of, one that the participant is intent upon. The participant has an intentional experience with, or intentionally interacts with, the phenomenon. Intentionality then is the act of being conscious of an object, referring “to consciousness, to the internal experience of being conscious of something” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). Intentionality plays out in this study as the participants’ intent upon the virtual school practicum. As they intend upon and interact with the virtual school practicum, the participants become conscious of their lived experiences in that phenomenon. Intentionality becomes visible courtesy of the participants’ reflection on their conscious interaction with the phenomenon.

### **Noema and noesis**

Related to intentionality are noema and noesis. Noema is the “discerning [of] the features of consciousness that are essential for the individuation of objects (real or imaginary) that are before us in consciousness”; noesis is the “explicit[ion of] how beliefs about such objects (real or imaginary) may be acquired, or how it is that we are experiencing what we are experiencing” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 31-32). In simpler terms, the noema is the what, or the object of the phenomenon as perceived through consciousness; the noesis is the how, or the process of experiencing that phenomenon. This study’s noema is the virtual school practicum as perceived through the pre-service



teachers' consciousnesses. The noesis is how the pre-service teachers experience the virtual school practicum.

### **Subjectivity in Qualitative Research**

The term 'subjectivity' is used in qualitative research to explain the researcher's involvement in collecting and interpreting data. Qualitative research allows the researcher to have "personal contact with" and get "close to the people and situation under study" (Patton, 2002, p. 50). People's experiences to a qualitative researcher are important; we, as qualitative researchers, use our methods to understand how people make meaning of their experiences (Crotty, 1998). To maintain a quality study, qualitative researchers continuously check back with the original data set during the interpretation process in order to stay true to the participants' experiences. In addition, validation techniques such as member checking (where the researcher takes the findings back to the participant to make sure the findings are true to the participants' experiences) are used to maintain validity.

### **Subjectivity in Phenomenology**

Subjectivity in phenomenology still means that the researcher is involved in the collection and interpretation of data. Furthermore, it means that the researcher is making a connection with the participants to make sure they understand the participants and the phenomenon they are experiencing. Specifically for phenomenology, epoche and bracketing are used simultaneously to achieve a fresh look at the phenomenon being studied. As was mentioned in the last section, epoche is the state of mind of being aware of biases and preconceived notions regarding a topic that is being researched. Bracketing, which will be discussed more in this chapter, is the application of epoche, a pre-step to make the researcher aware of his/her biases and preconceived

notions. By bracketing my biases, I was more aware of keeping my thoughts out of the interpretive process.

Using notes from my bracketing and epoche process, I wrote my subjectivity statement. It is important for me to state my subjectivity so that readers can better understand my connection to this study. Within my subjectivity statement, I make my feelings about the topic common knowledge ahead of time (Wolcott, 1990). While this helps readers put the findings in context based on their knowledge of the researcher's background, it also helps them to come up with rationale based on their own background (Merriam, 1995).

### **Subjectivity Statement**

I believe that even when you are a student in an education system, you are genuinely involved in what makes up that system. Therefore, I have been involved in the education field since I was four years old. In preschool and elementary school, I was in and out of private and public schools, all of which followed strict curriculum that did not leave much room for student creativity. In middle school, assessments were one-size-fits-all, and courses and lessons within those courses were separate from each other. High school brought me much of the same education as before and did not teach me anything about what was going on outside of the school walls. There were no real world connections being made. I was learning for a test's sake. There were no 21<sup>st</sup> century skills being taught, and I am not sure if they had even been thought of at that point in time.

When I started college, it was hard for me to break out of the standard box that I had grown up in while I was navigating the K-12 education system. I was always asking my professors what they wanted from me rather than asking myself what I wanted out of

my education. It took me until my master's degree to really understand how my K-12 education experience had shaped me, and even more important, how it was going to shape my future in a liberating way.

Due to my past experiences, I am a true believer of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments, which I described in Chapter 2. I believe that learning should happen on students' terms and be directly related to their personal interests. Students should be in control of their own learning. Learning should take place anywhere at any point in time. Because of this, I am a strong supporter of virtual schools and of online and blended learning opportunities in grades K-12. In addition, I believe that pre-service teachers should also have a say in how their teacher education plays out. If one-size-fits-all learning is taught at the pre-service teacher level, how are the teachers supposed to think outside the box? They will start teaching the students the same way as they were taught, and the education system will continue to become less and less relevant for today's students.

In addition to my education in face-to-face, traditional settings, I have had a significant amount of experience taking online courses. For example, my entire master's degree was completed online. A few of my doctoral courses were also taken online. Aside from college courses, I have taken professional development through professional organizations in both the fields of library and information science and educational technology. My experience with these online courses has resulted in a student perspective about what works and what does not work in online learning.

Because of my strong beliefs and background, it was important for me to engage in bracketing during the study. Bracketing allowed me to set aside my beliefs so I could

get at the experiences of the participants. This statement serves as a precautionary to the reader to look at the findings with my subjectivity in mind.

### **Study Design**

The purpose of this study was to describe the essence of a virtual school practicum as expressed by three pre-service teachers who took part in the experience. Essence, according to Moustakas, is “that which is common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (1994, p. 100). As mentioned, reaching the essence of an experience is what phenomenological research is all about – the researcher’s goal is to unveil the essence of the experience based on the realities of the participants who partake in the experience.

### **Participants**

In this study, three graduate-level, pre-service teachers’ experiences were documented to see how they lived the virtual school practicum. The participants in this study were selected using criterion sampling, where all participants matched a set of criterion (Patton, 2002), including the following:

1. Participants were enrolled in the fifth year of their teacher education program;
2. Participants were interested in becoming online and/or blended K-12 instructors; and
3. Participants were specializing in educational technology.

This procedure allowed for a more homogeneous sample. The names of the participants were changed to protect their identity. The study participants were recruited by way of participation in a master’s-level technology course housed in the educational technology department in the teacher education program. To recruit participants, I visited the course and gave a brief presentation about the virtual school practicum and

the research study I was conducting. Upon completion of the presentation, the students were encouraged to email me if they wanted to participate. Four prospective recruits emailed me. Their replies to the recruitment email voiced initial concerns regarding time constraints that this experience would require. The pre-service teachers were assured that the virtual school would work around their schedules, especially considering this experience was voluntary on their part. I provided information about the practicum to the participants, and within a week of the practicum starting, one of the participants had to drop out due to personal illness. That left three participants total. I sent a second email to solicit more participation, however, no other students partook of the opportunity. The three participants were all in their early to mid-twenties and were ready to hit the ground running in the field of education. Two were female while one was male. One of the females was African-American while the other was Caucasian; and the male was Caucasian as well. They are each described in more detail below.

### **Josh**

Josh was a Caucasian male in his mid-twenties. He described himself as sarcastic and creative when it came to his work with students. Josh was interested in teaching fourth or fifth graders in science and math. He was also interested in getting certified to teach gifted students. Josh talked about himself as “outspoken,” “very forward,” and “innovative.” He saw himself as a teacher because “that’s my personality...it’s not my profession, it’s me!” He first experienced online learning in community college, and he described this as not a great example of online learning, “really didn’t matter when you turned stuff in as long as it was done by the last day of class.” In graduate school, he took a few online courses, which were much more demanding, yet they were flexible because he worked a couple of jobs in order to make

ends meet financially while he was in school. For some of his face-to-face courses, he would have to ask off from work so that he could attend class. He appreciated the promptness of online instructors regarding feedback on assignments and grading. “If I turn in an assignment and there’s another assignment just like that one coming up, I want to know how I did on the first one before I start the second one because if I did something wrong, I don’t want to be penalized twice.” In his online learning experiences, he felt that timely communication was key, whether it be the instructor answering a student’s question, participating regularly in discussion forums, or providing feedback/grades for assignments. Structure was another quality of online learning that Josh felt was vital. In his eyes, students should have a “set schedule of when assignments are due.”

In addition to taking classes online, Josh also had learning experiences online through his contribution to professional social networking communities. He mentioned having posted a comment about Internet safety in schools to one forum. From that post, he received a great deal of feedback from practicing teachers.

Josh was interested in participating in the virtual school practicum because with a master’s degree he could teach community college or supplemental K-12 online learning opportunities. “It’s just unique. I love anything tech...so anything to distinguish me on my resume so I am not just another cookie cutter college of ed kid helps. I mean being a male is different (laughing) but I don’t feel that it’s enough, so I wanted enough on my resume to boost myself...I am super excited about it.”

Josh understood the need for teachers to learn how to teach online. He comprehended the challenge of having to “stay on top of it.” Josh thought “kids come

out of the womb knowing how to instantly turn on the video game systems (laughing) and how to go on the Internet.” He remembered being two-and-a-half years old and having his grandmother ask him how to work the VCR, and he could do it. He felt that when teaching kids online, a teacher should be at least near the same page as the students, and for Josh, if a student finds some new program that will work well for a certain application, teachers, no matter what medium they are using, should be open minded to that new tool and allow the student to teach the teacher. Josh felt that teachers should never “place limits on [a student’s] creativity.” Josh has a desire to be a lifelong learner and said, “If the kids can teach me something, I am all ears and ready to learn it.” He was very open to alternative assessments and allowing for a more universal design for learning approach to assessment in his future classroom, allowing students to choose the way that they want to express their knowledge.

Josh felt that “staying on the forefront of the technology wave is the only way to survive, to swim not sink.” In some of his past internships, he has noticed many technologies going unused, such as SMARTBoards and digital cameras, and he felt that a lack of teacher training on the part of the school/teacher education program and a lack of willingness to change on the part of the teacher were to blame. This virtual school practicum gave him “more tools for [his] bag of tricks,” and with the economy at its current state, where many newly-hired teachers are being laid off, virtual schooling gave him another career road to travel. His past experiences with virtual schooling were vicarious through his friends. He remembered that a couple of his friends had attended virtual school because of overcrowded face-to-face learning opportunities at his traditional high school. He remembered his friends going to the media center during the

class period when art history was held and logging onto the virtual school for their course. While he never enrolled in the courses, he always thought the concept was intriguing.

Josh was always trying to “spread the technology bug” to other people in the program because he said “we need more tech savvy people.” He felt that teacher education programs “need to have a tech class in every semester.” Many of the other pre-service teachers who he had interned with were technophobes, “Wah, computers, I don’t know how to turn on a Mac.” Josh said, ““Oh no, you need Tech Rehab right now, the Intensive Care Unit (laughing).”” He felt that if the tech classes were offered every semester, maybe these technophobes would become more and more comfortable with using technology in the classroom. He also felt that the teacher educators needed to be updated on how to use the latest technologies in the classroom. Josh never considered himself to be a virtual school teacher, but when he heard about this experience, he was “really excited about the possibility...a really unique experience to help me get my feet wet in the online world.”

### **Rita**

Rita was a 21-year old African-American woman. She described herself as conscientious in her studies and was aware of her responsibility to become the best teacher she could be for her future students. Upon graduation, Rita would be certified to teach K-6, but she hoped to concentrate on teaching third to fifth grade students. She was also seeking additional certification in mathematics for grades 6-12 and hoped to teach algebra 1 and algebra 2 in the near future, which would mostly be geared to grades 9-11. Rita was ambitious, “eager and excited” about learning and becoming an educator. She had taken “quite a lot of classes online,” at first as a business student



and now as an education major. Her experience as a business student left a “bad taste in [her] mouth about online learning” because there was no interaction in the courses. Instead, she would go online, watch videos of the instructors’ lectures, and then go to a testing site on campus to take a test with hundreds of other students who were taking the class also. There was no interaction at all, and she “didn’t feel like [she] was in a class” except for when she “showed up to the test and there was this big auditorium – type place with like 250 students, and I was like ‘who are all these people (laughing)?’”

Her experience with online learning in the education field has been quite different. In her courses within her educational technology specialization, there was more interaction, and she liked that. She mentioned having to post to forums to “give and get feedback to and from peers.” She appreciated this feedback especially since she was “still kind of a beginner about the whole lesson planning thing and...more experienced teachers...would make comments... saying, ‘I don’t know if that will work exactly in the classroom.’” In this environment, she was giving and receiving help and saw it as a “reciprocal community.” So her experiences with online learning range from “completely shut off” to “completely interactive learning.”

In her online classes, she said she really had to stay “on top of things” and “know when your deadlines are.” She took the business courses during her first year of college so “it was just kind of an adjustment, a different way of having to deal with school,” especially since the teacher was not there all of the time to “tell you, ‘Ok, next week, this is due. Or tomorrow this is due.’” Despite her not-so-good earlier experiences with online learning, she liked the online environment because the timing was flexible, and

she could upload assignments (“no printing necessary, saving ink and paper”) and get quick feedback.

In addition to her experiences with taking online courses, she also kept up with online resources such as blogs (web logs), by using a “blog feed in bloglines.” She mentioned a few examples of the blogs that she kept up with including “some teacher group that talks about how to use Smartboards in the classroom,” “some that are math related...[that] integrate technology,” and other general resources that discuss “using technology to supplement your lessons.” She also used the social networking site Facebook socially but not professionally.

She described herself as a forward thinker. In high school, she remembered “predicting the future in a way” by thinking about how “one day people [would] put a TV in a classroom and a teacher [would be] broadcast through the whole school, like the whole third grade (laughing). And it was just sort of in my head, and it has kind of like come to that in a way.” Rita was motivated to participate in the virtual school practicum to “be on top of what’s out there, to have some options, perhaps I want to be a virtual school teacher, I don’t really know at this point.” She had heard about virtual schooling before but “didn’t really understand what it was exactly or how I could take classes online.”

She was an advocate for technology use in schooling; “there are just endless possibilities with technology, and kids love technology so any way that it can be integrated meaningfully can be very helpful.” She wanted to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher. She wanted to be more of a facilitator and wanted her future students to be in control of their own learning. Out of the virtual school practicum, she hoped to have “an increased

awareness of what I can do with my students in the classroom...and to learn how to teach students I don't see..., learning how to speak in a way that...helps students understand information immediately and doesn't create mass confusion (laughing)." She hoped it would also be a "really great experience to learn about teaching in a new format and hopefully it will open some more doors for me both as a regular classroom teacher and as a potential virtual school teacher."

### **Sue**

Sue was a Caucasian woman in her mid-twenties. She described herself as ambitious and willing to do whatever it took to make herself as marketable as possible. Sue was interested in teaching English/language arts in grades 7-10. Sue did not hear about K-12 online learning until she was an intern while pursuing her undergraduate degree. A lot of her students in her placements were taking classes through the virtual school in order to get ahead or to catch up. She had spoken to some of them about their experiences, and they all said that they liked the online learning environment. She did participate in online learning as an undergraduate, and she admitted that they were easy filler classes. She has had both good and bad examples of online learning experiences. She enjoyed meeting and getting to know people, so she liked face-to-face classes. While she said that you could meet and get to know people to some extent online, she admitted that, for her, it was just not the same. As a potential instructional designer/teacher for K-12 online learning environments, she saw this as a challenge when designing a course – how does the instructor get people involved?

Sue considered herself a lifelong learner and would be happy to be a "professional student." She was a go-getter who was always looking for something new to challenge her. As a teacher, she felt that keeping up was important, however, there

was always the issue of time. She saw more recent online learning experiences as being more collaborative. In her previous online learning experience, she felt disconnected, as if she was not really in a class. She recollected being able to finish a semester's worth of coursework for one class in six weeks. Each of the lessons that she completed were individual lessons rather than ones that built on each other. In her more recent courses, she has had to get involved, make comments, and respond to other's comments. Sue thought that there was a balance between too much discussion board and not enough. And there was also a fine line between allowing students to finish a whole class in a short amount of time (self-paced) and only allowing them to see so much of their assignments at a time (same-paced).

Sue completed her undergraduate degree from another university in the southeastern United States. At her undergraduate program, there were no options to take online courses. However, she did have the same courses as those that are offered in the university featured in this study, including a general technology class and one class specific to her content area, language arts. She reported not having any preparation in how to be an online teacher or a teacher in a distance education situation. Her experience at her old institution for technology integration in the classroom was unfortunate in her eyes because they always taught to a basic level, and Sue was more advanced. To her, the courses using technology at her old institution were boring. In addition to online courses, Sue's online experiences had included social networking through Facebook, which helped her facilitate personal connections with family and friends that she had around the world. Sue saw online experiences as ways to form connections. She was intrigued by the idea of online learning and thought that

she might want to teach in the K-12 online learning environment upon graduation. Since she did not know what this environment was like, she wanted to “test run” the practicum to see if it would fit her needs.

When she graduated from high school six years ago, online learning in the K-12 education arena did not exist. Now, “it’s huge and it’s becoming even more prevalent, even elementary school kids can use it now so I think it’s just kind of only going to become bigger and more popular.” She believed that part of being a teacher was preparing your students for the real world, so that they are confident in those skills that will help them in the future. As a teacher, Sue felt as though it is a teacher’s responsibility to make sure students learn digital literacy skills and not assume that “they are learning them on their own or at home. And in an online course, as an online teacher, you can’t always assume they know these basic skills either.” She felt that it might be hard to teach these skills to students online because “you are not next to them.” Being a language arts content person, she saw English as the “catch-all subject in some ways where” other subjects are put “under the umbrella of English.”

She felt the need to “work hard to stay on top of everything as a teacher.” She felt that a lot of teachers have fallen behind. She recalled having to teach some of the teachers she was interning with how to “open their email or create shortcuts on their desktop or make a simple powerpoint for their class.” She urged that if “your students are going to be 21<sup>st</sup> century learners then you have to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher to keep up with them.” If the students were not met at their level, Sue felt that we would lose them because they will get bored. As a teacher, Sue felt that all teachers must step out of their classroom “bubble.”

She was interested in participating in this experience because she saw how it could allow her to incorporate the skills that she gained through the educational technology program, including program evaluation and design principles to examine the online learning environment. She was also interested in learning more about the tools used in virtual schooling. She wanted to seek employment with the virtual school for the summer as well, so she felt that this would be a good way to introduce herself to the school. She mentioned that she really had no time to do this additional training, but she said she was “going to make it work” because she felt that it was important for her to do.

### **Data Collection – Phenomenological Interviews**

The data for this study were collected using phenomenological interviews. These interviews followed the phenomenological interview guidelines as outlined by Moustakas (1994, p. 114-118). The goal of the phenomenological interview is to keep the questions open and free from preconceived notions and leading terms, allowing for more interviewee-guided rich narrative of a phenomenon.

The art of creating questions for phenomenological interviews is to make sure that each question centers around the phenomenon itself. This ensures the solicitation of deep, rich descriptive data of the experience as a whole. Asking questions in a phenomenological interview is constant in order to develop a deeper understanding of the participant’s meaning making of the experience. According to Van Manen (2001), participants are asked questions that will allow them to share a narrative of their own experiences, and the researcher’s role is to encourage as much concrete detail and context surrounding those experiences as possible. The constant questioning regarding the participant’s meaning making encourages a deeper reflection on the participant’s part. And this reflexive process occurs throughout the series of interviews, where

themes stemming from one interview can lead the researcher to ask clarifying/reflective/interpretive questions in the follow-up interviews. The researcher, at each stage of the phenomenological study, reports back to the participant to see if what they are describing is really what the participant is experiencing and is really a true representation of the phenomenon.

For this study's purposes, four, one-on-one, phenomenological interviews with each of the three pre-service teachers were conducted from the start of the virtual school practicum (March 2009) to the end (April 2009). The first interview was intended to catch a glimpse of the participants' expectations of the virtual school practicum and was conducted a week prior to the start of the practicum. Questions and prompts in the first interview included the following examples: Talk about your experiences with online learning; why did you decide to participate in the virtual school practicum?; and what does it mean to you to be an online teacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The second interview focused on the description of the virtual school environment. This interview was conducted during the third week of the practicum. Some questions and prompts from this interview included the following: Describe your orientation into the virtual school; what are your typical interactions with your supervisor teacher?; how do you communicate with your supervisor teacher?; and how are you being mentored in this program?

The third interview focused on how communication works in the virtual school practicum, whether it was with the supervisor teacher, other virtual school administration and/or staff, students, parents, etc. This interview was conducted a week after the virtual school practicum ended. Sample prompts and questions in this interview included

the following: Could you describe in detail the classroom that you are placed in?; how do you use the online environment to communicate?; how does communication work in the virtual school?; in your practicum, how would you define the roles of all of the individuals involved?

The fourth and final interview was conducted three weeks after the virtual school practicum ended and inquired about the practicum as a whole and in what ways the practicum affected the pre-service teacher. A few examples of prompts and questions from this interview included: How has this experience affected you as a potential online teacher?; what is important to know and/or consider when thinking about becoming a virtual school teacher?; what qualities, attitudes, values, and beliefs are essential for a virtual school teacher to possess?

Prior to the interviews, the researcher made a conscious effort to get to know each of the participants by conversing with them in the halls of the college, emailing them to ask if they had further questions or concerns, and calling them to make sure their interview times still worked for their busy schedules. This worked out well because it helped to establish a friendly, open, and flexible rapport with the participants.

The first two interviews were conducted face-to-face and the latter two via telephone. The ones done via telephone were necessary due to my need to travel toward the end of the study. While I did have time to establish a good relationship with each of the participants prior to the phone interviews (Seidman, 2006), I would have liked to have done all of the interviews in a face-to-face format to be consistent. There are both advantages and disadvantages to conducting phone interviews. The advantages include less effects of interviewer on interviewee based on gesturing,



interviewer uniformity, and “greater cost efficiency” when the interviewer and interviewee are located in separate places (Shuy, 2003, p. 178). The disadvantages include less naturalness in the setting, power issues based on lack of physical cuing, and better and more thoughtful responses (Shuy, 2003, pp. 179-180). The face-to-face interviews accounted for any intonations and inflections expressed during the communication of the pre-service teachers’ experiences. Field notes were recorded both while the interviews were in session and then immediately after the interviews had ended; these notes eluded to any cues (auditory or physical, dependent on the interview setting) that pertained to the participants’ expressions of their experiences.

Interview guides were created for each of the four interviews (see Appendix A). Each interview lasted 20 to 60 minutes and consisted of five to eight questions. The lengths of the interviews varied so much due to the topics being discussed during that interview. If the participant had little to say, then the researcher would move onto another topic. When gaps showed up in the participants’ data, I took the time to go back to the participant via email or phone to gain more insight in order to fill that gap. The time it took to fill the gaps were not included in the original interview times. Filling those gaps allowed me to arrive at a more detailed look at the phenomenon.

The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed verbatim (Poland, 2002). The interviews consisted of an explanation of the study and then questions for each participant to answer and discuss. The interview guides went through a pilot process with fellow researchers in order to ensure that the questions were understandable, inline with phenomenological interview question guidelines, and

able to engage interviewees enough to gain ample information for analysis and rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon.

### **Data Analysis – Phenomenological Analysis**

This section describes the steps taken during the data analysis process of the study. The interview data were analyzed using phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Each step in the phenomenological analysis process is explained in the sections below.

#### **Phenomenological reduction**

The first step in phenomenological analysis was reducing the data to only show the data that has to do with the phenomenon. Phenomenological reduction is a term that stems from Husserl's (1970) work, where the investigation is directly posited on the phenomenon under study. I reduced the data by looking closely at the interview data and omitting information that was not directly related to the virtual school practicum. While reducing the data, bracketing was done. I also used epoche to make note of my personal thoughts regarding the data. As mentioned earlier, bracketing and epoche go hand-in-hand. They are two "moments" done in tandem in the process of reduction; they are not separate steps (Fink, 1995, p. 41). While epoche is the frame of mind in which the researcher keeps in mind his/her thoughts regarding the phenomenon, bracketing is the application of setting aside and making note of those thoughts. After epoche and bracketing are complete, the phenomenological reduction process leaves the descriptive knowledge that the participants are sharing about reflecting on their intent upon and consciousness of a phenomenon (Giorgi, 1994).

Once the data were reduced and bracketed, I went through the data again to look for multiple representations of the phenomenon, or the horizons. Horizontalizing is

considered an ongoing process that has no end, seeing as one phenomenon can be experienced in various, limitless ways (Moustakas, 1994). These horizons were checked against invariant descriptions to make sure there were no other parts of the data that were originally excluded that needed to be included due to their relevancy to the experience. If not relevant in the second check, they were deleted. Meaning units were then assigned within each participants' data set.

### **Individual textural descriptions**

Once the horizons and meaning units were discovered and understood, I went through the reduced data sets to find representations of those horizons and meaning units. Using the meaning units, an individual textural description was constructed for each participant's experience. I made sure to retain the original "texture" of the descriptions, illuminating the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). The textural descriptions are filled with direct quotations and interviewer notes that bring the participants' experience to life. The textural descriptions highlight the participants' experiences by documenting what they saw, both consciously and directly. These descriptions helped to understand the virtual school practicum as seen through the eyes of the participants and represent the cohesive story of each pre-service teacher's experience in the virtual school practicum.

### **Individual structural descriptions and imaginative variation**

After using the meaning units to write the textural descriptions, individual structural descriptions were written. These structural descriptions are describing the structure of the phenomenon by way of reflection and interpretation of the participants' data. The structural description is where the meaning-making happens since this is where the researcher can venture to determine what the phenomenon means to the participants

who have lived it. This is done by using imaginative variation. Imaginative variation is a way for the researcher to interpret the experiences of the participants. In this study, I took the meaning units and the data that supported those meaning units and created alternative interpretations of what was going on between the participants and the way they lived the experience. Based on the data, I selected the most likely interpretation that followed the clues that were apparent in the data set. Moustakas understands imaginative variation as a way to utilize the imagination to approach the data, employing “varying frames of reference,” “polarities and reversals,” “different positions, roles, or functions” to come to the “underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words, the ‘how’ that speaks to conditions that illuminate the ‘what’ of experience” (1994, pp. 97-98).

### **Composite descriptions and the essence of the experience**

Once the textural descriptions were written for each participant, I pulled all of these together and organized the data based on the horizons that were shared by all three pre-service teachers. The composite textural description represents the rich descriptive experience of all of the pre-service teachers in the virtual school practicum. Once the structural descriptions were written for each participant, I pulled all of these together and organized the data based on the shared horizons, which helped to also arrive at the essence and meaning of the experience.

Crafting the essence relied greatly on the shared horizons and how they represented the three participants as if they were one. The essence statement incorporated both the main points of the composite textural and composite structural descriptions. The essence, according to Husserl (1931), is made up of the components

that make a phenomenon what it is; in other words, without these vital components, the phenomenon would not exist.

## **Validity**

Validity is the act of acknowledging that the findings of a study are “true” and “certain”; ‘true’ means that the results are representative of the participants’ experience of the phenomenon, while ‘certain’ means that these representations can be verified by the data sets of the study (Schwandt, 1997, p. 168). To get at the true representations of the study and the knowledge that can be offered to the research community, assumptions are set aside and made note of so as to ensure “an epistemological investigation that can seriously claim to be scientific” (Husserl, 1970, p. 263).

Validity in qualitative research differs from what it means in quantitative research. In quantitative research, validity is testing for reliability and dependability in a data collection instrument that is designed by the researcher. In the case of qualitative research, the researcher is the data collection instrument, and the researcher and his/her methods need to be trustworthy in that they need to be dependable, confirmable, and credible to ensure the study’s validity (Patton, 2002). To be dependable, the steps in the research process must be well-documented and logical (Schwandt, 1997). To be confirmable, the results have to be based on what the participants experienced (Schwandt, 1997). To be credible, the participants’ experiences and the researcher’s interpretation of those experiences have to match up (Schwandt, 1997). Validity in qualitative research has to do with the rigor that the researcher employs while conducting the study: what methods are used?; why are they used? how are they used?; why are they used that way?; and what steps does the researcher take to arrive at the results of the study?

In addition to general validity, it is important to think about external validity, or in qualitative research terms transferability, meaning how do the results of this study help to understand another group's experience with a similar situation? (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To achieve transferability of a study, the goal of the researcher is to "present the experience of the people he or she interviews in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects" (Seidman, 2006, p. 51). In other words, the researcher is hoping the reader can make a connection with the experience.

### **Validity in Phenomenology**

Validity takes an interesting twist in phenomenology. Phenomenologists are "less interested in the factual status of particular instances" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). They are more interested in better understanding the nature of a phenomenon and how participants experience that phenomenon. Validity in phenomenology relies a great deal on the participants' self-reflection on their experiences with the phenomenon and also on the researcher's interpretation on that reflection. When it comes to validity in phenomenology, truth and certainty are not considered because human science research challenges "the assertion that an interpretation can ever be absolutely correct [certain] or true"; instead, "it must remain only and always an interpretation" (Patton, 2002, p. 114).

### **Validation Strategies**

To secure the validity of this study at the general level of qualitative research, this study incorporated member checks and audit trails. Member checking is a process that is done after data is collected, analyzed, and conclusions are written. It is where the

researcher asks the participants to check the results to make sure that the study is staying true to their experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moustakas, 1994, p. 110-111). The member checks resulted in Josh having no changes to be made to the results, Sue asking that she change the intensity of one of her comments regarding the design of the practicum, and Rita asking a clarifying question about what some of the results meant. The participants felt the interpretation stayed true to how they experienced the virtual school practicum.

The study also used an audit trail (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993) to maintain valid procedures. An audit trail is where the researcher documents and justifies every decision that is made during the study. This study's audit trail includes raw data, reduced data, analyzed data, reconstructed data, synthesis data, process notes, and reflective notes (Halpern, 1983).

For phenomenology in particular, validity necessitates the use of epoche, rich detailed descriptions, and peer debriefing. Epoche is where the researcher's personal thoughts regarding the topic of the study are set aside while data collection and analysis are being conducted. This process includes keeping personal notes that separate the researcher's past involvement with the phenomenon (Ashworth, 1999). I also wrote the subjectivity statement, which states what my connection is to the topic.

Rich description was also used to ensure this study's validity. Many times, researchers mistake rich description to mean collecting great amounts of data about a topic from a participant and making it available for the reader to interpret. However, rich, thick-in-detail, descriptions are not merely "amassing relevant detail"; rather, "it is the interpretive characteristic of description" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 161). Another aspect in

addition to the interpretive nature of the thick data is that the interpretation needs to be transparent enough that it would allow the reader to explore how this study correlates to his/her own situation – are the results transferable, and to what extent? (Wolcott, 1990) Through the use of both textural and structural descriptions, both individual and composite, I have provided the reader rich, thick detail that will allow them to live vicariously through my participants as they experience the virtual school practicum.

Peer debriefing (Maxwell, 1998) was also used as a validation tool. Peer debriefing is where the researcher asks a few colleagues to read the study to see if they see any blatant biases, logistical and/or methodological flaws, or any other validity issues. This occurred three times during the study. First, it occurred as I was drafting the study design. I did this to ensure the methodology, epistemology, and methods made sense for what I wanted to accomplish. Second, once the methodology was sound, data were collected, and the raw data were reviewed by a fellow researcher to verify the lack of leading prompts and probes within the interview process. Third, after the results were written, drafts were sent to the methodologist and other committee members to ensure the data interpretation was accurate and sound.

## **Limitations**

Limitations exist in this study within the setting, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and the researcher's subjectivity. These are described in more detail below.

## **Setting**

The setting for this study was a virtual school in the southeastern United States. There are many different types of business models when it comes to virtual schools, so there is no 'one-size-fits-all' model. The virtual school in which this study took place has



a very unique business operation model. Because of this, there is limited transferability. In addition, the practicum itself was being structured while the experience was happening, so this could be seen as a limitation as well.

### **Data collection**

Two of the methods used in the data collection aspect of the study can be considered limitations; these include the sampling strategy and phone interviews. The sampling strategy used for this study was used specifically to gain access to teachers who possess an understanding of the shift in education occurring in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their graduate-level course work has exposed them to high-quality, meaningfully-designed, online learning environments, and a sense of self-responsibility to be the teachers who will make a difference for each individual student they come in contact with in their future careers. Each of these pre-service teachers entered this study thinking in a way that is necessary to become a 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher. In addition, there were a limited number of participants due to the voluntary nature of the experience. Because of this, only the students who typically go above and beyond chose to participate and were also identified by their technology seminar instructor as the ones who would most likely participate. In addition, the sample was small because the experience was voluntary and not credit-based.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, two out of the four interviews were phone interviews. Phone interviews can have limitations. These limitations include decreased naturalness of the setting, issues of power between the interviewer and interviewee based on the absence of body language, and less thoughtful responses (Shuy, 2003, pp. 179-180). In addition the varying lengths of the interviews could be considered a limitation. The lengths of the interviews varied so much because of the topics being

discussed at the time of the interview and whether or not the participant had anything they wanted to share about the topic. In any case, when gaps existed in the data, I went back to the participant to fill in those gaps in order to provide a richer look at the phenomenon.

### **Data analysis**

Epoche requires the researcher to see the research setting in a whole new light in order to have a fresh view of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon. In order to do this, all past judgments regarding the phenomenon need to be put aside prior to the researcher engaging in the research. By achieving epoche, "the pure state of being required for fresh perceiving and experiencing" exists as "a pure state of mind" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 88). This is difficult to do in its entirety because it is a solitary act, and there are "directing voices and sounds, internally and externally...manipulating or predisposing" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 88). Bracketing my thoughts helped to keep intensity and conviction in eliminating this limitation, however, "clear openness or pure consciousness is virtually an impossibility" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90).

### **Researcher's subjectivity**

Despite my use of bracketing, my thoughts and perceptions may have affected the interpretations I made about the participants' experiences in the virtual school practicum. Use of member checking and peer debriefing may have helped this limitation, however, as this was a solitary project, using peer debriefing and member checking at every stage in the process was not feasible. I provided the readers a subjectivity statement so they could see how my background may have influenced the final results.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of this study. As described in Chapter 3, phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the interview data. The results of that analysis include textural and structural descriptions for each of the three participants, a composite textural description and a composite structural description (a compilation of the three participants' experiences), and finally a synthesis highlighting the essence of the virtual school practicum as experienced by the three pre-service teachers who participated in the study.

The chapter is organized into three sections. First, the textural and structural descriptions for each participant are presented. In phenomenological tradition, the results of phenomenological research focus on the combined understanding of the participants' experience; as in this case, the results focus on how pre-service teachers experience the virtual school practicum, and these shared results are brought to fruition in the composite textural descriptions, composite structural descriptions, and the essence of the experience as a whole. However, in order to highlight the variations in the experiences, individual textural and individual structural descriptions are shared. The individual textural descriptions represent each participant's description of the phenomenon. The individual structural descriptions represent the researcher's interpretation of how each participant experienced the phenomenon. For this study, the phenomenon is the virtual school practicum. The meaning units that came up for each participant organize the individual textural and individual structural descriptions. A meaning unit is "a statement by an individual which is self-defining and self-delimiting in the expression of a single, recognizable aspect of the individual's experience" (Stones,

1988, p. 153). These meaning units help to bring to life each pre-service teacher's experience in the virtual school practicum. Within the individual textural and individual structural descriptions, quotation marks designate those words spoken by the participants.

After the individual textural and individual structural descriptions for each participant are presented, the composite textural and composite structural descriptions are shared. These composite descriptions are a mixture of all of the participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations of the virtual school practicum as experienced by the participants. These descriptions are organized using the horizons that were shared by all participants. Finding similarities among the participants' meaning units helped me arrive at the horizons. Horizons are defined as those "textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). The shared horizons include the following: (1) communication with supervisor teacher; (2) information systems at the virtual school; (3) modification of course content; (4) Elluminate; (5) balancing act; and (6) unmet expectations. (See Appendices B and C for lists of the individual and shared horizons and meaning units for each participant.). Following the composite descriptions, the essence of the phenomenon is outlined using the shared horizons. The essence of the phenomenon and all of the descriptions were written by the researcher, however, they arose out of the participants' experiences.

### **Individual Textural and Individual Structural Descriptions**

#### **Textural Description of Josh's Experience**

##### **Limited contact with supervisor teacher**

Going into the virtual school practicum, Josh voiced anxiety he had in regard to meeting his supervisor teacher (ST). Since they were meeting face-to-face first, he

thought everything would be fine, “as long as they’re cool.” His ST mentioned at the initial meeting that she would call him once a week. He had “high hopes for it,” but it did not happen that way. During the orientation, they communicated their teaching and technology stories. When he told his ST his stories, she made him feel as though his stories were unimportant and not correct. He listened to what she said but heard “this is the right way...my way of doing it.”

After the orientation, communication with his ST occurred via email mostly. He did not receive many emails from her other than “process” type emails, like “scheduling.” A sample email from their exchanges is below:

Josh: Good afternoon! I have a feeling I am going to get called to substitute teach (I usually get a call every Monday morning). In case I don't, I would be available for the morning welcome call. If you could, call my cell phone in the morning. If I answer, then I can participate. I will try and send you an email in the morning if I am substitute teaching. I hope this works.

Josh's ST: That sounds perfect. I will call you before I call the parent, if you are not substituting, great, then you can join in. If you are, there will be more.

In addition to the few emails, they had three phone calls total, one as a check-up on how the experience was going, another that was supposed to be a welcome call that the student was not home for, and finally a welcome call where all parties were present. During his one welcome call, his ST told the parent that Josh was an intern and was just there to listen. Josh listened in on the conversation while his ST talked to the student...“Do you know how to submit assignments? Here's the grace period. Do you have any questions about textbooks? Did you read everything online in the modules? Here's my office hours.” He did not get to ask questions even though he would have liked to. He felt that his ST could have communicated and “worked better with” him. He said that he always has his phone with him and that he is not hard to reach.

## **Learning to use the virtual school systems**

In his first two weeks of the practicum, Josh learned about the two information systems used in the virtual school, including the student information system (SIS), which essentially is “the grade book” and “communication log,” and the online classroom management system (OCMS), “where you get the modules...content.” The OCMS was where Josh’s ST’s course was housed. Josh entered the OCMS and found his ST’s course. In the course, he said the students submitted assignments, which were time- and date-stamped, and his ST was required to sign into the OCMS every day to grade. When describing his ST’s classroom, he said that there were 12 to 14 modules for the entire year, seven for the first part of the year and six for the second part. Each module was made up of six to ten lessons, and Josh said “normal” pacing for the students was accomplishing four lessons a week. This pacing was tracked by the virtual school teachers in the SIS. The SIS was also where Josh’s ST logged all of her communications with students and parents.

## **Ideal relationship with internship coordinator**

Each week, the internship coordinator would be in touch with Josh to let he and the other interns know how the weekly activities were going to be structured, and that was helpful for him, especially with how busy his schedule was outside of the practicum. Because of his rocky relationship with his ST, Josh sought out the internship coordinator rather than his ST when he had a question because he felt that the internship coordinator was “really trying to develop” him and felt that he could go to her with any question, “no matter how silly.” He felt that the internship coordinator was “more of a mentor to him” than his ST was.

He really enjoyed interacting with the internship coordinator because she was able to make the experience more personal. The internship coordinator made a great impression on Josh because she genuinely wanted “to know more about” him as a person including asking about his cat every time they had correspondence. He felt that she was a person that he could “continue to call on after the experience was over.” For Josh, the internship coordinator put in the effort to provide exciting information to him about this new learning environment, this new potential career opportunity. She was a person who made him think, and he liked that. She was really trying to develop him even though they only had a short experience. He felt “engaged with her” because he saw that “she was passionate and invested in what she was doing,” and he felt that she had invested time into developing him. That is the relationship he really wanted with his ST.

### **Student’s individualized learning**

During the virtual school practicum, Josh found out that virtual school teachers could not modify course content, however, they could choose the way in which they wanted to present information to students. For example, his ST coupled her course with a “zoo” metaphor, with a “toucan,” who helped students whenever they clicked on him. Josh later found out that the virtual school teachers use their tutoring sessions and virtual office hours in Elluminate to reach students at a more individualized level with the content. In Josh’s eyes, if students came to tutoring or office hours, that meant they needed to see the content in a different way than how it was presented in the pre-made course. In the tutoring sessions, instruction was individualized for those students who needed additional help. Josh’s ST offered tutoring on a daily basis.

One of the more positive aspects that he saw in his experience was how different ability levels were accommodated in the virtual school. He contrasted this experience with his past face-to-face classroom internships, where he saw how hard it was to make sure that every kid received everything he/she needed in order to move on, especially if there were gifted kids in the classroom. When he saw gifted kids in those traditional face-to-face classrooms, flying through the content “like that (snapping fingers quickly),” in addition to kids that needed more time, asking him to help them do their work, he could not see how differentiation could really work. In the virtual school practicum, the self-paced nature of the virtual school was a model that proved differentiation worked, and he thought it was “effective” and “cool.”

### **Improve yourself**

Josh focused on the aspects of his professional development in the virtual school practicum, wanting to concentrate on what he could do to better himself as a future teacher. To do this, he talked to the internship coordinator about professional development, an essential topic for Josh because he understood a teacher’s need to stay up-to-date. At the virtual school, Josh learned that teachers have a chance to attend many trainings. He mentioned that the teachers and staff at the virtual school desired to take trainings for themselves, for personal reasons, not just for professional enhancement. He mentioned, for himself, he was more willing to do things that interest him personally, and he saw how this played out for the virtual school teachers as well. In addition, Josh was able to meet his professional goal of “learning about new technologies” and finding out “how those can impact his future students.”



### **More face-to-face and interaction**

Elluminate, the online web conferencing tool, was a key part of Josh's virtual school practicum. Josh was able to see the capabilities of Elluminate in two sessions that were conducted during the practicum experience. One of the sessions centered around academic integrity. He participated in another Elluminate session where the internship coordinator demonstrated how teachers use Elluminate to enhance tutoring sessions with their students. Josh had a built-in camera on his computer, so he was able to see the full capacity of Elluminate. For example, he learned that even if students were sending private messages in Elluminate, the moderator/teacher could see those messages and could monitor the environment to "ensure the students' safety."

When the software first opens, the students "see a welcome screen" over a white board, which is what Josh saw when he signed into the session. Anyone can "use the white board to draw on in order to illustrate an answer to a question" that is posed by the instructor. Josh described symbols that help teachers discern those students who understand from those who do not; these symbols included "applause, confused, thumbs up, and thumbs down." Josh also conveyed that the instructor could "poll the students for a given question," and the responses, once input by the students, were shown in graph form. The instructor could choose to show those results to all or just to him/herself. The instructor also has the power to take or "click" people's abilities away, and Josh felt that this capability was important when securing the safety of his students. As part of the virtual school practicum, Josh also used Elluminate to create a virtual office, and he said it lasts for one year. Josh enjoyed using the Elluminate software because it is not recorded, "it's live."

He felt that the “live aspect” of the environment was interesting because, at the start of the experience, Josh saw himself as more of a face-to-face teacher. While he saw the value of virtual school, he personally loved being in the classroom and interacting with children, “see[ing] the light bulb go off.” He appreciated the concept of blended learning, having the online component be more of a supplement to what was going on in the face-to-face classroom. He never thought of being a virtual school teacher before the practicum. Once he encountered Elluminate and the other emerging technologies used by the virtual school, he was able to consider virtual schooling as a viable employment option for himself.

### **Voluntary experience**

For Josh, there was a balancing act when it came to his virtual school practicum. He was at odds with himself most of the time because he did not know how much time to put into the experience, especially since “it was voluntary.” He felt overwhelmed by the amount of work involved in the practicum because it was “something on the side” that he “wasn’t getting credit for.” He refrained from “super apply[ing]” himself since there was no grade attached.” The practicum was only four weeks, and everything felt “rushed” and “brief.” While he wanted to “dive in” and wished he had more time for more “in-depth” interactions, he was relieved because he barely had time to stay on top of his life outside of the practicum. He mentioned that the virtual school practicum, while very important to him, was “just one more thing” that he had to pencil into his planner. He was “stressing out” and felt that he was a “prisoner of time.” He said that if the practicum were for a grade or part of a project that he needed to do for a class, “more linked to assessment-based goals,” he probably would have been more “pushy” with his ST.

## **We were supposed to have done this**

One of the recurring horizons in Josh's virtual school practicum experience was "missing out" on certain activities. These became his unmet expectations. Josh "missed out on many of the practicum experiences," including weekly phone calls and practice grading. In addition, after creating his virtual office, he and the other interns "were supposed to host an hour session, but because of time constraints on our schedules, we couldn't complete that part of our practicum." Much of the time, he "felt out of control" of his experience. He "wanted to have the ability to manipulate" his environment so that he could learn more, "to get more out of it," but he did not feel he had the ability to do so. He voiced that he would rather have this practicum be a whole semester-long experience, something that he was getting credit for rather than "something on the side." Also, he wished the virtual school had more time to devote to the experience as well, but he was "grateful to do what we can."

## **Structural Description of Josh's Experience**

### **Difficulty communicating with supervisor teacher**

Josh's largest influence from the virtual school practicum was his difficulty in communicating with his ST. While some of the lack of communication was due to family emergencies and the fact that his ST was in the middle of getting new students, he thought that she could have been better about communicating with him despite everything that was going on at the time. During their initial meeting at the orientation, Josh felt belittled when she talked to him as if he had no experience. Despite their interactions, he knew that there were multiple ways of doing things, although he knew that she did not see it that way.

For extended periods of time, he felt disheartened because he was not receiving any emails from her. In addition, sometimes she would promise him something and would not follow through. For instance, she told him that she would share her welcome call script with him so that he could use it in the welcome calls that he was going to conduct in another part of the practicum, but she sent those to him during the last week of the experience. Josh mentioned that her lack of feedback affected his psyche and experience in general. She made him feel as though he was unimportant, not a priority.

When she did communicate with him, she was unsure about what he was supposed to be doing and what her role was in the process. To Josh, his ST was not mindful enough of his needs. At the end of the practicum, his ST tried to contact him, but by that time, he was ready to graduate and move on. He did not feel nurtured, and towards the end of the experience, he was ready to be finished.

Josh felt that her idea of what he needed from her did not exactly match what he needed. While he wanted to communicate his needs to her, he did not want to be overwhelmed by having to put more effort than he felt he should have to put into his experience. Communication-wise, there were many things stacked against his relationship with his ST, including family emergencies, scheduling conflicts, and the fact that she was getting new students during their allotted time together. While all of these were obstacles, if communication between them was to improve to what it could have been, the experience could have been better for both. If there may have been some sort of intervention, maybe by the internship coordinator or by Josh himself, he could have been placed alongside one of the other pre-service teachers in another ST's course so that he could get what he needed and wanted out of the practicum.

### **The hubs of operation**

For Josh, the information systems at the virtual school served as the hubs of operation. The virtual school teachers have to sign into these information systems regularly to keep track of everything they do. He liked how all of the course information was available through the information systems to students so that they could choose to do as much or as little as they wanted to. The information systems were what Josh felt would keep him on track if he were a virtual school teacher. He also realized that this was the way that the virtual school kept track of the teachers' progress with students.

### **Mentoring from internship coordinator**

The internship coordinator was instrumental in Josh's experience. She stepped in and took the place of his ST as a mentor. This was not done formally, but Josh confirmed that this is how it ended up informally playing out. The internship coordinator was there for him 100% whereas his ST was there minimally. Josh felt that if his ST made the effort to be more personable with him at the start of the virtual school practicum, it may have changed his experience. She could have spent more time nurturing their relationship and providing Josh with what he needed as an aspiring online instructor, as the internship coordinator had done.

Looking at it in a different way, maybe Josh could have asked for what he needed, or perhaps there could have been someone to step in to check on the pair to provide some sort of intervention. In an experience that only lasts four weeks, however, maybe Josh just did not feel it was worth making a fuss about, which is something that he had mentioned. More than that, maybe the ST really did not think that her role in Josh's development was so crucial. What Josh was questioning was whether or not she

received training for the role she played and what that training entailed. Did she understand her role as a mentor for Josh? Josh also asked whether or not she received credit for her part in mentoring him. If she was not receiving some sort of credit for doing the work, he could understand why he was one of her lesser priorities. He felt the same way about putting his own effort into the virtual school practicum, since he was not getting credit for it. He came to realize that if he failed to accomplish one of the virtual school practicum activities, he would not be penalized for it in any way, so he thought *why put in the effort if there are more pressing things that need to get done.*

### **Individualized tutoring sessions**

While Josh was surprised that teachers could not create or modify their own content for the courses they taught at the virtual school, he found that the content was able to be personalized through tutoring sessions. The individualized tutoring sessions allowed for different ability levels to be accommodated for in the virtual school. For Josh, instead of worrying about the course content, the virtual school teacher was there to create connections with the students. He saw these connections as vital components in a setting where teachers do not ‘see’ their students on a daily basis.

### **Professional development at the virtual school**

Josh concentrated on his development by asking questions of the internship coordinator. His participation in the virtual school practicum also speaks to his understanding of a teacher’s need to continually develop him/herself in order to stay up-to-date. This was a focus for him at all times. Whatever he could do to set himself apart, he would do. Whatever he needed to do to stay fresh for his students, he would make it happen. He felt as though his professional and personal development was his

responsibility to the teaching profession. Josh explicitly shared his commitment to lifelong learning, saying that he would continue to pursue professional and personal development. He felt as though teachers needed to be intrinsically motivated to participate in professional/personal development because if they were not interested in it, the effort was wasted on the part of the provider. In addition, he felt that teachers have to “think outside the box,” be open to new creative ideas.

### **Using technologies to connect**

Elluminate signified “connection” and “help” to Josh. It also symbolized physical presence because of how “live” it was. Despite the fact that it was live and that it was personal to him, he still felt certain courses were better face-to-face. For him, the choice between face-to-face and online learning all depended on what the individual needed, as some people like the presence of another human being. Elluminate brought enough presence to online learning to make it be acceptable to Josh as a learning option for K-12 students and a possible job option for him as well.

Additionally, he saw Elluminate software not only in terms of what he could do with it as a teacher professionally but how he could use it with friends and family personally. Josh felt that working with it on a personal basis would help him better keep up with advances in tools since he would be using it on a daily basis. He also really enjoyed the many capabilities of the software, so much so that he saw it playing out both in his work and home life.

### **Busy schedule VS. wanting the experience**

His motivation to excel at the virtual school practicum forced Josh to try and find balance for his hectic schedule. Josh talked a lot about how he needed to strictly

schedule himself every week in order to finish everything that he had to do. He knew that time constraints put a damper on the experience, and he just wished that he had a longer learning encounter with the virtual school practicum. With more time and balance on his part and the part of his ST, he felt that the experience would have been better.

Josh had many responsibilities outside of the virtual school practicum that had him pulled in multiple directions, and all of these commitments were necessary to keep him financially sound as a full-time student. It was very important for Josh to keep track of himself every day during the week as to not forget anything that he had planned to do. He color-coded his planner to highlight the most important information and to differentiate between work, school, and social activities. Despite feeling as though he was stressed out, he had a good sense of responsibility for his commitments. Even though the virtual school practicum was an extra thing on his list of things to do, he really was devoting as much as he could be time-wise. He really was a prisoner of time but one who could manage himself well in order to get as much as he could out of a voluntary experience.

### **Missing it**

Josh wanted to do the activities, grading assignments, more Elluminate sessions, and phone calls, which were supposed to be part of the practicum. He said that he could have pushed more so that he could do these activities, but he felt that if his ST really wanted to help him, she would have made more of an effort to do so in the beginning of the virtual school practicum. He said that if the practicum was for a grade or part of a project that he needed to do for a class, and especially if it were assessment-based, he probably would have been more direct about his unmet expectations with his ST.



Aside from not doing certain activities at all, a lack of interactivity in the training sessions was something Josh pointed out. This also became one of his unmet expectations. Josh had commented that he thought the modules within the virtual school introduction course could have been more interactive instead of just click and read. In addition to interactivity, he wanted to be active in communicating with students. In the one welcome call that he did participate in, for example, he wanted to talk to the student instead of just listening to his ST talk.

Josh sometimes felt like he should have been more vocal about what he needed out of the experience. However, he felt that his ST could have responded by being more prompt in providing the opportunities he expected out of the virtual school practicum. He did attempt to ask at least once for more help by requesting a copy of his ST's script for the welcome calls, and he said that he did not get the script until the last week of the experience. His ST's lack of follow through could have been why he just gave up trying to get more out of the practicum.

### **Textural Description of Rita's Experience**

#### **Not afraid to ask her supervisor teacher anything**

At the orientation, Rita met her ST. Rita worked well with her ST. They "communicated mostly via email," asking clarifying "questions about how the virtual school works." She also called her ST with more specific questions when it came to navigating the online classroom management system or filtering the students in order to better track them in the student information system. Rita and her ST had much in common, as both pursued their degree at the same institution and were interested in elementary education while still wanting to eventually end up teaching high school math.

Because of this connection, Rita felt a strong trust with her ST, and that was demonstrated by her ST's willingness to provide her with "endless opportunities to ask questions" and peruse additional information.

Rita appreciated her ST encouraging her to ask questions, by email or phone and then emphasizing Rita's experimenting with a task and then calling her afterward to "make sure everything went okay." She helped Rita stay on top of everything and encouraged her to learn more. Their candid discussions helped Rita "understand the new learning environment."

### **Understanding the virtual school systems**

During the first two weeks of the practicum, Rita described how she completed modules from the virtual school introduction course, where she "learned about the virtual school and their policies," about "how their systems work," the student information system (SIS) and the online classroom management system (OCMS). Rita entered the OCMS and signed into her ST's course, an algebra course, and began exploring. Her first observation was an announcement page that her ST "changes every week and it's very colorful, it's very bright, it really makes you want to actually read it." The page was divided into sections, one of which was where her ST displayed the "superstars of the week" or students that had gone above and beyond other students. There was also a list of scheduled times when "virtual tutoring sessions" were occurring in Elluminate in addition to a "modules tab...where all of the assignments are" located.

Rita learned about the virtual school email system where "students cannot email to outside accounts but teachers can." And teachers are to "monitor what is being emailed between students and make sure there's nothing going on like they're not sharing work or anything." In the SIS, Rita learned that the students could see their

grades in the grade book, view their assignments, and resubmit them for a better grade. Parents were required to go into the SIS under their parent account, which gave parents the ability to “get every email students get” and “track their child’s grades and everything.” Within the OCMS, the course content for the students was chunked into modules, and Rita thought the “break down [of] the information seems really good...there’s also a lot of practice for each lesson within the modules...pretty good the way it’s laid out, sequential.”

### **A different responsibility**

Rita’s ST said that teaching is different in the virtual school, as Rita discovered through modules and discussions. Courses are pre-made, so teachers “don’t create the content...or the lessons,” assignments, worksheets, or exams. Rita learned that virtual school teachers were typically not involved in course development at all unless they became curriculum specialists.

Modification of the course occurred through the virtual school teachers’ communication with their students. For example, once a virtual school teacher has a course, Rita conveyed that teachers add students and “create an announcement page.” While most virtual school teachers use PowerPoint and save their page as an image, Rita said her ST used HTML to create her announcement page. This announcement page is the first page that students see when they sign into their courses. If the virtual school teacher wants to change anything else in the course, Rita said they “can submit...a ticket...to the helpdesk.”

Rita’s view of teaching changed in the virtual school practicum because she was witness to these pre-made courses that some virtual schools employ. At first, Rita was disappointed because she “had a preconceived notion of how the virtual school worked

and thought teachers would be able to be more creative and have more input.” Initially she thought that this would make it difficult for her to design her course the way she visualized it. While she was put-off at first when learning about the pre-made courses, she then thought about it in terms of the traditional face-to-face courses she had been placed in before. Those classrooms had “textbooks that the teachers had to follow, standards that the students had to meet,” so she thought it was “similar in that respect.” The virtual school conveyed that they wanted to be consistent across all the courses, to make sure all the standards were covered. Rita understood that, but she commented that it would also be nice to have some input, to design “just one module...to teach this topic” and to have someone check the teacher’s work to make sure it is consistent with the curriculum.

Despite her want to have more creative freedom, she learned this new role of the teacher was to “check the students and keep track of their assessments.” The teachers have oral assessments, where “you listen to them explain how they do a particular problem, reasoning through the problem, and...suggest they go to tutoring...that’s more where you are teaching...traditional teaching occurs more in the tutoring sessions.” In the virtual school, for Rita, she likes the environment because she sees

more opportunity for remediation...[whereas] in the traditional school setting, if this little group of students aren’t getting it, then it’s up to them to come in after school. You don’t have time to stand over there and help them with their problems because you have to teach the other students.

### **As if I am a student**

Rita saw some creative ideas for students to be involved in her ST’s course. When Rita signed into her ST’s course, “the course had discussion boards, and the teachers asked the students to gather data from their classmates.” For example, Rita

recalled one example where “one student was asking the other students to give her their arm length measurement.” Once the student had gathered all of the other students’ measurements, she created a “data table” with the overall results. Another project was solely for honors students. For this project, they could create a concept map “of the different types of numbers that there are – real numbers, irrational numbers, and all that.” There was another lab where they discussed the “length of a pendulum...so they get to discuss their results.”

Rita also discovered that students do not start on the same day, so every student is on a different pace. Because of this differing pace, Rita saw the virtual school student as needing to “be on top of yourself to develop a schedule for when you are going to go online and do the course...it’s scheduling yourself, it’s being responsible...good about resubmitting work...the student is more in control of their learning.” More than that, she likes the flexibility for students in an online environment, where they can “choose to express themselves in a way that is conducive with their own style.” Rita’s understanding of virtual school from the students’ perspective was a key component of her experience in the practicum. She saw students as having more control of their learning and understanding of the material.

### **Helped support my experience**

Mentoring moments with her ST were enlightening for Rita. During the monthly calls, for example, Rita was able to observe how her ST tracked students “while she talked to them” going “through the files” and “access[ing] the student information” inside the student information system. Rita’s ST also allowed Rita to ask the students and their parents questions. For example, she asked one parent “how she felt about her son taking a class through the virtual school for grade forgiveness.” The parent said, “He

kind of slacked off a bit in the beginning but he was starting to see that this is serious,' so she started to see him doing better in the class taking it this way."

Rita watched how her ST graded assignments, how she used "a bunch of different animated graphics...to add to the comments." An easy way to keep up with grades was another area where Rita's ST shared her thoughts. Rita explained that her ST "also tracks students in excel and then she color codes them...how many assignments they've completed in a week." Her ST showed her how to filter within the student information system, so if the students "turn red" that means it is time to check in with them to see why they are behind. Rita found it extremely helpful to have her ST there to be able to help her clear things up regarding what she was learning in the teaching modules and expand on those things that were not being covered in those modules. Rita was happy with her ST because she helped her understand what it is like to be a virtual school teacher.

### **Finding new and upcoming technologies**

Rita was most surprised by how the practicum affected her view of online instruction. She thought online instruction mimicked her earlier experiences, where the "teacher presented the material via video feed, and the student was just an observer." The practicum opened her eyes to "another way online learning could work." For instance, before the practicum, Rita was unsure how teachers could provide tutoring to students at a distance. When she learned about Elluminate tutoring sessions and how they were used, she mentioned how she "enjoyed learning about the software" and how she thought it was "great how videoconferencing can be used to tutor students, especially when they are at a distance." She found out that teachers host these Elluminate sessions for one-on-one and group tutoring to "teach [lessons] in a different

way...to tailor it to [the students].” Using Elluminate, she also created her own “Rita’s Virtual Office.” This office made her feel more “official,” as if she were a virtual school teacher.

### **Turned up a whole bunch of notches**

The voluntary nature of the practicum was an “odd balance” for Rita because she did not want to overwork herself, but at the same time, she “wanted to make a good impression in case a job opportunity came available.” While it was a good experience for Rita, the experience was not long enough. Toward the end of the semester, when the practicum was scheduled, everything for Rita “just turned up a whole bunch of notches.” She wished there was more time to complete the modules and to do the tasks. Despite time constraints, Rita was gung-ho about jumping into the experience. At the same time, she found it “hard to keep up with everything and fully comprehend what I was learning.”

### **Was not able to do that**

Rita’s role as a pre-service teacher participating in the virtual school practicum was “ultimately to learn the format of the virtual school, to understand the process that students go through...gives me an opportunity to practice assessing students as if I am a teacher at the virtual school, so it is to expose me to how the virtual school is structured and how things work basically.” Rita said that the pre-service teachers who participated in the practicum “didn’t communicate very much with each other,” and she thought “that would have been helpful.” She also “didn’t have interaction with teachers other than my ST,” and she wished she had that. Her communication with students and parents was through monthly calls that she participated in with her ST. She wished there was more of that as well.

## **Structural Description of Rita's Experience**

### **Frequent communication with supervisor teacher**

Rita and her ST worked well together, and there are multiple reasons why this occurred. First of all, they were very compatible, as their backgrounds and goals were identical regarding what they wanted to do professionally and the school from which they earned their degrees. In addition, as the relationship grew, it seemed as though Rita was becoming more and more comfortable about going to her ST for whatever questions she needed answered.

Because of Rita's willingness to keep asking questions about her new learning environment, she was able to get a wealth of knowledge out of a short amount of training time. Her ST was really willing to share information with Rita about every aspect of her life as a virtual school instructor. In return, Rita conveyed her needs well to her ST. She was truly engaged with the experience, constantly questioning what was going on in the new learning environment. Because of that constant questioning, Rita's ST may have felt as though she had someone under her wing who really wanted to learn about the life she lives as a virtual school instructor. Because Rita was so engaged and committed to communicating with her ST, her ST was equally engaged and committed to providing Rita with a valuable experience.

### **Using information to meet needs**

Rita saw the merits of the information systems at the virtual school as a way "to reach learners in a new way." Rita saw these online information systems as ways to provide students with a lot of content and feedback, constructive criticism in positive ways. At the end of the experience, she mentioned that teachers have to use these systems to create an environment that allows "all students to learn." By using these



uniquely designed information structures, each student's needs could be accommodated. So Rita grew to believe that any student could learn online as long as the environment was structured to cater to their learning needs. She understood that virtual school teachers were just working with students in a "different format," using information systems that individualize learning experiences.

### **Being more of a facilitator**

Rita was concerned that, as a virtual school instructor, teachers may not have as much say in how their courses are set up. As mentioned before, she found out the courses were pre-made, and at the start, she was put-off a little and thought that was limiting for the instructor's creativity. But she found that there was a way to really be one-on-one with each student and differentiate instruction based on each individual student's needs – the Elluminate tutoring sessions.

Because of this shift in thinking, Rita felt that her role as a virtual school instructor would be to help students nourish their creative side by encouraging them to use new tools to assess themselves and bring in prior knowledge. Played out in the course she was placed in, creativity was what kept the students engaged with their curriculum. While Rita felt that sometimes taking more time to create interactive, technology-based curriculum could be time-consuming, she saw that in the virtual school, since the courses were pre-made, this could be done.

### **Understanding from the virtual school student perspective**

Rita saw that the way she conducts herself as a student is also the way she saw the virtual school students needing to conduct themselves – conscientious, responsible, in control, scheduled, disciplined. Though structured, the flexibility of the environment was intriguing to Rita because she saw that the students could share their knowledge in

a way that matched their learning style. She liked how each student received individualized attention from her ST. From what she could tell through her participation in welcome calls, Rita saw that her ST cared for her students. Looking back on her past online learning experiences, she never had a teacher care that much about her to call her on the phone to check on her progress, and she thought having a teacher be that attentive would make students feel more comfortable and supported.

### **Mentoring from the supervisor teacher**

Rita's ST allowed Rita to be very active, as she was able to perform her grading tasks and was able to converse with parents and students during welcome calls. If she was just observing her ST, she may not have taken as much away from the experience as she did. What her ST also did was have Rita experiment with teacher tasks first before helping to answer questions about what she learned. This demonstrated how her ST followed the same line of instructional techniques that she used with her own students; first, she let them learn on their own, and then she was there for them when they had questions about what they had done. Rather than feed Rita the information, Rita's ST allowed Rita to explore the environment and opened the floor to Rita when she had questions. And despite Rita's own self-motivation, her ST encouraged her to dig deeper into learning about what it was really like to be a virtual school instructor.

### **Real-time technologies**

Rita had been in face-to-face classroom internships and practica before, and from the experience in the virtual school practicum, she could see that the learning setting was different (online) and the mode of delivery was different (via the computer). When thinking in terms of instructional strategies, those varied but some seemed more effective to Rita, especially when finding out the courses were pre-made and the

students received one-on-one tutoring in sessions that were conducted by their instructor in Elluminate. She saw that the teacher's responsibility, no matter what their learning environment or mode of delivery, was to design the environment and deliver the curriculum in engaging ways that meet the needs of each and every student.

### **Staying afloat VS. looking good**

Rita felt that her virtual school practicum could have been spread out so that she could take more time to learn about the new setting. Time was not a friend to Rita, but she continued to push through and learn as much as she could about the virtual school. In addition, Rita mentioned that while the virtual school practicum would be ideal because of flexibility, because it is something extra and not credit-based, these activities tended to take the backburner to tasks that were credit-bearing and being evaluated. While Rita wanted to give her all to the virtual school practicum, she had to be mindful of her other responsibilities as well.

More time for the experience would have probably worked better for Rita, especially if it continued to be voluntary. If credit-based, Rita felt as though the virtual school practicum would be worked into a course, and time would have to be allotted for the work that needed to be completed and assessed. Despite it not being credit-based, Rita still found herself giving 100% to the virtual school practicum because of her interest in the experience, her interest in finding out what it would be like to be a virtual school instructor. If she would have only put in half as much effort as she had, Rita would not have gotten as much out of the experience.

### **Time runs out...keep going**

If Rita did not have that drive to get what she wanted out of the virtual school practicum, her experience would have been lacking. While there were expectations that

she did not get to meet, such as being able to host an Illuminate session and being able to conduct her own welcome and monthly calls, she considered the work that she had done in the experience life changing. Rita commented that she was trying to fit in time to do some practice grading, but she was not sure if her ST wanted her to continue doing the work, especially since the virtual school practicum had technically ended already. Despite this, she negotiated with herself so that she would complete the task because it was important for her to understand how the grading worked in the virtual school. Rita's ambition was key in getting her developmental goals achieved in this experience. Her initiative and resourcefulness helped her get her questions answered. She went to her ST to ask clarifying questions about what she did not understand. Rita confessed that because of her proactive nature, she forged ahead in the practicum and ventured into some areas that were not even on the agenda for the experience.

### **Textural Description of Sue's Experience**

#### **Getting to hear how somebody does it**

During orientation, Sue met her ST, who was a social studies teacher. Sue corresponded with her ST through email and phone, but mostly email. An example of the email exchange between Sue and her ST is illustrated below:

Sue: Hi! I'm excited to finally get started with the internship. As far as this week goes I don't really think I have any activities/assignments I'm expected to do with you, but I just wanted to check in and say hello. Have a great week!

Sue's ST: Hi! I am glad that you are able to get started. This is such a fun class. You are going to enjoy it. I think we are supposed to have a quick check-in call this week. When is good for you????? It will only be a few minutes or so. Any time tomorrow during the day? Hope you had a great spring break.

This communication was vital for Sue especially in the online learning environment; it helped her build that trusting bond with her mentor. This relationship was strengthened by Sue's ST's willingness to stay in constant contact with Sue and allow her to ask the questions she needed to ask. For example, when Sue had completed a module within her ST's course as if she was a student to "kind of get used to the course itself," her ST saw that Sue was submitting work for that module and called Sue and asked her if she had "any questions." Sue said her interactions with her ST centered around her ST sharing her personal experience, "what works and what doesn't."

### **How to use the virtual school systems**

The virtual school practicum started out for Sue with the ten modules of training, which she described as "basic," telling her how new virtual school teachers "prepare [their] work station[s] and...use their different software and different online programs." She was able to sign into her ST's course, housed in the online classroom management system. Sue saw the assessments and her ST's welcome page. Sue felt like "the course was there to communicate information to the student." She found her "ST's welcome page to be exciting to look at and motivating for the students." She observed that the students typically do one module and at least one oral assessment a month. This was a way for her ST to "check in with the students monthly," but at the same time, it gave her "a chance to touch base with the parent(s)."

Sue's ST set up these appointments with her students, as they needed to complete their oral assessment, and kept track of this in the student information system (SIS). Making appointments with her students ensured the students were going to be there to take the test. Her ST explained to her that these calls also "help the students feel more connected" because she could sit and talk to them for however long it took to

help “alleviate some of the concerns and answer their questions and hear an actual voice.” Sue also found out that virtual school teachers needed to keep track of all communication that they have with students and their parent(s), and this information was logged in the SIS.

In addition to logging communication in the system, the virtual school teachers have to “track their students’ progress.” Tracking progress in the system is especially important considering the students at the virtual school are allowed to “choose a learning pace that most suits their needs.” The virtual school allows students to choose accelerated, regular pace, or request special permission for slower pacing. Sue felt this was “empowering for the students because it allowed them to have more control of their learning.” She completed a module within her ST’s course as if she was a student to “kind of get used to the course itself” and to see what it would be like for a virtual school student.

Sue’s ST demonstrated how she logged her correspondence with her students as she did monthly calls. Sue said these mandatory “checks and balances” help a teacher protect him/herself. While these steps “may seem tedious to some,” Sue said, “It’s smart of the virtual school to have built that in to ensure that the teachers do their job and to ensure that the students’ needs are being met.”

### **Keep curriculum standard**

Sue found out that teachers do not have to create curriculum for their courses, as “courses are pre-made by curriculum developers.” Sue thought the lack of teacher involvement in curriculum development “takes out some of the creativity for the teachers.” She asked the instructional leader and hiring manager about this, “how do you keep creativity in the class when it’s basically like cookie cutter laid out for you?”

Both of these individuals communicated to Sue that it was more important that the teachers learned how to effectively communicate with students and motivate students through their welcome pages and individualized tutoring sessions. After hearing their explanation, she said that in her eyes it was good because “it takes a lot of stress off the teachers because they do not have to worry about what they are going to teach on a daily basis.”

### **Keep changing and improving**

Sue saw her ST as having “trusting bonds with her students.” When Sue’s ST was walking her through the student information system, Sue could tell that her teacher “exemplified all of the qualities that she found necessary to possess in the virtual school.” Sue said her ST knew her students really well and was “willing to be flexible when they needed it.”

Sue also mentioned that an online teacher needed to be creative and be “a special kind of people person” to be able to relate to students who were at a distance. Sue could see the importance of making students feel comfortable through all of the communications and how “it takes more effort to accomplish this in the virtual school than it does in the face-to-face classroom.” She also understood that “processes that may work well in a face-to-face classroom do not always translate well to the online environment,” so she saw an online teacher’s willingness to “try new things is vital.” An online teacher, in Sue’s opinion, “needs to be open-minded” because the environment keeps changing and improving, and she felt that teachers need to be changing and improving with it.

## **Really cool tool**

For Sue, Elluminate was “a way to connect and share” with students, and Sue learned that alongside her ST. Sue was impressed and interested by Elluminate, which she had “seen a few times before from a student perspective.” From the teacher’s perspective, she was happy to see all of the additional capabilities. When she was working with Elluminate, Sue found out that her “ST never really used it because she thought the course was not designed to incorporate a tool like that.” However, Sue felt differently and felt that “some interactive group work would be more engaging for the students if set up using Elluminate.”

As a past online student, Sue felt that “online teachers tended to be distant, not physically there,” but with Elluminate, that physical aspect was alleviated in a virtual way. Sue saw a new commitment to making that distance almost nonexistent based on the virtual school’s emphasis on communication, which “ensured a human element and meaningful interactions.” Sue came to an understanding that, if set up properly, an online classroom could help students interact and build relationships with each other, especially if using software like Elluminate. To demonstrate this, each week the internship coordinator corresponded with Sue and the other interns in different formats. Sue explained that there was a slideshow one week, and then a character the next week; “it was fun.”

## **Teacher perspective – preparing students for the real world**

While in the internship, Sue’s focus was on “seeing” what the teachers do at the virtual school. She found that the “constant changing online environment warrants the virtual school teachers’ constant need for support.” At the virtual school, she found out that “there is a lot of support available for the teachers,” for instance the help desk for



technical support and mentors for developmental guidance. Sue saw her ST and other teachers as “on the front lines.” They are the ones in contact with the students, making students feel connected, getting them involved and interacting. That sense of connection between teacher and student comes best through feedback and Elluminate tutoring sessions.

At the same time as Sue was “impressed by the communication requirements of the virtual school,” she was really surprised at the amount of time virtual school teachers have to be available for their students, from 8am to 8pm, seven days a week. Her ST reassured her that “each teacher has to monitor his/her time in order to not become overwhelmed by the work,” especially since it never ends. “There will always be a phone call to answer, an email to write back to, etc.” By corresponding with the students so much and concentrating on that relationship, Sue saw that as a virtual school teacher, “you get to do what you love to do, you get to teach, without the politics getting in the way.” To do this, Sue felt that a virtual school teacher needs to be creative and be “a special kind of people person” to be able to relate to students who are at a distance.

### **A lot to juggle**

Balance is something Sue is “always trying to work on,” “always trying to find.” While Sue enjoyed being able to take part in the virtual school practicum, the experience was a “juggling” act. Her hectic schedule was “packed full”; she felt that the experience was “placed at a difficult time in the semester.” However, she said that she “would have done it again despite the time constraints.” Aside from the time and the amount of work required for the virtual school practicum, while she might have liked to have earned credit for the practicum, she appreciated having less stress since it was

voluntary and she did not feel like she was being “checked up on.” Because of this, determining what amount of effort she should put into the experience was “difficult for me to negotiate.”

### **Would have liked to...**

Sue’s unmet expectations had to do with how the virtual school practicum was set up. She felt that she was observing rather than being active in the experience. She “wanted to have some sort of responsibility” and “needed to feel like I was accomplishing something in the practicum.” While learning about the process was productive, Sue “didn’t feel like I was given a chance to make a difference with the school.” She wanted to influence the school in some way. She “wanted more involvement in the course.” Sue wanted the presentations given by the staff to be more interactive as well.

At the end of the practicum, she felt as though it was just over, “it just kind of ended.” She did not know if she was done. In addition, Sue felt that her “ST could have had more direction because she relied on me to let her know each week what we were supposed to accomplish for the practicum experience.” She did not know if they met all of the responsibilities of the practicum. Sue said they were not very clear.

She also wanted to be more involved with the class she was placed in. Although she completed a module within the class as if she was a student in it, she “wanted to interact with the students” as well to see how it felt to be a virtual school teacher. She wanted different activities beyond the welcome and monthly calls that could have brought her to a more intimate level with the online classroom experience. Even when she was doing the monthly and welcome calls, Sue was in the background and was not introduced at all in the conversation. While she could sign into a teaching assistant (TA)

view, she did not find a way to get into the system to access the student work. She also “had no time to do the student grading I was supposed to do towards the end of the experience.” When talking about her communication with the other interns, Sue mentioned that she did not speak to them other than to check and see how their experience was going. There was no real structured communication. She also mentioned not having talked with teachers other than her ST.

### **Structural Description of Sue’s Experience**

#### **Sharing expertise**

In Sue’s correspondence with her ST, she was being provided the “do’s and don’ts” of being a virtual school instructor. Sue was interested in hearing from her ST because her ST had been a teacher at the virtual school for some time and had a great amount of experience in what she did. Sue’s ST was able to share her expertise, and Sue appreciated that because it helped her learn as much as possible about the teacher perspective. While it might have been more helpful for Sue to be active in her experience and figure some of the things out about the virtual school on her own, it was helpful for her ST to share her personal experience because Sue was able to see firsthand how virtual school teachers function on a daily basis in this new learning environment.

#### **Checks and balances**

The information systems at the virtual school, for Sue, were places to keep track of quality customer service. Sue saw them as places for teachers to accommodate students, since each individual student has a different learning style and varying situations at home. Because the virtual school keeps track of teachers using these systems, Sue said these systems help to protect teachers. While all of the tracking

progress and logging communications seem tedious to some, Sue said that it is smart of the virtual school to have built that in to ensure that teachers do their job to meet the students' learning needs.

### **Course design at the virtual school**

Sue felt that the pre-made courses did not allow teachers to be creative in their career. At the same time, she realized that teachers' time that is not spent on creating the curriculum is allotted for making sure each student understands the standard curriculum. If a student does not understand, it is the teacher's responsibility to present that information in a way that is conducive to that student's learning needs. She saw this as a change in the role of the teacher. While Sue appreciates this new role for teachers, she would be satisfied more if she were involved as a curriculum specialist or an instructional designer in the virtual school environment. She looks at the virtual school from a design perspective, and so her evaluative nature caused her to think in terms of the learning environment's accessibility and suitability for all students, especially in regard to the course content. In addition, as mentioned before, Sue was in a course that was not matched with her subject interest, so her experience was different in that she saw information presented in the course that she herself was uninterested in teaching. She also felt that she would want to be a course designer rather than a teacher, especially since the teacher does not typically help in the course design process at the virtual school.

### **Necessary qualities of virtual school teachers**

When talking about the qualities that are necessary for being a virtual school teacher, Sue saw many of those qualities in her ST. Rather than looking at the qualities based on the teacher perspective, Sue looked at these qualities from more of a student

perspective. For example, she thought it was important to have teachers who are creative themselves in order to foster creativity in students. Also, if a teacher exemplifies someone who is kind and caring, then Sue felt that teacher's demeanor may transfer over to the students as well. Sue's ST made her feel comfortable just as her ST made her own students feel comfortable. Being open-minded and willing to change were two additional qualities mentioned by Sue as necessary in the virtual school. In order to be an effective online teacher and keep up with the inherently changing environment and not be overwhelmed, Sue felt it was worthwhile to be willing to modify when necessary.

### **A way to connect**

Sue saw Elluminate as a way to connect with people in a way that was synonymous to having a face-to-face encounter. Coming into the experience, Sue was inclined to find ways to satisfy her need for human connections. Because of this, she was very in-tune with the virtual school's emphasis on communication and making personal connections with students. This connection that could potentially be formed between students and instructor was something that Sue was and is invested in, so during the practicum, she found ways that nourished that connection, something that she did not experience in many of her own past online courses. She found this connection in Elluminate.

### **Seeing the teacher perspective**

Sue really had a keen sense of what was important for the student. This could be because she has a genuine want to become an instructional designer, who focuses most on user needs. While she was very interested in instructional design as a teacher, she saw that the pre-made courses did not allow teachers to design their courses. At

the same time, she realized that extra time is allotted for making sure each student understands the standard curriculum and presenting that information to them in a different way if they do not understand it the way it was initially presented.

### **Could not say 'no'**

Because of many responsibilities Sue had in addition to the practicum, balance was hard for her to accomplish. However, she really put effort into learning as much as she could about the virtual school during her practicum experience. There was a balance that Sue had to find in order to keep herself afloat during the time that the virtual school practicum was taking place. As a self-labeled workaholic, saying "no" was not something that was on Sue's mind. When approached with the virtual school practicum opportunity, Sue could not pass it up.

### **Wanting more**

For Sue, it was hard for her to really see what it truly was like to be a virtual school instructor because she was placed in a social studies course rather than a language arts course. Sue's ST had Sue observe her a lot. Sue would have liked her work with the practicum to be more interactive. She felt there was more demonstration rather than active learning taking place when she worked with her ST. Sue wanted to make a contribution to the virtual school. She did not feel that her involvement was making a difference to the school. Instead, she just felt like an observer.

In addition, Sue needed more structure to the experience, a list of tasks to complete. If her tasks were more clear, Sue would have been able to get more from her experience. If the experience were counted as credit, she would probably be monitored by someone charged with accounting for her progress. She felt like the voluntary nature was helpful, but since there was no reason to complete all of the tasks, her effort level

had to be minimal because of time constraints and other responsibilities that did have accountability attached to them.

### **Composite Textural Description**

The composite textural description gives an overall view of the experience by taking into account all three participants' textural descriptions using the shared horizons as a guide to highlight the participants' reflections and offer a composite look at the virtual school practicum. The shared horizons include (1) communication with supervisor teacher; (2) information systems at the virtual school; (3) modification of course content; (4) Elluminate; (5) balancing act; and (6) unmet expectations.

#### **Communication with Supervisor Teacher**

All of the participants had trouble scheduling and communicating with their STs in some way, having to cancel some activities and working to fit in other opportunities to learn. Once connected, the pre-service teachers learned that their ST was "someone else [they] could call on" who could give them constructive feedback and provide "personal experiences...perspectives." While much of the conversations had by one of the pairs were more "process stuff," the other two pairs asked questions so that the ST could "help clear things up" for them, "email[ing] frequently...call[ing] with more specific stuff."

For the pre-service teachers involved in the virtual school practicum, communication was crucial as "not hearing from my ST "affect[ed] my psyche" and was "a little frustrat[ing]," especially considering the length of the experience being only four weeks. Because communication sometimes was an issue, there was a feeling that there was more time spent on "setting up stuff rather than mentoring." For two of the pre-

service teachers, there was a lot of “she showed me...she gave me...she helped me” and “how do you do it?...this is how I do it...this is what she does...”

### **Information Systems at the Virtual School**

The participants spent time learning the systems that are used by the virtual school, where student information was logged – student information system – and where the courses were housed – online classroom management system. They spent time “learning about new technologies” and “learning the terminology.” They learned about the new teachers’ orientation and how new teachers “prepare [their] work station” once they arrive home from training. The participants saw good control aspects for virtual school teachers, and the virtual school in general, within the student information system, where information regarding communications between teacher and students/parents was kept. This system was seen as “checks and balances,” a place where the virtual school teachers can “cover [their] base” so there is “always a record.”

### **Modification of Course Content**

The virtual school teachers do not design courses; instead they track student progress and provide individualized tutoring, “a different responsibility.” At first, this aspect of a teacher’s role in the virtual school really threw the participants for a loop. They thought virtual school teachers would “have more input” and more of an “opportunity to be creative.”

But then they came to understand tracking as a way to keep teachers “focus[ed] on [their] students.” The no-course-design aspect of the practicum showed the participants “a different way of teaching,” where the teacher is “more of a facilitator.” The pre-service teachers noted that, instead of modifying course content, the STs were “responsible for keeping track of student progress” and “alleviating students’ concerns”



regarding their progress or lack thereof. The virtual school teachers were observed monitoring student-to-student communication and providing “constructive, positive feedback.” For the pre-service teachers, they saw the virtual school teachers “preparing [their students] for the real world” by giving their students hope and “convey[ing] [they] believe they can make it.” Their STs saw students as individuals who have individual needs, “different situations” and different learning styles, and they “concentrated more on nurturing their connections with students” and less on worrying about designing daily instruction. They discovered that grading and communication must be prompt to ensure that they are “really there for the students” and “mindful of how your message may be interpreted,” “think[ing] about the words that you’re writing.”

### **Illuminate**

The pre-service teachers set up their virtual offices using Illuminate, providing them “a way to see what it’s like to correspond with students at a distance.” By creating this office, as potential virtual school teachers, they “keep up with students [they] don’t see” by “know[ing] their names” and “remember[ing] their voices.” The office hours and tutoring sessions that were held in the Illuminate sessions showed the pre-service teachers how the virtual school keeps “some human element and interaction” in their students’ learning environment.

Illuminate also showed the pre-service teachers how they could still be in control of their course. For example, they learned how to “give moderator privileges” when students are acting appropriately and “click away” their privileges when they are not. The pre-service teachers felt that the virtual school teachers’ use of Illuminate demonstrates them making a conscious effort to ensure the students feel comfortable and “not so disconnected.” The pre-service teachers compared their virtual school

practicum also to those personal experiences that they had with taking courses online. Most of their online learning experiences either lacked a teacher or lacked teacher involvement. As learners, they “felt disconnected.” While two of the pre-service teachers mentioned at the start of the experience that the presence of another human being was important to them, at the end of the practicum they mentioned that using Elluminate conferencing, and other software like it, because of “the live aspect of it,” made that disconnected feeling fade.

### **Balancing Act**

The virtual school practicum was scheduled for four weeks. Considering this, time was definitely a factor in the pre-service teachers’ experiences. Because of this, there was a “great deal of activity placed into a short timeframe.” The participants described their schedules during the practicum as “crazy” and “ridiculous.” They were all “very very busy.” They all wished that they had “more time to devote” to the experience because it seemed “like a time crunch” and had “gone by really fast.”

Despite having “a lot going on,” the participants found a sense of balance in the chaos that was their schedule, “making it all work.” Aside from school and the practicum, the participants had work, as they “work for a living.” In their own way, they each stayed on top of what they could, navigating the “odd balance” of volunteering for a great experience (not attaining any school credit) while trying to “look good” and not “look like a slacker.” Because it was a voluntary experience, the participants found it hard to push themselves, especially knowing that they did not have to meet assessment-based goals.

They also pushed themselves because they saw the practicum as an employment boost, “unique for [their] resume.” Since it was a new experience for their

teacher certification process, they saw their participation as elite, knowing only a “handful of people” had partook in virtual school practica. The economy, and consequently job prospects for teachers, around the time of the experience was noted by the participants to be non-existent, so some said they were “thinking possibly [about] working for them,” and that the practicum made them “want to work with them.”

### **Unmet Expectations**

The participants were “happy with their experience” because it “gave [them] real experience about what it’s like” to be a virtual school teacher. They also saw the virtual school practicum as “rushed and brief” and did not “get to dive in as much.” It was “a lot of information,” and they “learned from it.” They “listened” and “observed” a lot and would have liked to have been more “active” in their ST’s course. They also wished that they and their ST “had more direction.” They wanted to be responsible for something and to have “things to accomplish.” They wanted a “chance to make a big influence” at the virtual school and did not feel like they had that opportunity. They also felt like they wanted to reflect on the experience together with the other pre-service teachers but were not really asked or encouraged to do so.

### **Composite Structural Description**

The composite structural description is a combined description of the researcher’s interpretation of how the pre-service teachers experienced the virtual school practicum. This description is organized by the six shared horizons. Again, those horizons include (1) communication with supervisor teacher (ST); (2) information systems at the virtual school; (3) modification of course content; (4) Elluminate; (5) balancing act; and (6) unmet expectations. Coming into this experience, all three pre-service teachers were new to the idea of online learning in grades K-12. After having

poor learning experiences in online courses themselves in the past, they all wanted to learn how online learning really works today, particularly for younger students.

### **Communication with Supervisor Teacher**

Asking questions of their ST forced them to gain the knowledge that they desired but also prompted them to ask more questions. Defining what constitutes communication for mentoring relationships depends on the individuals involved – the mentor and the mentee – and how they negotiate that communication. In the case of the pre-service teachers, they should have the option to let someone know what it is they want or expect out of the experience. Maybe at the first meeting, it would help to have a time set aside for negotiations between the pre-service teacher and ST, which would have helped to facilitate potential benefits to both parties. In two of the relationships, more guidance and structure could have helped solidify what needed to be accomplished in the practicum; in the other, the communication was strong.

The pre-service teachers wanted a great deal from their STs, so being able to communicate those needs would have helped them get the most out of their experience. For example, the pre-service teachers wanted to be invested in by the staff, and they wanted to feel invested in the experience. They wanted someone to be engaged in them as much as they were engaged in those offering the experience. They wanted to be engaged in the experience itself. Some found themselves surging ahead because of their communication techniques, getting ahead of themselves because they have always been prone to asking questions to find out more about what they were doing and eager to know what was going to happen next. Also, they were eager to share their experiences with others, demonstrating that they had tried something new and wanting to enlighten others with their newfound knowledge.

Communication with their ST was the key to the participants' experience in their virtual school practicum. While some of the relationships were better than others, the pre-service teachers still learned from the experience. The participants wanted their relationship and communication with their ST to be supportive and not competitive. Just as the virtual school teachers need to be prompt with feedback to their students, the pre-service teachers expected that same promptness and detail in replies from their ST. They wanted the relationship to be comfortable enough to feel as though they could call on their ST anytime they had a question or concern.

The pre-service teachers did not want to have to push to get what they needed out of the experience. Instead, they wanted the relationships defined enough to where each party knew what his/her responsibility was. They wanted to hear that their ST was as excited about the experience as they were. They wanted their ST to be able to help them understand what they were experiencing. The pre-service teachers wanted to be able to call on their ST even after the experience had ended. They did not want to be afraid to ask their ST a question. They wanted their ST to be approachable, encouraging, introductory, and guiding. The pre-service teachers desired to hear what life was like for the ST as an online instructor in the K-12 environment and wanted to understand how they could also fit into that new learning environment.

### **Information Systems at the Virtual School**

The pre-service teachers grew up in an education system that was filled with learning that was not active, where students sat and listened to what their teachers said and absorbed information in a very passive manner. In addition, technology back when they were K-12 students is far from what it is now. Today, students are accustomed to the latest tech craze and expect learning that is centered on their interests and caters to

their developmental needs. Learning can no longer be one-size-fits-all because students see themselves as unique, different from one another. They demand respect. They want to be in control of their learning, and they want to be invested in their learning as well as be invested in and respected by their educators. These pre-service teachers understand their learners.

The information systems of today are also starting to understand learners, as they have the capability, and are continually being developed, to differentiate and individualize experiences for the learners that interact with them. These systems are the building blocks of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments that are interactive, engaging, and user-centric. Information systems like the ones at the virtual school help 21<sup>st</sup> century learners stay connected in the networked society.

### **Modification of Course Content**

While all of the pre-service teachers were surprised that the course content for the virtual school was pre-made, they felt that it was not much different than what they see in traditional classrooms. In traditional classrooms, teachers are typically standards-driven and go by what the textbook says to do next. Because the courses are pre-made, they felt that it gave teachers more time to concentrate on creating meaningful connections with their students. These connections were seen as essential because the students are at a distance. Since they have been online students in the past, the pre-service teachers understand that feeling of disconnectedness when a teacher-student relationship is not built. So the lack of ability to modify the courses was not seen as a huge issue. It was just surprising at first.

## **Illuminate**

The virtual school practicum brought the pre-service teachers to a new understanding of what online learning can look like for them as adults but also what online learning can look like for K-12 students. As aspiring teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century education system, they wanted to know and understand what new tools were available – Illuminate was one of the major tools that they encountered in the practicum. While some of the participants were interested in the presence of another human being, they saw the live aspect of video conferencing – Illuminate – as comparable and compensatory for the distance between teacher and student.

## **Balancing Act**

Pulled in many directions because of multiple commitments, the pre-service teachers felt as though time was not on their side. They wanted more time out of the virtual school practicum but knew that it was not possible considering it was a voluntary experience. Despite the time issue, the pre-service teachers fit the practicum into their schedules and felt that it was important for their professional development to do so. While they wanted the practicum to be part of a course that they earned credit for, they also liked that it was not tied to assessment because of the lack of time they had to devote to it. The pre-service teachers were very organized in their schedules, making sure to show up when and where they needed to be, at the time they needed to be there.

Balance was hard to come by. Again, because participation in the experience was voluntary, the participants had a hard time deciding what was necessary to do for the experience and what was extra. While they would have liked to accomplish all of the activities, they wanted to make sure that they were staying afloat in their life outside of

the practicum. Despite it being voluntary, the virtual school practicum was important to them because it was something that set them apart, gave them something a little extra, and because of that, they were willing to be a little off kilter some of the time in order to gain what they could from the unique experience.

### **Unmet Expectations**

The pre-service teachers had unmet expectations in their virtual school practicum. Training for the pre-service teachers needed to be interactive. They needed to be involved and feel as though they were invested and invested in. The pre-service teachers wanted to be part of the design process, wanted to be users who were highly involved in the development stage of whatever training they were taking. They wanted a say in what was necessary for their own learning. Willing to listen to others was key, but they also wanted to be heard. As active learners, they did not want to be sedentary. They wanted to have information and also find things out on their own. When it came to their training, time was essential, and more time was better. They wanted to feel engaged and be motivated. Connection through communication was vital.

They had expectations, ones that they set for themselves and ones that were set by the experience, such as grading student work, interacting with students and parents, and participating in teacher/student tutoring sessions, that did not happen for all of the pre-service teachers. All of the participants wanted to be more involved in the virtual school. Despite these unmet expectations, the pre-service teachers understood that they could learn something from every situation.

### **The Essence of the Experience**

Based on the pre-service teachers' experiences, the virtual school practicum is an opportunity for teachers-in-training to get a glimpse of another way to provide



learning opportunities to K-12 students, where teachers work to individualize a standard curriculum for each of their students. The practicum acts as a step in the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers, those who use dynamic information systems, such as the student information system and the online classroom management system, and technologies, such as Elluminate, to reach their students in interactive and engaging ways, understanding the ever-changing nature of emerging technologies and how they affect the education system at large. It fosters pre-service teachers' awareness of the power of communication with and learning from others (especially the teachers with whom they are matched during practica experiences), the diversity in learning opportunities (both beneficial and challenging), and the importance of managing one's self to make sure they are getting the most out of their developmental learning experiences. (See Appendix D for an understanding of the progression from meaning units to horizons.)

### **Summary**

The results reveal a unique learning environment for pre-service teachers – professional development that introduced them to a rapidly expanding educational opportunity for today's K-12 students. The virtual school practicum allowed the pre-service teachers a way to see new technologies and adaptive information systems being used to enhance and manage online learning environments. Emphasizing the need for communication and quality learning, the virtual school practicum offered the pre-service teachers a variety of learning opportunities, those that they will learn from and those that they will use as examples to enhance their future professional development.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

This dissertation studied the experiences of three pre-service teachers as they participated in a virtual school practicum. Virtual schooling, a form of online learning where education is delivered entirely or partially via online methods, is on the rise as an educational option for K-12 students in the United States and around the world. Continuing to grow exponentially, the number of students using some form of online learning (whether full-time or supplemental programs) is expected to reach over eight million by 2011 (Greaves Group & Hayes Connection, 2006). Because of this, the need for teachers who know how to teach online will continue to grow as well.

Organizations such as the International Association for K-12 Online Learning have published standards to help guide the professional development of current and aspiring online teachers (iNACOL, 2008). Preparing current virtual school teachers for online instruction has typically fallen on the shoulders of the virtual schools that employ them. Especially for those teachers who transition from teaching in a face-to-face traditional school, the virtual school's professional development efforts regarding online pedagogy are crucial to acclimate teachers who are altogether new to virtual schooling and online learning in general.

For those teachers who are still in their preparatory programs and aspiring to be virtual school teachers, some teacher education programs offer courses in online pedagogy. While these courses are extremely useful in providing theoretical background necessary to understand the differences between teaching that occurs in face-to-face and online learning environments, there is also a need for these programs to offer their pre-service teachers practical experiences in virtual schools (Compton,

Davis, & Mackey, 2009). As mentioned above, this dissertation studied the experiences of three pre-service teachers as they participated in one such virtual school practicum. The pre-service teachers' experiences resulted in the essence of the phenomenon, organized by six shared horizons. These six horizons are (1) communication with supervisor teacher, (2) information systems at the virtual school, (3) modification of course content, (4) Elluminate, (5) balancing act, and (6) unmet expectations. The following section discusses these horizons.

## **The Virtual School Practicum**

### **Communication with Supervisor Teacher**

The first element of the essence was communication with the supervisor teacher (ST). The pre-service teachers found communication with their ST vital because the STs acted as their link to understanding K-12 online learning and how day-to-day processes occur in the life of a virtual school teacher. The concept of K-12 virtual schooling is relatively new for the pre-service teachers, and the ST holds the understanding of what it is like to be a virtual school teacher; this is what the pre-service teachers wanted to find out. By communicating with their ST, a unique career opportunity was brought to light for them.

The mode of communication was typically email, however, phone calling and online video conferencing via Elluminate brought pre-service teacher and ST together to have candid conversations about what it is like to be an online instructor. With the experience only being four weeks in length, it was essential that communication be constant and deep in order for the pre-service teachers to feel that their relationship with their ST played a role in advancing their professional development as future educators. Mentoring occurred only on a surface level in this experience. If more time were allotted

for the experience, the relationship between ST and pre-service teacher could reach the most effective mentoring level.

### **Information Systems at the Virtual School**

The second element of the essence, information systems at the virtual school, signified the network of communication that provides structure for the virtual school. The information systems are where most of the virtual school practicum occurred because all of the operational procedures were housed in them. For instance, this was where the email, grades, and courses were stored. This is where the communication was logged. Without these systems, the network of communications and the record of that communication between school, teachers, students, and parents would not exist. The information systems were also where the virtual school could monitor the quality of their teachers and connect with teachers to promote developmental and administrative activities.

For the virtual school, since all of their data is collected and archived electronically in their information systems, they have access to a vast array of information sources including discussion interactions, the amount of time students spend performing each activity, and even a map of how each student cognitively explores the course information. The pre-service teachers were able to see and understand how these systems work in-depth. This knowledge, they felt, helped them better understand the value of learning to use this data to make key changes in the way they communicate with their students or help their students learn the way that best matches their education needs.

## **Modification of Course Content**

The third element, modification of course content, means that the pre-service teachers had to understand a different format of teaching – online pedagogy. In some virtual schools and in the virtual school in which this study was conducted, the course content was pre-made, and the virtual school teachers cannot modify it. When the pre-service teachers realized this, they were surprised and wanted to find out why the virtual school did not allow their teachers to modify the course content. What the pre-service teachers found out regarding why the course content was pre-made and not able to be modified was fourfold. First, the course content needed to be standardized based on state curriculum standards. Second, in line with the mission of the school, the virtual school wanted teachers to concentrate more on forming meaningful relationships with the students. Third, the virtual school teachers needed to have additional time to track students, making sure that each student was learning what they needed to and succeeding, which was critical in securing the funding for the school. And fourth, when the students did not understand the content, teachers had to take the time to individualize the course content to each student's learning needs in tutoring sessions. The pre-service teachers in this sense get a whole new understanding of how the profession of online teaching, and teaching in general, could work.

## **Illuminate**

The fourth element, Illuminate, signifies new technology that the pre-service teachers were exposed to in their virtual school practicum. While Illuminate was one of the most-used technology tools by the virtual school in this experience, there were other technology tools used to show how the virtual school incorporated technology into their learning environment. These tools signified connection and real-time interaction for the

pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers saw how these technologies created connections between the many constituents of the school. Connecting parents with teachers, students with teachers, and as in this phenomenon, pre-service teachers and virtual school teachers, was made simpler by the use of Elluminate and other unique technologies.

In the virtual school practicum, the pre-service teachers were expecting that their experience with the virtual school would be similar to what their past online learning experiences were like, where teachers were non-existent and students had to fend for themselves. On the contrary, experiencing the capabilities of Elluminate and other technologies showed the pre-service teachers how today's technologies were making a difference by making the learners not feel as distant from their instructors and peers.

### **Balancing Act**

The fifth element, the balancing act, is how the pre-service teachers described keeping up with the virtual school practicum despite their busy schedules. All three of them chose to participate in the practicum because they wanted to better themselves so that they could stand out amongst the other prospective teachers in the job market. Their hectic schedules were doable considering they were going to add a really unique experience to their resumes that not many other pre-service teachers in the world had. Because the experience was voluntary, the pre-service teachers felt more relaxed and did not feel as though they needed to put in as much effort, especially because they were not being assessed.

### **Unmet Expectations**

The sixth and final element, unmet expectations, stands for the pre-service teachers' thoughts on what they felt they missed out on in their virtual school practicum.

They had expectations that they had imposed on themselves and those that were set by the virtual school. For example, they wanted to be more active in their experiences, by using interactive capabilities and being present and participatory instead of passive. They also wanted to communicate and interact with virtual school people other than their ST. They needed to feel as though they had made some impression, an imprint, a difference, in their work with the virtual school. Not all of their expectations were met, however, they were able to make the most of their experience.

These six shared horizons that are essential to the make-up of the virtual school practicum not only helped to explain the phenomenon, but they also provided implications for practice and possible directions for future research efforts. These implications and suggestions for research are shared in the following sections.

### **Implications**

The implications that stem from this study are presented in this section. There are many constituents who are inherently connected when it comes to virtual school practica, and they are all informed by this study. These constituents include pre-service teachers, virtual schools, teacher education programs, and education policy makers. The implications are organized based on topics that affect these constituents.

### **Design of Virtual School Practica Experiences**

While this study cannot offer exact details for how to provide the best learning opportunity for all pre-service teachers when it comes to the design of virtual school practica, it can offer some advice based on the experiences of the pre-service teachers. As was mentioned by the pre-service teachers, the lack of time allotted for the practicum was a huge issue. Ideally, it would be helpful if practica could span a normal class-length of 16 weeks. This will not only allow for ample time to immerse the pre-

service teacher in the new learning environment, but it will also offer a greater amount of time for the supervisor teachers and the pre-service teachers to engage in meaningful mentor-mentee activities.

In addition, practica should be linked to credit-bearing courses or be credit-bearing courses in and of themselves. Returning back to the experiences of the pre-service teachers in this study, they struggled a great deal with that odd sense of balance when it came to the practicum being voluntary. They were not getting credit for their work and effort. Having this experience be credit-based would help pre-service teachers discern the value of virtual school practica in terms of what priorities they have to set. If it were part of a course or part of what they needed for their certification, pre-service teachers may be more invested in the experience.

Based on this study's findings, details of how virtual school practica could be designed include the following. During the first weeks of the virtual school practicum, the instructor should concentrate on helping the pre-service teachers reflect on their past online learning experiences. The pre-service teachers in this study were able to do that and realized by the end of the experience that they had seen a difference between what they first believed K-12 online learning would look like as compared to what they were witness to in their practicum. In their past online learning, their courses lacked teacher involvement and interactivity. In the virtual school practicum, the courses were interactive for the K-12 students, and the virtual school teachers were highly involved in monitoring their students' progress and helping the students when they needed help. This reflective practice before practica start would help pre-service teachers unload any predisposed attitudes they have toward online learning so that they can look at the



virtual school with fresh eyes. Because students, including pre-service teachers, teach the way they were taught, teacher educators need to give pre-service teachers a chance to unpack their beliefs, deconstruct their experiences, and reflect on how their past speaks (or does not speak) to their new learning opportunities. Past examples in literature where pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on their past experiences include the creation of autoethnographies/autobiographies of their educations (Coia & Taylor, 2005), writing of reflection journals with prompts on a given topic (Brownlee, Purdie, & Boulton-Lewis, 2001), and construction of portfolios documenting past experience (Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997). By providing pre-service teachers a way to connect their past to their present learning, powerful experiences in teacher preparation can occur (Smith, 2006).

The practicum itself should be designed in a blended format. The blended format would be especially helpful for students who have not taken an online course before. The course should start out with at least a four-week introduction to K-12 online learning. This introduction would need to include relevant literature and reports regarding K-12 online learning. Especially important to include would be *Keeping Pace* (Watson et al., 2009), which will provide a broad overview of the current state of K-12 online learning and also introduce the various business models of virtual schools.

During the first four weeks, learning for the pre-service teachers should be designed similar to the way in which the K-12 virtual school courses are designed. This will allow the pre-service teachers to experience firsthand what the K-12 virtual students experience. Essential in the design would be interactivity. This was another idea that stemmed from this study. The pre-service teachers felt that interactivity was important

because they want to be active in their learning, not passive. In active learning environments, the learner is able to interact with new knowledge and has the ability to reflect and gain a deeper understanding because they are involved and active in the learning process (Berge, 2002). Pre-service teachers want to see the same instructional strategies in their professional development opportunities that they are expected to incorporate when teaching their own students. If the professional development trainers do not/cannot model the teaching techniques that they expect teachers or prospective teachers to use with students, the teachers who are participating in the training will be less inclined and less likely to use those techniques in their future classes.

After the broad context of online teaching, online learning, and virtual schooling is presented in the first four weeks of the experience, the remaining 12 to 13 weeks should be devoted to the development of the relationship between the supervisor teacher and the pre-service teacher, and dedicated to the pre-service teacher's discovery of what it is like to be a virtual school teacher. Possible activities include grading, facilitating discussions, participating in synchronous work via online video conferencing software, engaging in virtual school professional development opportunities, learning about academic integrity, and understanding time management.

The course itself should run parallel to the practicum so as to allow the pre-service teachers an opportunity to regroup and reflect on their experiences as a group and with the course instructor. This topic came up with the pre-service teachers in this study; the pre-service teachers felt they needed some outlet for their thoughts about what they were going through in their experience. For them, they said that the interviews with the researcher helped to alleviate their need to talk about the practicum,

but they mentioned that it would have been nice to get some feedback from others who were participating in the experience as well. The connection between teacher education courses and pre-service teachers' practica/internship experiences has been documented as necessary (Darling-Hammond, 2009). This hybrid setting "where academic and practitioner knowledge" combine to provide "the service of teacher learning" is key to offering pre-service teachers a rich and integrated curriculum (Zeichner, 2010, p. 89).

Another idea that stemmed from the pre-service teachers' experiences was the need to see how the virtual school teachers can use data to make decisions about communication and instructional techniques. The concept of data driven school improvement is linked directly with schools' information systems. Learning about the information systems is important for pre-service teachers because they can see how teachers modify their instructional or communication approaches with students based on the information that is housed in these systems. This type of experience can enlighten pre-service teachers by offering them an opportunity to see not only how data driven decision making practically occurs, but they can also see how action research plays out in a school setting and how their supervisor teacher can and does become a teacher researcher (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2007). They can also see how schools organize and use this data to apply for grants and other funding opportunities (Johnson, 2000).

### **Connecting Teacher Education Programs and Virtual Schools**

The virtual school practicum helped the teacher education program in this study form a valuable connection with the virtual school. This connection provided the virtual school a recruiting venue of teacher education program graduates who could potentially

work at the virtual school as online instructors. By offering the virtual school practicum to pre-service teachers, the virtual school shows how invested they are in their K-12 students since they are working to ensure that future graduates of colleges of education have the online teaching and learning know-how to meet the needs of each and every one of their online K-12 students. In addition to offering pre-service teachers a way to understand K-12 online learning from an instruction point-of-view, these collaborations between virtual schools and colleges of education can offer students who want to be administrators, media specialists, and counselors a practica in a non-traditional setting.

Practice-based connections, such as the virtual school practicum, have the potential to create additional professional development cooperatives where virtual schools can host professional development opportunities for the teacher education program, and the teacher education program can host similar continuing education venues for virtual school teachers. Via this collaboration, a wealth of theoretical and practical knowledge can be shared by way of professional development opportunities for both pre- and in-service teachers. Taking this collaboration to another level, the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) could foster the use of virtual schools as a way for pre-service teachers to prepare for their future teaching careers.

Following NAPDS' "nine required essentials," Figure 5-1 was designed to illustrate how a partnership between a virtual school and teacher education program might play out (NAPDS, 2008). These "essential" elements were not created for virtual schools; they were originally created to guide the partnerships between traditional brick-and-mortar, face-to-face, K-12 professional development schools and teacher education

programs. They do, however, translate well to the partnerships that can be formed between virtual schools and teacher education programs. In order to ensure an effective virtual professional development school, the university and virtual school need to share a comprehensive mission to further the education profession and the advancement of equity in schools and communities. They also must commit to a school-university culture that is charged with preparing prospective educators by engaging them actively in school communities. They need to train all participants professionally based on the needs of each individual. They must commit to innovation and reflection and encourage teachers to engage in and share results from deliberate investigations of their teaching practice. Roles and responsibilities must be assigned to each stakeholder involved, and provisions should be made for free and open governance, reflection, and collaboration. Reciprocal and diverse work should be developed and encouraged for both university and P-12 faculty to span across institutional boundaries. Rewards and recognition should be provided, and resources should be shared and dedicated to make a difference in both settings.

### **Preparing for Powerful Mentoring Opportunities**

In teacher preparatory literature, the relationship between the supervisor teacher and pre-service teacher in a virtual school practicum could be considered a mentoring relationship. Mentoring relationships have many components. Mentors provide information (Villani, 2002), support and encourage (Huling-Austin & Murphy, 1987), coach (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002), give emotional support (Odell, 1990), encourage creativity (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007), model effective behavior (Williams, 1993), and provide guidance in instruction and professional development (Rowley, 1999). Mentorship is important to the development of pre-service teachers, giving them an

opportunity to work with an experienced teacher as an apprentice (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006).

Despite the potential for mentoring to occur in virtual school practica, the virtual school practicum in this study did not offer enough time and structure to encourage mentoring relationships between the pre-service teachers and supervisor teachers. The mentoring that did occur in this study was surface mentoring. One explanation that could account for this could be that the supervisor teachers are lacking proper training to be effective mentors. Great teachers are not always the best mentors (Rowley, 1999). Because of this, it is crucial for the virtual school to provide training for the mentors, instilling in them the crucial role they play in the professional development of their mentee (McKenna, 1998). In addition, providing training for the mentors is an investment for the virtual school because they will be building the base of teacher leaders needed to sustain their organization (Zimpher, 1988).

In face-to-face mentoring environments, mentoring must be “educative” (Wang & Odell, 2002). Mentors need to facilitate their mentee’s path to develop a “commitment to inquiry,” where mentors consistently ask “difficult questions” to their mentees and encourage their mentees to continue to pose difficult questions to themselves throughout their entire career (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2007, p. 25). In addition, a mentor must encourage the mentee’s commitment to equity (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004) and ensure that the mentee will continue to advocate for all students. Mentors need to engage in their practice and study it in order to better the mentees with whom they work (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Mentoring structures do exist in virtual schools, including ones that are illustrated in a recent publication by iNACOL (Wortmann, Cavanaugh, Kennedy, Beldarrain, Letourneau, & Zygouris-Coe, 2008). This report entitled *Online Teacher Support Programs: Mentoring and Coaching Models* provides a detailed look at how mentoring occurs in various virtual school business models. Differences between various virtual school business models is best described in the *Keeping Pace* reports that are published on an annual basis (Watson et al., 2009). The differences in business models include their placement on various continuums regarding the following program characteristics: (a) "Comprehensiveness" of program: supplemental → full-time; (b) "Reach" of program: district → multi-district → state → multi-state → national → global; (c) "Type" of program: district → magnet → contract → charter → private → home; (d) "Location" of program: school → home → other; (e) "Delivery" of courses: asynchronous → synchronous; (f) "Operational control" of program: local board → consortium → regional authority → university → state → independent vendor; (g) "Type of instruction": fully online → blending online and face-to-face → fully face-to-face; (h) "Grade level": elementary → middle school → high school; (i) "Teacher-student interaction": high → moderate → low; (j) "Student-student interaction": high → moderate → low (Watson et al., 2009). Depending on the make-up of the school based on these criteria, the mentoring strategy for the teachers will vary. For example, if the virtual school is a supplementary, district-run program, the teachers might be full-time face-to-face teachers who are teaching one course a semester online. Their mentoring program may not have to be as extensive as a teacher who is 100% full-time with a fully-online school. The teacher in the supplementary program may need mentoring that is informal

(not assigned) and on an as-needed basis, whereas the teacher in the full-time online instructor position may need a formal mentor assignment with additional support from virtual school staff. For more information on varying mentoring models, see Wortmann et al. (2008).

Most of the mentoring models show mentors who are guiding teachers in helping students with new online learning environments, providing school-specific information, giving feedback, and engaging in consistent communication. The virtual school models see effective mentoring as developing knowledge and skills, leadership and communication, and sharing of ideas and expertise. Mentors take many forms, as they could be a formal mentor, an instructional leader, a content buddy, a professional learning team, or informal mentors. By reflecting on the results of this study, learning from the virtual school mentoring models, and tapping into the already abundant literature on how mentoring occurs in traditional settings, we can further develop quality practice in mentoring that occurs in virtual school practica experiences and beyond.

The most important aspect of mentoring is providing training for the mentors. Based on the results of this study, a mentor development training program for preparing supervisor teachers for virtual school practica would have four main goals. First, the supervisor teachers need to have a solid knowledge of their organization and its mission, goals, and objectives so as to instill those into their mentee's training. Second, the supervisor teachers should get a solid understanding of what their roles are as mentors by reading mentoring literature from experts in the field including Feiman-Nemser, Achinstein, Wang, Odell, Dana, and Yendol-Hoppey. Third, they should interact with one another and reflect on their teaching experiences thus far,



understanding where they came from and what they can offer to a prospective virtual school teacher. And fourth, they should engage in the development of the virtual school practica and help with the matching process of pre-service teachers and supervisor teachers. This is an important aspect of the mentor training because this is where the supervisor teachers transform into field-based teacher educators. In addition, an anticipatory reflective process prior to the practicum beginning, where both the supervisor teacher and pre-service teacher write down and share with each other a list of what they need/want from the experience, might be helpful in ensuring a positive experience for all involved.

Another must for mentoring training and mentoring in general, the virtual school teachers who serve as supervisor teachers to pre-service teachers need to get credit (Futrell, 1988). They could receive this in a number of ways. They could be monetarily compensated, receive release time from other teaching duties, or receive continuing education units toward their recertification process. This would allow them to be more invested in the experience because they are being recognized and rewarded for their participation.

As for the mentoring strategies that are used in virtual school practica, for increased strength, supervisor teachers should be urged to form strong relationships with their pre-service teachers by understanding the prior knowledge that the pre-service teacher brings to the experience (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2007). Supervisor teachers need to guide pre-service teacher's "professional knowledge development" to include "curriculum," "pedagogical," "content," "context," "pedagogical content," "student learner," and "classroom management" knowledge (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2007, p.

28). And the pre-service teachers should be able to count on their supervisor teachers to encourage them to engage in ethical work, collaboration, inquiry, and equity (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2007).

### **Contributing to K-12 Education**

At the general level of K-12 education, online learning has become part of the national plan. As was mentioned before, 45 out of 50 states have supplemental or full-time online programs, while some states have both (Watson et al., 2009). By 2011, estimates show over eight million students will use some form of online learning, fully-online or blended) (Greaves Group & Hayes Connection, 2006).

Each of this study's shared horizons speaks to the field of education in general. Regarding communication with supervisor teacher, mentoring and collaboration within schools are vital, especially when considering teacher attrition and how important professional learning communities have become to the teaching and learning practice. Professional learning communities have been known to foster "mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), "increase commitment to the mission and goals of the school, create shared responsibility for the total development of the students, create powerful learning that defines good teaching and learning," and reduce "teacher isolation" (Hord, 1997). By nurturing that communication at the pre-service teacher-level of professional development, this practice will carry forward into the next stages of the teacher professional development ladder.

As for information systems at the virtual school, this horizon taps into the need for teachers, at all levels of development, to understand the information systems of their schools. What information is in the systems? How can teachers use that information to make changes to their communication and instructional strategies?

In regard to modification of course content, each teacher at the virtual school takes on a supportive role for their students rather than concentrating on developing the curriculum for courses. In business terms, the virtual school is concentrating on giving specialized roles to the teacher, whose main purpose is to build and cultivate meaningful and supportive relationships with their students. The idea of role specialization stems from social psychology and has to do with organizational effectiveness (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Teacher education programs can help in this role-based initiative by presenting the multiple business models, as outlined by Watson et al. (2009), that virtual schools have in regard to what roles teachers play. They could also ask their pre-service teachers to reflect on the role of the teacher in each practical experience they are involved in.

Illuminate as a shared horizon helps to understand the importance of the adoption of innovation. Illuminate signified the technology that is used in the virtual school, but it can go beyond that and speak to the technology that is used for learning in general. When it comes to adopting technology, it is important to make note of the people who are going to be adopting the technology because it is those people who are going to need to change methods in order to incorporate something new into their environment. One strategy that has informed this idea is CBAM, or Concerns-Based Adoption Model. It has seven levels including 0, awareness – “I am not concerned about it”; 1, informational – “I would like to know more about it”; 2, personal, “How will using it affect me?”; 3, management – “I seem to be spending all my time getting materials ready.”; 4, consequence – “How is my use affecting learners? How can I refine it to have more impact?”; 5, collaboration – How can I relate what I am doing to what others are doing?;

6, refocusing – “I have some ideas about something that would work even better.” (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987). Professional development centered on the adoption of a new technology into a learning environment should take adoption models, such as CBAM, into consideration when designing and implementing training.

Balancing act as a horizon speaks to the idea of giving credit for effort in any context, such as a mentor teacher getting credit for the work they are doing with their mentee(s). It also signifies allotting enough time for an experience to be an effective one for all stakeholders involved. For best practices, guidelines regarding credit and time commitments should be structured for professional development experiences so that everyone involved will have ample time to get the most out of the experience and get rewarded for it.

And finally, the horizon unmet expectations had to do with how some of the expectations were not met in the practicum experience. For the field of education in general, this horizon informs the need for instructional designers, or those involved in curriculum development at any and all levels, to be concerned about users’ needs. User needs assessments are important to make sure that the instruction is meeting the needs of those who are going to be receiving the instruction. What are the goals that need to be met? What are the backgrounds of those individuals taking the training? How can this curriculum be designed to meet all users’ needs?

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

While offering insightful results, this study also raised questions that warrant the need for further investigation, which will help expand the knowledge regarding the phenomenon of virtual school practica. The topics for further study include (1) evaluating the effectiveness of virtual school practica, (2) exploring the supervisor

teacher and pre-service teacher relationship, (3) investigating how virtual school practica effect pre-service teachers' overall outlook on education, (4) examining pre-service teachers' ability to differentiate between the requirements for teaching online from teaching in traditional, brick-and-mortar classrooms as well as teaching in different types of online learning environments, (5) considering pre-service teachers' understanding of what is needed to work virtually, and (6) exploring different models of virtual school practica.

### **Effectiveness of Virtual School Practica Design**

This study was designed to describe the experiences of three prospective teachers participating in a virtual school practicum; it did not focus on the effectiveness of the design of the experience. Thus, a study evaluating the effectiveness of the design of virtual school practica would be useful. A study such as this could help to inform future design of these experiences.

### **Supervisor Teacher and Pre-service Teacher Relationship**

This study was broad in that it was looking at the overall phenomenon of the virtual school practicum. One of the key elements of the virtual school practicum was the relationship between the supervisor teacher and the pre-service teacher. There were many dynamics that were involved in this relationship, but those dynamics could only be explored so far, as this study's main goal was to look at the virtual school practicum as a whole. A deeper look into the intricacies of this relationship would be helpful.

Also, there is a need to pursue research that explores the training needs of supervisor teachers and pre-service teachers to ready them for practica and internships. In addition, it is essential to research ways to successfully match mentor to mentee in

order to attain the most beneficial relationship for both parties. It is also necessary to look at what constitutes an effective mentoring relationship between a virtual school teacher and a pre-service teacher. Furthermore, it is important to investigate if the relationship is negotiated differently in a virtual environment, and if so, how that negotiation plays out.

### **Pre-service Teachers' Outlooks on Education**

A focus on the pre-service teachers' overall view of the field of education was not included in this study. This would be an enlightening investigation to see how pre-service teachers' views of the field change, if at all, based on their experience in virtual school practica. Research could explore what their view of the field of education was prior to the virtual school practica and compare that to what their view of the field of education is after the virtual school practica.

### **Differentiation Between Teaching Environments**

Seeing as virtual school practica are new experiences being offered, the pre-service teachers do not have much to compare their experience to other than their traditional brick-and-mortar classroom internships. Many of them do not even know that working in an online learning environment, such as a virtual school or a school that is set in a blended environment, is a viable employment option for them. Some teacher education programs have begun to offer classes that introduce pre-service teachers to the concept of online pedagogy. It would be interesting to study whether or not pre-service teachers who are given this training are able to differentiate between teaching styles in these two very different environments. Even more intriguing would be to look at whether or not pre-service teachers can discern the type of online learning environment that is best suited to their teaching style. For instance, would one pre-service teacher be

more inclined to teach in a K-12 virtual school that allows teachers to develop their own content while another is more suited to teach for a virtual school that has pre-made content?

### **Working Virtually**

Another study that would add to K-12 virtual school research literature would be one that explores pre-service teachers' understanding of what is needed to work virtually. What skills and traits would pre-service teachers feel are necessary to effectively work virtually? Many of the pre-service teachers who are unfamiliar with K-12 online learning would most likely comment first about the need for high levels of technological know-how. However, many current teachers and researchers in online education have mentioned the need for motivation of students, cultivation of the learning environment, and assisting learners in their control of their own learning process (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples & Tickner, 2001). It would not only be interesting to see the disconnect in pre-service teachers' perceptions, but it would also be beneficial to understand where teacher educators need to concentrate when designing effective programs that prepare pre-service teachers for online teaching.

### **Conclusions**

This study is on the cutting edge of teacher preparation, providing guidance and insight to other teacher education programs and virtual schools. The results of the study fill a gap in the research on virtual schooling regarding the preparation of teachers to teach in new dynamic learning environments that are online and blended in nature. This study offers information that will benefit those involved with virtual schooling including but not limited to state, national, and international government-based departments of education, teacher certification organizations, other education-oriented organizations,

virtual schools, teacher education programs, and pre-service teachers. Figure 5-2 illustrates the contexts flowing into the virtual school practica and the meanings flowing out of it.

First, this study informs pre-service teachers about a new possibility for a teaching career. In the virtual school practicum, pre-service teachers were introduced to a potential employment option that they did not know about. They felt that they were navigating uncharted territory because, in their past teacher education program practica, they were never exposed to virtual schooling. This experience brought this career option to life for them.

Second, it informs teacher education programs who have not started preparing their teachers to teach in online and blended learning environments. These teacher education programs need to form lasting relationships with virtual schools to offer their pre-service teachers experiences that will prepare them for the changing education landscape. In addition, this study will provide teacher education programs an understanding of what pre-service teachers expect to get out of their education. At the same time, teacher education programs will be informed by seeing a model of virtual school practica. The number of virtual schools is growing exponentially, and with that, so are the varieties of models of teaching and managing students in these schools. The virtual school in this study is a unique one, as it has been in existence for over ten years, and there are a myriad of virtual school models where teaching styles vary. Because of this, the preparation that pre-service teachers experience just from this one virtual school practicum would not fully transfer to all virtual schools. Thus, it would be ideal for teacher education programs to offer various virtual school practica. If this is not



possible, maybe consortia of teacher education programs could be formed so that each teacher education program could offer pre-service teachers a different virtual school practicum. From the consortium's collection, pre-service teachers could have the option to choose the virtual school practica that best suit their professional development needs.

Third, this study informs virtual schools to begin and/or continue fostering relationships with teacher education programs as well as train their current teachers to be effective mentors for pre-service teachers participating in virtual school practica. Virtual schools will benefit from this study by being offered a perspective of what they can do to help in preparing pre-service teachers to be online instructors. In addition, they will see the need to build relationships with teacher education programs so they can offer aspiring online instructors, as well as aspiring media specialists, counselors, and administrators, authentic, practical internship experiences.

Fourth, it informs education policy makers and teacher certification organizations to consider what is necessary in the development of teachers in pre-service training programs. It also forces them to consider virtual school internships as important as traditional school internships for teachers' professional development. Consequently, the results of this research could influence change in certification requirements to include virtual school internships as credit-based options for pre-service teachers to pursue. And finally organizations, such as iNACOL, will be recognized for their major contributions and efforts to the standards that govern K-12 online learning. The *iNACOL Standards for Quality Online Teaching* (2008) would be ideal to form a consistent framework for the development of virtual school experiences, internships, and practica,

but these or similar standards must first be adopted by the state and national departments of education. Education policy makers have a role in virtual school practicum by recognizing them as legitimate and necessary practical opportunities for pre-service teachers. By ignoring the significant changes that are occurring today, education could become less and less current to K-12 students and their parents who are becoming savvy retailers in today's education marketplace. With more and more virtual schools providing options to students beyond state borders (i.e. Florida Virtual School and Virtual High School), education policy makers who do not acknowledge these changes will be less and less relevant and will have potentially less funding due to a drop in student population since the students will choose virtual schools over brick-and-mortar. The ones who do support virtual school practica as a necessary step in the development of pre-service teachers are not only investing in the development of well-rounded teachers; they are also investing in the K-12 students who will benefit from the special training in online pedagogy that their teachers will possess. Using iNACOL's *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching* as a guideline for online teacher preparation, in addition to using TEGIVS' curriculum and objectives (TEGIVS, 2010) and, by following in the footsteps of states who have adopted virtual school practica as an option for teacher training, states can organize an effort to prepare teachers for this thriving learning environment.

While virtual school practica are geared to potential virtual school teachers, the participants also thought the practicum could enlighten teachers who were going to be in fully traditional or blended classrooms. They relayed that no matter what learning environment a teacher chooses to work, they must learn a variety of ways to connect

with students on more meaningful levels using the technologies that kids use on a regular basis. The virtual school practicum provided the pre-service teachers that experience. These virtual school experiences, similar to the one that this study is based on, can provide pre-service teachers an awareness of virtual school teaching as a career option, an understanding of the realities of online teaching, a debunking of myths about a career as an online instructor, an opportunity to develop their online instructor skills, and exposure and introduction to differing virtual school models and blended learning options.

By 2011, it is predicted that over eight million K-12 students will be learning online (Greaves Group & Hayes Connection, 2006). As K-12 online learning continues to grow, so too does the need to prepare teachers to teach online. This study advocates for the development of more virtual school practica experiences for pre-service teachers, such as the one developed for this study, so they can see what it is like to be instructors in K-12 online and blended learning environments and be prepared to facilitate the learning of tomorrow's K-12 students.

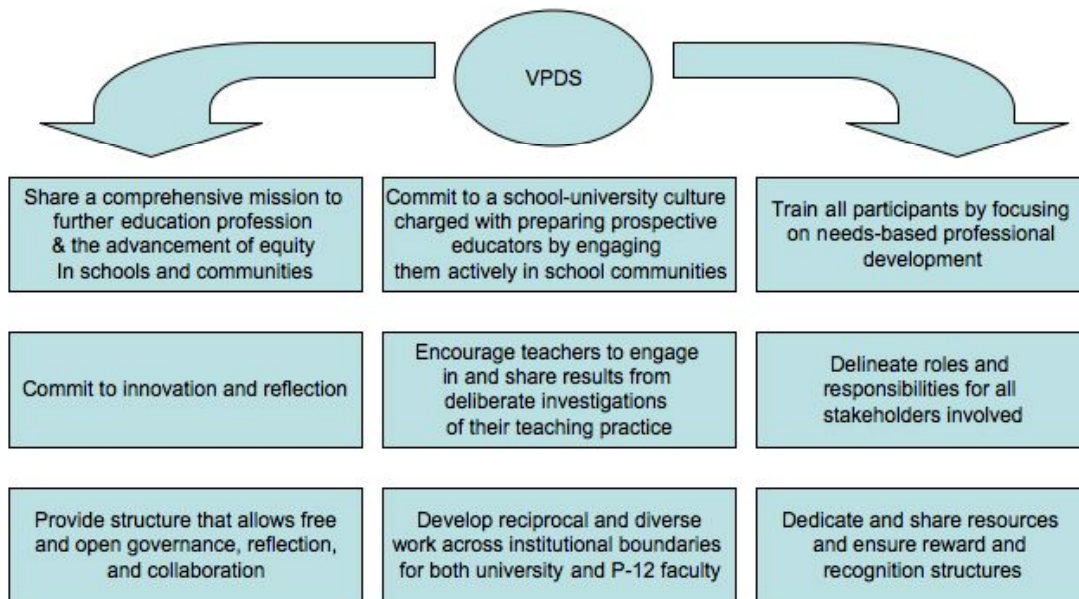


Figure 5-1. Diagram of Virtual Professional Development School “Nine Required Essentials” (Modified based on National Association for Professional Development Schools) (NAPDS, 2008)

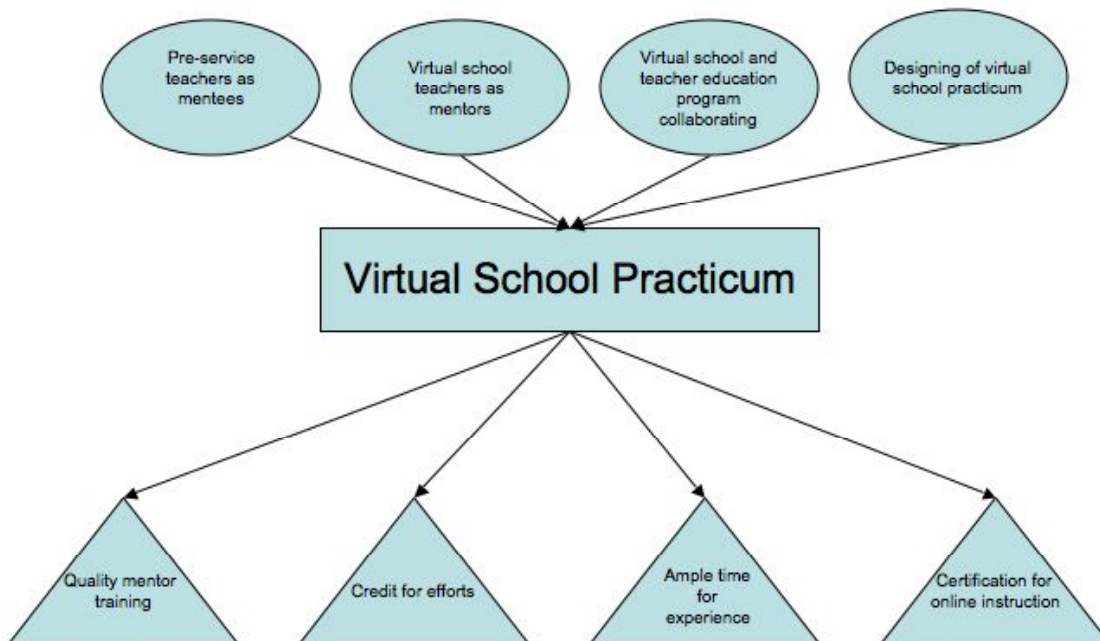


Figure 5-2. Outline of the flow of the current study

## APPENDIX A INTERVIEW GUIDES

### Interview 1

I want to talk to you about the virtual school practicum.

I have a few questions to ask that will help guide your discussion, but I want you to elaborate if you feel that we are not covering something that is pertinent to your experiences.

1. Talk about your experiences with online learning. (Probes: courses, virtual learning environments, social networking communities, etc.)
2. Why did you decide to participate in the virtual school practicum?
3. As you know from EME4401, digital literacy is the ability to locate, organize, understand, evaluate, and create information using digital technology. What role does digital literacy play for you as a potential online teacher?
4. What does it mean to you to be an online teacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
5. How can this practicum help you become better or more skilled to be an online teacher in the future?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank you so much again for participating. I will see you for the next interview and will email questions for you to consider prior to our meeting.

### Interview 2

Thank you so much for being here. I want to talk to you again about how you are experiencing the virtual school practicum. I have a few questions to ask that will help guide your discussion, but I want you to elaborate if you feel that we are not covering something that is pertinent to your experiences.

I would like to ask you a few questions.

1. I would like to go over your first interview to have you elaborate on some themes that came out of Interview 1 (Present highlights of first interview to participant and ask for clarification/elaboration where necessary.).
2. Could you describe your orientation into the virtual school?
3. What are your typical interactions with your supervisor teacher?
4. How do you communicate with your supervisor teacher?
5. Describe ways that you're being mentored in this program.
6. What sorts of conversations transpire between you and your supervisor teacher? Talk about the topics and highlight some of the most interesting conversations you had.
7. Overall, how are you feeling about your practicum so far?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank you so much again for participating. I will see you for the next interview and will email questions for you to consider prior to our meeting.

### Interview 3

Thank you so much for being here. I want to talk to you again about how you are experiencing the virtual school practicum. I have a few questions to ask that will help guide your discussion, but I want you to elaborate if you feel that we are not covering something that is pertinent to your experiences.

I would like to ask you a few questions.

1. I would like to go over your second interview to have you elaborate on some themes that came out of Interview 2 (Present highlights of second interview to participant and ask for clarification/elaboration where necessary.).
2. Could you describe in detail the classroom that you are placed in?
3. How do you use the online environment to communicate, Probes: with other interns, peers, virtual school teachers, virtual school administration, students?
4. How does communication work in the virtual school?
5. In your practicum, how would you define the role of the teacher?  
Probes: The student? The course? The virtual school staff? The virtual school Administrators? Your role as an intern?
6. Anything new you would like to share about your practicum so far?

Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank you so much again for participating. I will see you for the next interview and will email questions for you to consider prior to our meeting.

### Interview 4

Thank you so much for being here. I want to talk to you again about how you are experiencing the virtual school internship. I have a few questions to ask that will help guide your discussion, but I want you to elaborate if you feel that we are not covering something that is pertinent to your experiences.

I would like to ask you a few questions.

1. I would like to go over your third interview to have you elaborate on some themes that came out of Interview 3 (Present highlights of third interview to participant and ask for clarification/elaboration where necessary.).
2. How has this practicum affected/ changed/ transformed you as a potential online teacher?
3. What is important to know and/or consider when thinking about becoming a virtual school teacher?

4. What qualities and attitudes, values, beliefs are essential for a virtual school teacher to possess?
5. How has the relationship with your supervisor teacher helped you?
6. How has this practicum fit in with your personal and professional development goals?
7. Anything else you would like to add regarding your practicum experience?

Thank you so much again for participating. I will be in touch soon with transcripts to make sure I accurately transcribed the details of your interview. I will also be contacting you to confirm the results of the study.

## APPENDIX B LIST OF PARTICIPANTS' HORIZONS AND MEANING UNITS

### Josh's Horizons & Meaning Units

#### Communication with Supervisor Teacher

Limited contact with supervisor teacher  
 Little anxiety  
 Trouble contacting  
 She didn't inform me  
 Asked her if I could have that list  
 It affects my psyche  
 Not hearing from my teacher  
 A little frustrated  
 I had to email her  
 Hey what's going on?  
 Didn't have much contact with teacher  
 Her dates were messed up  
 Mostly email  
 Better than zero out of three  
 It's been kind of sporadic  
 I can call her  
 I can go into her office help  
 She can call me, she never does  
 Competition over teaching/tech stories  
 Need to be better than me  
 You're new at this  
 Let me tell you everything I know  
 This is the right way, my way  
 In one ear and out the other  
 I have an intern, he'll just listen  
 Maybe he would need this  
 Maybe he should have this  
 Not a lot of communication  
 I emailed her about it  
 She never got back to me  
 Had to specifically ask my teacher  
 Just listened in  
 Finally got it last week  
 Could have worked better with me  
 Supposed to be talking to her  
 How you doing phone call  
 Process stuff  
 Setting up stuff rather than mentoring  
 I am not hard to reach on the phone  
 I always have my phone on me  
 Trying to one-up each other  
 It was a competition  
 STs will get better  
 A little more nurturing  
 Just backed down  
 I had high hopes for it  
 It did not stay that way  
 Could have stomped feet, put up a fight  
 If she wanted me, she would have said

More pushy with my teacher  
 Didn't harp on teacher like I should have  
 Seen some things that I wouldn't do  
 Helped me to see what not to do  
 Not very good with communication  
 Already turned off to her  
 Didn't give two flips about me  
 Have to worry about myself  
 Don't have a good relationship  
 It's kind of hard, but I can't worry  
 Didn't get anything from my mentor  
 That never happened  
 Difficulty communicating with supervisor teacher  
 Not necessarily that works for me  
 Responsible for what she gets paid for  
 Responsible for her students  
 Don't think she gets paid for helping me  
 More time commitment to me  
 More commitment to developing me  
 Me, me, me  
 More involvement for her on my behalf  
 Didn't get invited to Elluminate sessions  
 Be a lot more open with communication  
 Try a lot harder

#### Information Systems at the VS

Learned about the resources  
 Where do you find help  
 How to use their systems  
 The hubs of operation  
 Log all of your communication  
 Activate students  
 Learning to use the VS systems  
 Academic integrity – It's like CSI  
 Just saw it from the training area

#### Elluminate

Learning about new technologies  
 Really cool to have the video  
 It's all live  
 I really like the live aspect of it  
 It's interactive, more F2F  
 Presence of another human being  
 Opened my mind to a lot of tools  
 Fun setting office up  
 Within your virtual office  
 Elluminate sessions daily  
 Click away their privileges  
 I can give moderator privileges



### Balancing Act

Just one more thing  
Keep school at school  
Getting the inquiry done  
Busy schedule vs. wanting the experience  
Stressing out  
I have no choice – work for a living  
Prisoner of time – goes against motto  
All our schedules are so crazy  
Voluntary experience  
Wish we had more time  
More time to devote to it  
My schedule is so bad right now  
Trying to graduate – I am done  
I don't have the time myself  
Just trying to graduate  
A lot of stuff to do for it  
Wrong time of year for us  
Trying to get done  
There's so much to do  
Just add it to the list  
Wish I could have been involved more  
Not going to beg for extra stuff  
Limited because of time constraints  
Didn't give as much as I should have  
Kind of rushed and brief  
Don't get to dive in as much  
Wish we had more in-depth  
Something on the side  
Voluntary outside of class  
Don't really apply myself unless graded  
On a voluntary basis  
All packed in at the end  
As part of a class  
Not doing this for a grade  
Would have been for a grade  
I don't have to do too much  
More linked to assessment-based goals  
Didn't really feel pressure to do so

### Unmet Expectations

She had to cancel it  
They cancel and they reschedule  
We were supposed to have done this  
More one-on-one contact  
I didn't really go into depth  
It bothers me but it doesn't  
Just going in myself  
Supposed to listen to two  
Supposed to conduct one or two  
One-on-one experience  
Missing it  
Not sure if we are supposed to  
Feel like I could get more out of it  
Could have gotten more out of it  
I don't ever look at it

List hanging on my wall at home  
Happy with the experience  
Supposed to  
I'm missing it but I'm not  
Supposed to do grading  
That didn't happen  
Interactive where you have to click  
Supposed to have done  
Supposed to log in  
Supposed to be submitting assignments  
We never did  
Would have like to have graded  
Grateful to do what we can  
Get positives and negatives from this  
Trying to get the most out of experience

### Professional Development at the VS

Committed to learning all the time  
Have to be a lifelong learner  
Continually get professionally developed  
Do it for themselves  
Professional/personal development  
Help yourself improve  
Grow from that as a teacher and person  
Trying to explain it in a different way  
Explained it the easier way  
Use stuff that people are using today  
Up with what the kids are interested in  
What would help them become better  
To make a great experience for anybody  
Stay up with your kids  
Kids come out knowing how to play Wii  
It's become part of our genes  
Grow more comfortable with technology  
Seek out knowledge  
Gain as much knowledge as possible  
To better myself  
Doing this to get extra experience

### Modification of Course Content

It's more self learning  
Individualized tutoring sessions  
It's self-paced  
Different ability levels  
Kids that need more time  
No time limit  
Student's individualized learning  
You don't have to follow it  
Showing effort  
Go it however you want to go  
Accessibility of those resources

### Mentoring from the Internship coordinator

She was helping me  
Gave me constructive feedback  
That type of relationship  
Really trying to develop us  
She sends us a reminder  
Willing to give me stuff  
Really good about answering questions  
You could always throw in a question  
She wanted to know about us  
Already knows something about my life

I can always just call her  
No matter how silly  
A really good contact to have  
Talk about technologies they are using  
She is excited as much as we are  
Have that investment in it  
Engaging feeling  
Felt really engaged with her  
Relationship wish I had with my teacher  
More of an influence on me than mentor

### *Rita's Horizons & Meaning Units*

#### Communication with Supervisor Teacher

After you experiment, call me  
Helps you deal with tough situations  
Able to work with someone one-on-one  
Learning things not covered in modules  
Talked it through with my mentor  
Help me sort it out a bit  
I started talking to her  
How do I get access to your course?  
Helpful to have my supervisor there  
Help clear things up for me  
Frequent communication with supervisor teacher  
We are pretty similar  
Asking her how courses were developed  
She's helping me stay ahead  
She's very encouraging  
She sent me her welcome letter  
Told me how she conducts calls  
Asking her about development of course  
Asked her what job of the teacher was?  
We email frequently  
Call with more specific stuff  
It's kind of just back and forth  
She's pretty free  
A lot of different conversations  
She's very friendly  
Not afraid to ask her anything  
She was telling me  
We were talking about  
Oh! This is the last week?  
Not afraid to ask her supervisor teacher anything  
She gave really detailed feedback  
She's just always around for questions  
I could just call her anytime  
She is someone else I could call on

#### Illuminate

Find new and upcoming technologies  
I like learning about Illuminate  
Keeping up with students you don't see  
Do videoconferencing to tutor someone  
Create our own Illuminate room

#### Understanding VS via Student Perspective

Being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century  
Moving beyond the textbook  
Giving students opportunities  
Expand knowledge & understanding  
Increase comprehensible input  
Reaching students on another level  
Move beyond the classroom  
All kinds of web 2.0 tools  
Allowing students to work creatively  
Higher order thinking skills  
Reaching out to those students  
I have wondered *what is it like?*  
All students learn in this environment  
School to reach learners in a new way  
See many many things typically not seen  
Learn how to create, research for materials  
Applying information & creating things  
Increased likelihood of remembering  
Individual like to tailor it to them  
More creative kinds of stuff  
Different kinds of labs  
Discuss their results  
See the stuff the kids like to work on  
Asked her about her son (parent)  
Feel proud of themselves  
Read the lessons  
Complete the assignment  
Parent account  
Option to go to tutoring  
Additional practice before testing  
Develop a schedule  
Taking time to read everything  
Scheduling yourself  
Being responsible  
Have to be very responsible  
A lot of responsibility on the student  
More in control of their learning  
Understand process students go through  
I can see exactly what they are seeing  
I understand exactly what they're seeing  
As if I'm a student

### Modification of Course Content

Breaks down the information  
Being more of a facilitator  
Presents information in order  
Oh wow, how would I do that?  
A different responsibility  
Affected my thinking—online instruction  
It just opened my eyes  
Another way that online schools work  
Being more of a facilitator  
See myself as the facilitator  
Be a little more creative  
Going to have more input  
Difficult in making it creative  
How you want it to be  
Thought it would be more teacher input  
Create an announcement page  
Work with HTML  
Special tutoring sessions  
Still kind of do things differently  
Want to teach it in a different way  
I thought it was more open  
More about tracking students  
Making sure they stay on track  
Helping students with that  
It's like a different responsibility  
See what the issue is, work with them  
Try to work with the kids  
Maybe you could have more input  
Thought you had a little more freedom  
How does that work exactly  
The role of the teacher  
Oral assessments with the students  
Showing them step-by-step  
Make sure they understand material  
Tracking is key  
See online school as pre-created material  
Job is more about tracking students  
Teach them through tutoring sessions  
Provide students with a lot of feedback  
How to write message to students  
Give constructive, positive feedback  
Give them hope  
Make them feel that they haven't failed  
Convey you believe they can make it  
Just know their names  
You remember their voices  
Just got to learn how to track students

### Mentoring from the ST

A different way of being a teacher  
Different in an interesting way  
More opportunity for remediation  
She has real-time classroom experience  
F2F vs. online – transition in thinking  
Transformed her thinking

She has to keep more data  
Learning to work in a different format  
You could go straight into VS  
What is taught in an algebra class online  
Somewhat similar but different formats  
She's teaching me different things  
How do you keep up?  
She was showing me the filters  
Paired with mentor when you first start  
Help you stay on top of things  
Not completely like you're on your own  
Heard a lot about the mentor  
She has helped support my experience  
You get a mentor when you start  
Showed things not in teaching modules  
She showed me how to  
How she can create a custom view  
Keep up with all the phone numbers  
Showed me her announcement page  
She showed me how she does HTML  
That's how she learned it  
Her own personal thing  
She actually showed me how to  
She was able to show me a lot  
She let me ask them questions  
Showing me how she grades  
Goes beyond what's expected  
Keep track of students more easily  
Ask her questions specific to experience  
She has an announcement page  
It's very colorful, bright  
It really makes you want to read it  
Superstars of the week  
She's still willing to work with me  
She used graphics  
Tell her when I am ready – go on & do it  
I was trying to do the practice first  
She showed me different things  
She showed me little tricks  
She showed how she tracked students  
She'd still help me after experience  
Always asking questions  
Always full of questions  
Always want to know what's next

### Information Systems at the VS

Teacher's job to monitor communication  
Learning the terminology  
Understanding the VS systems  
Learned about VS  
How their system work  
Using information to meet needs  
Understanding their systems  
How the VS works  
It's been very informative

### Unmet Expectations

Supposed to email our teacher  
Never received the log in info  
Don't have a log in  
I wasn't able to do the last two things  
Good for me to assess students  
Supposed to get in on a tutoring session  
A lot of information  
Although it is voluntary  
Wasn't able to do that  
I've learned from it  
It wasn't "you should", was "you need"  
Time runs out...keep going  
Never had a chance to practice grading  
We didn't really communicate at all  
Something to take from VS practicum  
To expose me to how VS is structured  
I thought it was really interesting  
Didn't know anything about it  
Gave real experience about what it's like

### Balancing Act

Trying to move through it slowly  
Not trying to do too much at once  
Really want to stay on top of it  
I don't want to look like a slacker  
Odd balance – voluntary vs. look good  
Trying to figure out when I can do it  
Very very busy  
Just got a lot busier  
It's just like crazy  
Staying afloat vs. looking good  
Turned up a whole bunch of notches  
Just turned up a whole bunch of notches  
If we had a little bit more time  
Maybe could give a bit more extra time  
Some additional time would be helpful  
Seems like a time crunch  
I kind of feel behind  
It went by fast

### *Sue's Horizons & Meaning Units*

#### Communication with Supervisor Teacher

Assigned a mentor teacher  
Emailing us in different formats  
Introducing us to different ways  
Good to hear what she does personally  
She gave the actual teacher perspective  
Getting to hear how somebody does it  
Always have questions  
We do them together  
Sharing expertise  
How do you?  
Trying to work on it  
Emailing her back and forth  
We have been talking on the phone  
Hearing her personal experience  
How do you do it?  
Some teachers do this way, I do this way  
Which time would work best  
I heard her give a welcome call  
Talked about a lot of her experiences  
Emailed me a bunch of info at end  
Enjoyed the conversations with her  
Class activities – discussing with teacher  
Getting to hear how somebody does it  
This is how I do it  
This is how I manage my schedule  
This is how I organize my work space  
Getting her personal experiences  
Getting her personal perspectives

#### Necessary Qualities of VS Teachers (15)

Need to communicate  
Have to be willing to try new things  
Keep changing and improving  
Willing to be open-minded to changes  
Willing to put an effort to learn  
Willing to adapt and make changes  
Be creative  
Be a special kind of people person  
Be able to relate to students at a distance  
Make students feel comfortable  
Being flexible  
Knows best way to approach parents  
Knows best way to approach students  
She really knows her students  
Willing to be flexible, works with them

#### Information Systems at the VS

How to use the VS systems  
Cover your base as a teacher  
How to use the systems  
Checks and balances

#### Modification of Course Content

At their own pace  
Course communicate everything uniform  
Takes out some of the creativity  
To keep it standard  
Keep creativity in class  
Cookie cutter laid out for you  
She helped design the course  
Put her own creativity into it

### 'Seeing' the Teacher Perspective

Prepare them for the real world  
Check in with students and parents  
Let them know that you are available  
Alleviate some of their concerns  
Answer their questions  
See stuff that you could do as a teacher  
Set up our own  
Students come in, see if you are there  
Responding in a reasonable time  
New teachers kind of get overwhelmed  
It was like 24 hours  
Reasonable is 24 hours  
More than enough time  
Reasonable is doable  
Thought it was within an hour  
Same training that new teachers get  
To see their perspective  
So much support built in  
Get to actually work with the students  
Checks and balances  
Talk to them, log it  
Always a record  
Logged in as TA  
As far as I could see  
Share a little bit about yourself  
How I would do it  
I would probably use it more  
Get the students involved  
She is on the front lines  
Decisions about/around/above them  
They're the ones working with students  
There for and because of students  
How you communicate with students  
Opportunity to be creative  
Gets you to focus on your students  
Keeps some human element/interaction  
Not working on your schedule  
Working on students' schedules  
Good training  
VS gives its teachers

### Unmet Expectations

Would have been more involved  
Would have liked to do more with class  
Wanted more interaction with students  
Couldn't really access the student work  
Didn't have explanation of course itself  
This is my class, this is how this works  
Would have liked to...  
More involvement in the course itself  
More interaction with the students  
Wasn't a lot of 2-way interactions  
On the schedule for next week  
It's only 4 weeks  
Showing us what the resources are

Wanting more  
I listened  
I got to listen  
Had more direction  
What am I supposed to do with you?  
All I knew was what was on the email  
All she knew  
Don't know if we met responsibilities  
Weren't very clear  
Got to talk to different people  
Wasn't involved with her class  
Not really intensive  
Not really necessary to repeat calls  
All calls kind of sound the same  
Have a lot of fun doing it  
A classroom designed more English  
We heard "this is how you should do it"  
It could be improved  
Voluntary thing  
Not worried about being checked up on  
Don't think I could as far as I know  
Maybe I was just doing it wrong  
Ask each other how ours were going  
Not really structured communication  
We watched  
We got to talk to them  
We talked  
Felt like I was an observer  
Don't feel like I had any responsibility  
Don't feel like had things to accomplish  
Just kind of learning about the process  
No chance to make a big influence  
This is what we do, any questions?  
Just giving presentations  
Felt like it just ended  
Kind of anticlimactic  
Didn't need a party  
Didn't know if I was done or not  
Have a good basis start  
Do for longer than four weeks  
The content wasn't my passion  
Training were kind of theoretical

### Illuminate

Never really uses it herself  
Internet safety  
Really cool tool  
Academic integrity  
Not feel so disconnected  
From a student perspective  
Accommodating for the students  
Interacting with each other  
More than compensated for distance part  
More collaborative and supportive  
A way to connect  
That's really a cool tool  
A good place to share information  
What I've learned from it  
Prove valuable in the future

### Balancing Act

A lot going on  
Always feel like need to get back  
They're going to be okay  
They'll be there when I get back  
It's always there  
It's always something that I can work on  
A lot to juggle  
A balance I would have to find  
It's ok to go places  
Really stressful for me at the beginning  
I have to be there  
Figure it out once you get started  
Making it all work  
A lot to juggle with everything else  
It's been ridiculous time-wise  
If it were a less stressful point  
Gone by really fast  
Couldn't say 'no'  
Time-wise, it's the big thing  
Hard to make it more time

APPENDIX C  
COMPOSITE LIST OF HORIZONS

\* = Shared Horizons

Information Systems at the Virtual School\*  
Modification of Course Content \*  
Understanding the Virtual School from the Student Perspective (Rita)  
'Seeing' the Teacher Perspective (Sue)  
Mentoring from the Supervisor Teacher (Rita)  
Mentoring from the Internship Coordinator (Josh)  
Balancing Act\*  
Elluminate\*  
Necessary Qualities of Virtual School Teachers (Sue)  
Course Design (Rita, Sue)  
Change Management (Josh)  
Communication with Supervisor Teacher\*  
Unmet Expectations\*  
Professional Development at the Virtual School (Josh)  
Lifelong Learning (Josh, Rita)

**APPENDIX D**  
**PROGRESSION: FROM MEANING UNITS TO HORIZONS TO ESSENCE**

Individual Meaning Units	Shared Horizons	Essence of the Virtual School Practicum
Josh - Limited contact with supervisor teacher - Difficulty communicating with supervisor teacher	Communication with supervisor teacher	Fosters pre-service teachers' awareness of the power of communication with and learning from others
Rita - Not afraid to ask her supervisor teacher anything - Frequent communication with supervisor teacher		
Sue - Getting to hear how somebody does it - Sharing expertise		
Josh - Learning to use the virtual school systems - The hubs of operation	Information systems at the virtual school	Helps to develop 21 <sup>st</sup> century teachers who use dynamic information systems to reach students in interactive and engaging ways.
Rita - Understanding the virtual school systems - Using information to meet needs		
Sue - How to use the virtual school systems - Checks and balances		
Josh - Student's individualized learning - Individualized tutoring sessions	Modification of course content	Provides pre-service teachers with a glimpse at another way to provide learning opportunities to K-12 students, where teachers work to individualize a standard curriculum for each of their students.
Rita - A different responsibility - Being more of a facilitator		
Sue - Keep curriculum standard - Course design at the virtual school		
Josh - More face-to-face and interaction - Using technologies to connect	Elluminate	Offers pre-service teachers the 21 <sup>st</sup> century understanding that emerging technologies have an ever-changing nature and will forever affect the education system at large.
Rita - Finding new and upcoming technologies - Real-time technologies		
Sue - Really cool tool - A way to connect		
Josh - Voluntary experience - Busy schedule VS. wanting the experience	Balancing act	Allots for pre-service teachers' need to manage one's self to make sure they are getting the most out of their experience.
Rita - Turned up a whole bunch of notches - Staying afloat VS. looking good		
Sue - A lot to juggle - Could not say 'no'		
Josh - We were supposed to have done this - Missing it	Unmet expectations	Acknowledges diversity in learning opportunities, those that can be beneficial and others that can be challenging.
Rita - Was not able to do that - Time runs out...keep going		
Sue - Would have liked to... - Wanting more		



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