

Chapter 18

The Effects of Virtual Classroom Instruction: The Pre-service Teacher Preparation Program at the University of Ljubljana



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Abstract Over the past few decades, a strong presence of the reflective model of teacher-training has been observed. It presupposes intense teacher-trainees' involvement in the development of teaching practices and engagement in teacher self-development through the process of self-reflection. Subject to internalization, this process facilitates transmutation of personal learning experience into effective teaching practices. With the current pandemic still well underway, these systems of self-reflection and internalization have significantly shifted as the process of transmutation had to be replaced or at least supplemented by development and implementation of new teaching practices, inadvertently demanding of students and teachers alike to adapt to the new reality. The shifts in teaching practices have been marked by a number of modifications in the teacher-training experience, which are reflected in the recent research, conducted within our teacher-training program at the end of the online Teaching Practicum (TP). The present chapter discusses the research findings based on the teacher-trainees' responses in two separate surveys designed for use at the end of the academic year 2020–21, which was heavily marked by the lockdown mode. These findings are further supplemented by the analysis of the relevant content from the teacher-trainees' reflective essays, which are submitted as part of their TP portfolio requirement. Supported by the research results, the present chapter highlights the respondents' concerns over as well as benefits of their online teaching experience and draws relevant conclusions pertaining to future development of (online) teaching practices.

Keywords Online teaching · Pandemic · Reflective model · Teacher training

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Introduction

The shutdown of universities and schools in Slovenia, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, came in mid-March 2020, just as many pre-service teacher-trainees either began their final practicum or were conducting their group observations/school visits. This means there has been disruption to initial teacher training during the last three months of the academic year 2019/20, and throughout the academic year 2020/21 for reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the academic year 2020/21, the restrictions imposed regionally or nationally varied, depending on the Covid-19 situation, with primary and secondary schools being both on- and offline, then moving on to a hybrid model, to finally reopening in May 2021 (according to online sources <https://www.portalplus.si> and <https://ourworldindata.org/>). The universities remained online throughout the academic year. So, there has been variance in the disruption experienced by initial teacher training (henceforth referred to as ITT) trainees during the academic year 2020/21 regarding their final practicum or school placements, whereas the university-based teacher training program remained online throughout the year. This research focuses on the challenges this posed for teacher-trainees.

The Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, is by far the largest ITT provider in Slovenia. Within different departments, it provides teacher preparation programs for future teachers of the following languages: English, German, Italian, French, Spanish, Russian, Croatian, and Slovenian (both as a first and a second/foreign language).

So, the context framing this research is the official route into teaching established by the Bologna Reform in Higher Education in Slovenia. The Faculty of Arts adopted the so-called two-cycle degree structure, i.e., a 3-year Bachelor/Undergraduate Level, plus a 2-year Master/Graduate Level. In this two-cycle degree structure, the first three years of undergraduate studies are, in the case of future teachers of English, devoted entirely to subject-specific courses relating to linguistics and literature. The whole teacher preparation program is placed within the second cycle, i.e. at Master Level, and within what we refer to as the Pedagogical Module. Students at MA level can opt to follow either the non-pedagogical (i.e. omitting all teacher-training courses) or pedagogical route, the latter being the only route into teaching.

The Initial Teacher Training Design

There are two main types of ITT programs—a consecutive model, and a concurrent or simultaneous model, both with their advantages and disadvantages (Sedrevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė and Vainorytė 2015). In the consecutive model, students take the teacher preparation program after they have completed their “package” of disciplinary subjects relating to linguistics and literature. In the concurrent model, however, “the academic subjects are taught alongside the educational and pedagogical studies throughout the preparation period” (Zuzovsky and Donitsa-Schmidt 2017, p. 414). It is generally believed that the consecutive model offers stronger subject matter

preparation. Yet, as Zuzovsky and Donitsa-Schmidt (2017, p. 415) point out, “this model provides a less integrated learning experience between the discipline and the pedagogical studies, and a shorter period of socialization into the profession.” On the other hand, “the concurrent model offers a more integrated learning experience but requires a fairly early career decision from people who are also less mature and less knowledgeable” (ibid.).

In this sense, the current teacher preparation program provided by the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, is a mixture of both—consecutive and concurrent—models because trainees enroll into the MA program with a BA (i. e. subject-specialist) degree, but continue to study, during both MA Level years, both the academic subjects and the educational and pedagogical studies in a 1:1 ratio. The scope of the Master’s degree curriculum is 120 ECTS credits—60 credit points of academic subjects, and 60 credit points of the educational and pedagogical studies). Quantitatively, the pre-service teacher training program is in fact a one-year post-graduate program spreading over two years of MA Level.

The pedagogical module consists of two parts: (a) general educational and pedagogical studies, and (b) subject-specific teacher training courses. The scope of the general educational and pedagogical studies is the same for all departments at the Faculty of Arts that provide a pedagogical route of studies and is as presented in Table 18.1.

The scope of the subject-specific teacher training courses at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, is as presented in Table 18.2.

As can be seen from Table 18.2, the trainees have to complete two school placements (in Year 1 and in Year 2), totaling 12 lesson observations (based on specific observation tasks), 4 holistic or general lesson observations (i.e. observing lessons as a whole), 14 lessons taught independently, and a negotiable number of micro-teaching sessions (i.e. instances where the trainee and the mentor team-teach parts of a lesson). To document their school experience, the trainees are required to develop a Teaching Practice Portfolio, which is a collection of their work on placement, highlighting and demonstrating their knowledge and skills in teaching. The portfolio also provides a means for reflection; it offers the opportunity for critiquing their work and evaluating the effectiveness of their lessons.

Table 18.1 Pedagogical module curriculum

	Contact hours	ECTS*
Psychology for teachers	90	7
Pedagogy	45	3
(General) didactics	60	5
Adult education	30	3
Observation practice	15	2
an elective course	60	4
Total:	300	24

*ECTS stands for European Credit Transfer System

Table 18.2 Subject-specific teacher training curriculum

	Contact hours	ECTS
<i>Year 1</i>		
The Fundamentals of ELT Methodology	150	8
Methods and Techniques of Teaching English	60	7
Teaching Practice for English Teachers (practicum)	30	2
<i>Year 2</i>		
Programs and coursebooks in ELT	45	4
Testing in ELT	30	3
Scientific research work in foreign language pedagogy	30	3
<i>Elective courses (trainee chooses 2 out of 3):</i> Teaching English for Specific Purposes Teaching English Across Age Groups Trends in ELT	30 + 30	3 + 3
Teaching Practice for English Teachers (practicum)	30	4
Total:	435	37

The COVID-19 Lockdown Effects on ITT

Before we move on to describe the situation that happened in March 2020 when, as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic, all universities and schools in Slovenia shut down and transferred teaching online, we need to highlight the main methodological and “philosophical” design of the pre-service teacher education program to see how it was affected by this sudden change of teaching. The methodology of the pre-service teacher education program stresses the importance of involving the teacher-trainees in the instruction through hands-on activities, class discussions, pair work, brainstorming sessions, etc. In other words—the program is based on the so-called “reflective methodology” as we believe that this style of instruction is not only more engaging for the student teachers, but it also makes instruction less wearing on the teacher educator. So, given the “reflective methodology”-based design of the pre-service teacher education program and the centrality of the practicum, what happens when it is no longer possible?

As we are discussing the methodological design of the program, we will be interested in whether the imposed online teaching mode spelled a return to a more traditional way of teaching, and, primarily, what were the challenges related to »e-practicum«. In other words, we will try to show whether giving training sessions online and doing »e-practicum« are more demanding and challenging, and potentially less effective, or not.

The lockdown that happened in March 2020 was, of course, emergency-mode. As Nissim and Simon (2020, p. 11) point out, “in contrast to distance learning courses that are planned, designed and tailored to online settings ahead of time, emergency-mode is a temporary move made to transfer learning to an alternative

option due to a crisis.” Although at the faculty level, nobody was really prepared for this kind of situation (organization-wise, or otherwise), all theory-oriented courses, after the initial shock, seemed to move from frontal teaching to emergency-mode distance teaching without much difficulty, leaving teacher educators in a much more challenging situation. As for the practicum, the Ministry of Education issued very vague emergency guidance, letting the ITT providers (i.e. the faculties) decide for themselves, and the faculties letting the teacher educators decide for themselves. As the school practicum is a crucial point in the program, and its assessment is a key requirement for Year 1 trainees to be promoted to the next year level, and for Year 2 trainees to gain their final Qualified Teacher Status, we, the teacher educators, had to come up with new forms of practice in this “practicum vacuum”, and alternative strategies to substitute for lost practicum learning (Kidd and Murray 2020). We drew up an “alternative-practicum” plan that would enable the trainees to gain their teaching qualifications, but it also contained some changed requirements for school experience. The following alternative options were available to the trainees:

- Finding a school placement and doing their practicum online.
- Waiting until schools re-open, and doing the practicum offline.
- Year 1 trainees (academic year 2019/20) could postpone their practicum to next year (2020/21), in the hope that the situation would get back to normal. This meant, of course, that the trainees would have to do two placements in one year.
- Acknowledging and assessing any of the trainees’ (documented) past teaching experience such as individual tutoring, teaching language courses, working as a substitute teacher, providing help with teaching students with learning difficulties, and the like.
- Peer e-practicum sessions. At the faculty level, several departments of foreign languages (English, German, French, Spanish, and Italian) set up virtual classrooms where teacher-trainees of different languages performed micro-teaching to their peers who acted as students by using Zoom. For example, teacher-trainees of German would teach German to teacher-trainees of French, and vice versa, to mention just one language combination. After the e-practicum sessions, both peers and the university supervisor gave detailed feedback to the pre-service teachers. The benefit of the peer e-practicum was twofold—it was acknowledged as a (partial) practicum requirement, and the teacher-trainees found it useful because it helped them overcome online teaching fears.

As we can see, the trainees’ live teaching experiences in a classroom setting had to be compromised because otherwise they may not have fulfilled the pre-requisites for licensure.

It is safe to state that during this epidemic, pre-service teachers missed components of the school environment, culture, and expectations, “minimizing opportunities for reflection to understand failures and, most importantly, to build relationships in the learning environment” (Hill 2021, p. 2).

Strengthening Theory/Practice Connections via the Methodological Design of the Pre-service Teacher Preparation Program

Within pre-service teacher education programs, the so-called “theory/practice divide” and the importance of the practicum (or placement) in schools have been much debated (Kidd and Murray 2020). The practicum is usually widely recognized as it represents the central link between theory and practice—it is only here that the principle of “theorizing practice or practising theory” can be applied (Trappes-Lomax and McGrath 1999, p. 33). In other words, it is during the practicum that trainees acquire the skills to transfer knowledge of pedagogy to practice. The assumption is that more such practical experience straightforwardly produces better teachers as “practitioner and academic knowledge can be re-conceptualised to enhance students’ abilities to learn in and from practice” (Kidd and Murray 2020, p. 544). Although the practicum is, without doubt, the strongest connection between practice and theory (i.e. academic knowledge at the university), it is not the only one. Other solutions to strengthening theory/practice connections include increasing the practical, skills-based, experiential, and reflective components of university teacher education programs (Kidd and Murray 2020, p. 544).

Changes in Conceptualizing the Knowledge Base of Language Teaching

As the major concepts related to this topic have previously been outlined in a published work by the co-author of this article (cf. Skela 2019), we are briefly summarizing the main ideas in the following paragraphs.

Since the 1970s, there has been a marked shift in our understanding of what we mean by teacher preparation. Since then, several developments have significantly shaped the way second language teacher education (henceforth SLTE) is currently conceptualized (Burns and Richards 2009), of which the most important are changes in the knowledge base of language teaching and a re-orientation of our perspectives on pre-service teachers.

The established core curriculum of a SLTE program has traditionally been composed of two “packages”: a “package” of disciplinary knowledge that provides academic underpinning of practice, and a methodology “package” that shows teachers how to teach. In the “applied science” model of teacher education (Wallace 1991), which underpinned the growth of applied linguistics, it was assumed that disciplinary knowledge about language and SLA can be unproblematically applied to teaching, perhaps facilitated by classroom observation or through experience (Burns and Richards 2009). The growth and diversification of applied linguistics did not substantially affect how teachers were taught (Graves 2009). The content component of teacher education was taught separately, in both time and space, from the

practical component and actual teaching practice (Freeman and Johnson 1998; cited in Graves 2009, p. 117). It was perhaps not surprising teachers often failed to apply such knowledge in their classrooms.

For this reason, many experts called for the reconceptualization of the knowledge base of language teaching (Johnson 2009) that would include the third strand which had often been missing from formulations of the traditional core content of SLTE—namely, the nature of teaching itself, or *how teachers learn to teach*. In the 1980s, certain intellectual streams significantly changed our ways of understanding teaching. When researchers coined the term *teacher-learner*, it became a touchstone for teacher educators. Teachers began to be seen as “actors in two fields of activity: with students in classrooms where they *taught*, and in settings of professional training, where they *learned*” (Freeman 2009). In other words, SLTE began to include not simply *what* teachers need to learn, but increasingly *how* they would learn it. Additionally, research on teacher cognition began to develop and it focused on how teacher-learners’ prior (experiential) knowledge affects what and how they learn and how they make sense of experience (Borg 2006; Graves 2009). Language *teacher cognition* research indicated very clearly that “teacher-learners have strongly held conceptions of and tacit personal theories about teaching through which they filter input from educational courses” (Graves 2009, p. 117). In other words, the research distinguished between *explicit* knowledge and *implicit* knowledge.

Moreover, research that previously focused on language teachers and language teaching itself has begun to acknowledge an essential kind of knowledge that is critical for language teachers—the *pedagogical content knowledge* or the *practitioner knowledge* (Johnson 2009). This means that teachers have specialized knowledge about how to teach their subject matter—the so-called *pedagogical content knowledge* (Graves 2009). Pedagogical content knowledge, then, describes the teacher’s capacity to transform content into accessible and learnable forms. The acknowledgement of the pedagogical content knowledge “positions language teachers as creators of knowledge that constitutes the activity of language teaching” (Johnson 2009, p. 22). This is not to say that English teachers do not need to know the disciplinary knowledge of their field, but it does suggest that they also need to acquire the pedagogical content knowledge that will enable them to teach language (and linguistic concepts) in ways that will make it possible for their students to learn them.

Changes in Conceptualizing the Nature of Teacher Learning

It is ironic how little language teacher education has concerned itself with how people actually learn to teach. As Upadhyay (2014) points out, the notion that there is a learning process that undergirds, if not directs, teacher education is fairly recent. A focus on the nature of teacher learning has significantly expanded and reshaped the knowledge base of language teaching, and consequently both the content and delivery of teacher education programs (Burns and Richards 2009).

Roberts (1998) considers teacher education in terms of four “views of the person”, which have a significant impact on the objectives, content, and process of teacher education. In the first perspective, pre-service teachers are viewed essentially as input–output systems. Such a conception privileges imitative and behaviorally-informed models of teacher education, such as what Wallace (1991) called the *craft model*. This typically involved pre-service teachers working alongside experienced masters, following their instructions and advice, and learning by imitating. A second view of pre-service teachers involves focusing on their self-agency and viewing them as autonomous agents. Inherent in this view is the goal of empowering teachers with specialized knowledge about language and pedagogy. In the *applied science* model (Wallace 1991), such theoretical knowledge is imparted to pre-service teachers by experts, and then the former are tasked with applying this knowledge to practice. The other two perspectives described by Roberts (1998) involve viewing pre-service teachers as constructivists, who craft personal constructions of their professional contexts and as social beings whose professional role is shaped by social rules, group identity, occupational culture, and teacher development in the context of school. Comparing the four views, Roberts suggests that “behavioural and humanistic perspectives throw useful but only partial light on teacher learning”, and that “a synthesis of constructivist and social perspectives, a broadly social constructivist view, provides the most helpful and appropriate general framework for teacher education design” (op. cit., p. 13). Such a synthesis led to the development of the *reflective model* of teacher education (Wallace 1991), which is described below.

The *reflective model* is trainee-centered. It assigns great importance to teacher cognition and seeks to establish solid connections between theory (i. e. both personal small *t* theories, and the capital *T* Theory) and classroom practices. It includes two kinds of knowledge development: (a) received knowledge (i.e. external input coming from scholarly sources, the collective theoretical knowledge of the profession or the capital *T* Theory), and (b) experiential knowledge. The trainee will develop experiential knowledge by teaching or observing lessons, or recalling past experience; then reflecting, alone or in discussion with others, in order to work out theories about teaching; then trying these out again in practice. Such a “reflective cycle” aims for continuous improvement and development of personal theories in action (Ur 1996).

Being an effective English language teacher means a lot of things. It involves, as Richards (2015, p. 106) notes, “mastering practical classroom skills, as well as acquiring specialized knowledge that teachers make use of in their teaching.” But it also involves developing a deeper understanding of teaching, over time, through the experience of teaching. At the same time, teaching is an activity that draws on the teacher’s personal assumptions, beliefs, and values (ibid.). The challenge in this expanded scope of the knowledge base of language teaching lies in how to operationalize it, i.e., how this learning can be incorporated into a teacher education program that would adequately prepare as many participants as possible for the classroom contexts in which they will teach. As a Postmethod pedagogy poses a lot of challenges to language teachers, their preparation “requires the existence of an appropriate teacher education infrastructure” (Akbari 2008, p. 644).

Recognizing the legitimacy of practitioner knowledge (i.e., the teacher's capacity to transform content into accessible and learnable forms), teacher-learners' implicit personal theories, and the role of prior (experiential) knowledge, calls for the kind of teacher education pedagogy/methodology that emphasizes exploration and experimentation, risk taking and cooperation, balancing input and reflection, using what trainees bring and know, and increasing their autonomy (Freeman and Cornwell 1993, pp. xiii–xiv). Such methodology of teacher learning will enable teachers to make sense of the disciplinary knowledge they are exposed to in their SLTE programs and to reorganize their experiential knowledge which, in turn, helps them understand their classroom practices. For practitioner knowledge to become part of the knowledge base of teacher education, it must be made public and »represented in such a way that it is accessible to others and open for inspection, verification, and modification« (Johnson 2009, p. 23). All this calls for the reflective teaching methodology which resists the assumption that people will learn to teach just by being told what to do or how to do it. Instead, it is based on the educational philosophy of constructivism which claims that knowledge is actively constructed and not passively received.

It seems, then, that a broadly reflective model of learning teaching provides the most helpful and appropriate general framework for teacher education design. Although the reflective model might now be the dominant paradigm of teacher education, there are also many pedagogical and institutional barriers to devising and implementing "reflective practice" in pre-service training (Wallace 1999, p. 184). This raises many questions about the scope, impact, and realities of pre-service teacher education.

The Practicum: The Interplay of Practice and Theory

An important assumption of the reflective model is the interplay of practice and theory—a reflective cycle where classroom practice "will inform personal theories, and theories and Theory will inform classroom practice" (Malderez and Bodoczky 1999, p. 14). In this view of initial teacher education, "where the central link is classroom practice, the carefully designed practicum has a vital part to play and can no longer be viewed as a luxury add-on" (ibid.). However, the fact that trainees get on average only six weeks of teaching practice during their entire pre-service education, makes the scope of pre-service teacher education disappointingly narrow. Six weeks (or even less) of teaching practice, usually completely separate in time and space, cannot possibly prepare student-teachers for life in the classroom or help them acquire their 'practitioner knowledge'. For one thing, "the trainee teacher has to become a practitioner, and only then they can become reflective practitioners" (Wallace 1999, p. 185). The reflective model assumes that developing expertise in teaching entails a constantly evolving process of growth and change, and that professional learning will take place throughout a career. It is obvious, then, that a teacher's expertise will be mostly developed on the job; the pre-service education course can only lay foundations for the trainee's motivation and ability for life-long learning.

From what has been said, *it follows* that the aim of an initial professional training program is, as Wallace (1999) puts it, at least two-fold: (a) to bring the trainee to an acceptable level of professional competence; (b) to equip the trainee with the motivation and the means to continue to develop in professional expertise through reflective practice. An important role of the pre-service teacher education program is, then, to provide learner-teachers with opportunities to develop reasoning and reflective skills, tools and processes for continuing their own learning of teaching throughout their professional lives (Malderez and Bodoczky 1999, p. 13). Therefore, Wallace (1999) makes a strong case for explicit demonstration of reflective techniques. A training framework as a bridge to reflective practice typically contains activities such as the teaching practicum, teaching practice portfolios, supervision and the supervisory dialogue, reflective demonstration (follow me!), micro-teaching, loop input (hall of mirrors), journal and diary keeping, peer observation, action research, study groups, self-development activities, and others. What these instructional practices have in common is that they see teacher learning as the theorization of practice (i.e., knowledge construction); in other words, making visible the student–teacher’s beliefs about teaching and the nature of practitioner knowledge, and thus providing the means by which such knowledge can be elaborated, understood, reviewed, and reorganized (Burns and Richards 2009).

Closely related to “reflective practice” are teacher-learners’ prior knowledge about and their tacit conceptions of teaching through which they filter input from educational courses. The contemporary constructivist position “that teacher learning occurs through interactions between prior knowledge on the one hand and new input and experience on the other” (Borg 2009, p. 164), carries significant implications for pre-service teacher education: trainees must first recognize their existing knowledge and beliefs about teaching in order to transform and reorganize them. In other words, the role of teacher education then becomes one of reshaping existing ideas rather than simply introducing new raw material (Upadhyay 2014). Or, as Borg (2009, p. 164) puts it, “ignoring preservice teachers’ prior cognitions is likely to hinder their ability to internalize new material.” Even though we are dealing here with “the unobservable dimensions of teaching—teachers’ mental lives”, i.e., what teachers think, know, and believe (Borg 2009, p. 163), it is still possible to design a methodology that will help them “fish out” their invisible and implicit beliefs.

By providing an insight into the reflective nature of methodological design of the current pre-service teacher education program at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, we wanted to emphasize considerable challenges related to online teacher education. Because of the legacy of knowledge-transmission, which is very pervasive and is embedded in most institutions that prepare teachers, implementing a reflective model of learning teaching in pre-service teacher education is very difficult even in normal circumstances, and all the more so when it comes to online teacher education. As pointed out initially, theory/practice connections can be strengthened via practical, experiential and reflective components of university teacher education programs, and primarily via the practicum. With this, we move on to the research part to show what were the challenges related to the e-practicum.

Study Aims and Research Questions

This study explores responses to two surveys carried out into the needs and experiences of pre-service teachers trying to do their practicum during the Covid-19 pandemic. The responses to an online survey are further supplemented by the relevant content from the teacher-trainees' Teaching Practicum Portfolio: a survey and a reflective essay relating to their Teaching Practicum. Given the "reflective methodology"-based design of the pre-service teacher education program and the centrality of the practicum, we were interested in finding out about the challenges related to "e-practicum" and the status of the traditional ways of teaching compared to the currently observed online practices. The research questions were therefore:

1. What are the challenges related to the "e-practicum"?
2. Did the shift of the education process into virtual environment spell a return to more traditional ways of teaching?

Methodology

For the purposes of the present investigation, three research tools were employed to collect information on the teacher-trainees' first-hand experience at their teaching practicum (henceforth referred to as TP): an online survey, a survey as part of TP portfolio and a reflective essay. The respondents were all future English teachers, students of the MA teacher-training program at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

The online survey at the end of the academic year was targeted at the specifics of the online learning and teaching experience, explicitly reeling the respondents' attention towards ranking the challenges of their online TP. It was voluntary and anonymous, designed with the open access online survey tool called I ka (available at <https://www.ika.si/d/sl/spletne-ankete>). The research only targeted those first- and second-year teacher-trainees who conducted their TP online, therefore the number of respondents was reduced from the potential maximum number of 64 (the number of all enrolled students) to 22.

The survey the teacher-trainees need to complete at the end of the TP is conducted manually and included in their portfolio, which is submitted as the final course examination requirement. It includes 18 questions, of which 13 are multiple choice and 5 are open-ended. They are targeted at sharing general impressions as well as personal experience. The questions have been designed by the authors of the present chapter, based on the aspects of TP which have in the past been identified as the most prominent. The teacher-trainees are generally encouraged to focus on advantages and disadvantages of the system in place and provide suggestions for improvement. For the purposes of the present research, only responses to two open-ended questions were used in the analysis (for details see Section "[Results and Analysis of the Survey After the TP](#)").

The third tool, the reflective essay, is also included in the teacher-trainees' portfolio and submitted as part of the final course examination requirement. Its design is entirely unrestricted as it seeks to reveal the more personal and, hopefully, the more dominant aspects of the teacher-trainees' teaching experience. This is achieved through the open-ended nature of the task, where no restrictions or narrowed-down expectations are imposed upon the respondents. On the contrary, the teacher-trainees are expected and encouraged to write about anything that relates to their TP, allowing them the freedom to express their grievances as well as praise. Therefore, the respondents' reflective process triggered with this research tool inevitably involved a level of re-living particular episodes and thus—in some cases at least—resulted in successfully dissolving certain issues as well as stretched the teacher-trainees' awareness about the importance and social relevance of the teaching profession. Due to the unrestricted nature of the task, the responses in the essays are extremely varied, therefore the thematic coding approach is used in the analysis to group the responses into manageable and sensibly selected categories.

Results and Discussion

The research results collected in the two surveys and supplemented by those extracted from the reflective essays are represented and discussed separately in the three subsections that follow. The online survey results are presented in the form of graphs, generated by the online tool used. The portfolio survey results for the two open-ended questions are represented descriptively, in a narrative, referring to specific mentions and their frequency. The reason for the narrative and descriptive choice of presentation of results is the open nature of the two questions selected for analysis, which generated a colorful palette of different responses. The data from reflective essays is represented in the form of three categories, the choice of which was motivated by the principles of thematic coding, applied by the authors in the process of data analysis. The ensuing discussion offers a collective interpretation of the results within the context of the recent Covid19-related circumstances, heavily impacting traditional teaching practices. In the conclusion, the data from all three sources is collated and interpreted within the context of the study of online TP, and their effectiveness within the scope of proposed aims is examined.

Results and Analysis of the Online Survey

The online survey was conducted in June 2021, after the pedagogical process at the faculty had ended. It was targeted at the group of teacher-trainees who had completed their TP online. The number of responses was 15 out of the expected 22, accounting for 68% of expected respondents who had completed their TP online. The survey consisted of 1 question: *What were some of the challenges that you encountered while*

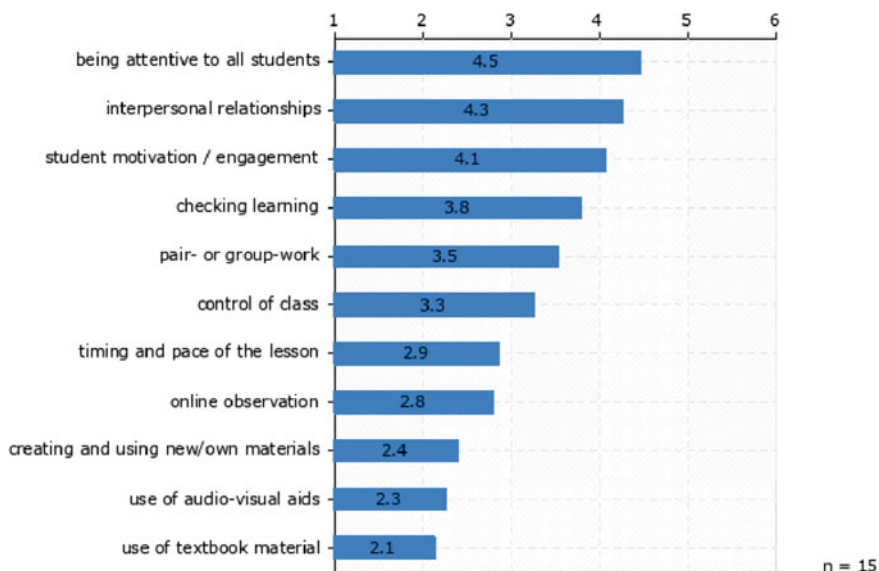


Fig. 18.1 The challenges encountered during TP

doing the teacher practicum online? with 11 categories the respondents had to assess on the scale from 1 to 6. The choice of categories was motivated by the reflective methodology (cf. Section 1.2 for details) which presupposes the proposed aspects of classroom instruction, such as *being attentive to all students*, *checking learning*, *timing*, and *pace of the lesson*, to mention a few (see Graph 1 for a comprehensive list of categories). The 1–6 Likert scale was used for ranking the categories, offering options ranging from *extremely satisfied* to *extremely dissatisfied*. The 1–6 scale was specifically chosen because it forces the respondents into making a choice, thus rendering the data collected more reliable. The results featuring average values are represented in Fig. 18.1.

The results somewhat unambiguously lead to the conclusion that the pre-service teacher-trainees acting as respondents in the present survey were not highly concerned with the *use of textbook material*, *using aids* or *creating and using other (audio-visual) materials*, with these categories tailing the list. The middle values fell on the *online observations*, *timing and pace of the lesson*, *control of class*, and *pair or group work*. The categories heading the list were those strongly related to communicative activities, such as *checking student's engagement and learning*, *interpersonal relationships*, featuring *attentiveness to all students* at the top of the list.

The visible indent on the academically motivated categories relating to the actual use of classroom materials (textbooks, audio-visual, and creating new/own) versus the round-shape arch on the value of the more sociologically motivated categories of *interpersonal relationships*, *motivation*, *attentiveness to students*, and *pair- or group-work* can be observed in the radar graph (see Fig. 18.2). This further strengthens the

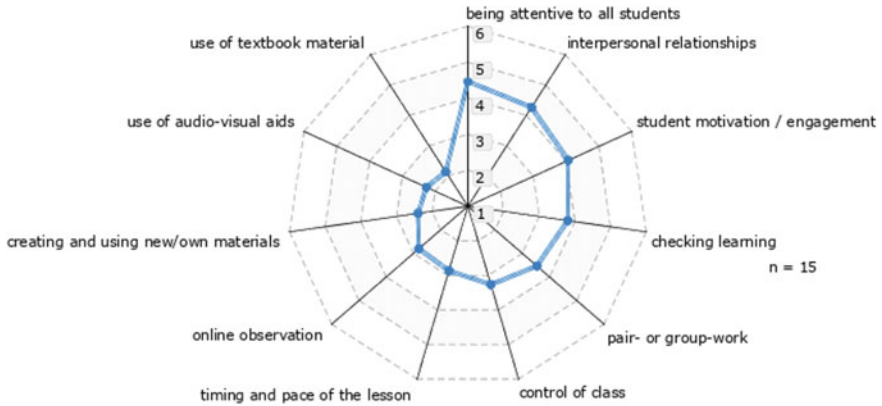


Fig. 18.2 The challenges encountered during TP—radar graph presentation

respondents' position of prioritizing the social aspects contributing to successful classroom interaction over those relating to classroom instruction tools and techniques. The reason for this might be assigned to the fact that the teacher-trainees are expected to use published classroom materials rather than create their own, and therefore did not perceive these categories as challenging. In light of the Covid-19-related online switch, perceived as more challenging were the categories connected to the sociological aspects mentioned earlier.

A closer look at the survey results (cf. Table 18.3 Summary of the TP online survey in Appendix 1) shows that *attentiveness to students* and *checking learning and motivation/engagement* received zero votes on the value of 1 (corresponding to *not at all challenging*), while receiving 4 (27%) and 5 votes (33%), respectively, on the value of 5 (being perceived as *very challenging*). However, neither of the highest-ranking categories—*attentiveness to students* and *interpersonal relationships*—scored the highest in the maximum value (6), having received fewer votes (4 and 3, respectively), which might attest to the fact that these aspects of online teaching, while challenging, were not perceived as extremely challenging or corresponding to something resembling “beyond manageable” after all. The most votes (6, accounting for 40% of respondents) were located on the value of 5 for the category of *interpersonal relationships*, and the same share (6 votes, accounting for 40%) fell on the lowest value (1) in the *use of textbooks*, which complies with the general interpretation of the survey results, placing the former high up (second) on the list of concerns and the latter to the least frequent position. Interestingly, in the category of *student motivation/engagement* the same percentage (40%) fell on the value of 4, appropriately relativizing its status of ranking the third on the list of the most challenging aspects of online TP, as the teacher-trainees clearly did not perceive it as extremely challenging, but rather ranked it as slightly above average.

Results and Analysis of the Survey After the TP

The survey conducted immediately after the TP consists of 18 questions, focusing on several areas, such as the level of contentment with the TP, rapport with the students, general satisfaction with the teaching experience, rapport with the mentor, and similar. Thirteen questions are multiple-choice type, while five are open-ended (numbers 8, 12, 16–18; the specifics of the survey are available on request;). As the present investigation targets the teacher-trainees' issues with the TP experience, specifically relating to the current pandemic circumstances, we are focusing on the selected two of the open-ended questions:

- Number 8: *Did you experience any difficulties at your TP?*
- Number 17: *Did you encounter anything at your TP that you were not prepared for at all?*

Due to the current circumstances, not all teacher-trainees were able to complete their TP, therefore the number of collected responses is reduced to 22 (accounting for just under 49% out of the expected maximum number of 45 enrolled), which classifies as another consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, directly affecting the educational process and the teaching profession/practices on the whole.

Interestingly, 50% (11 out of 22) of respondents gave a negative reply to question number 8, expressing that they had not encountered any issues at all during their TP, thus displaying a positive attitude towards the online switch. The rest of the responses revolved around the obvious issues of having had to switch to online or distance teaching (all 11 of them), specifically emphasizing that it required considerable adaptations on the part of the teachers. Difficulties listed were interrupted sessions due to internet connection issues, bad sound quality, time constraints, pushing the TP towards micro-teaching in place of individual teaching, issues in lesson planning, often spelling out the obvious matter of never having met the class in a physical environment or highlighting the devastating effect of online teaching on student motivation.

In answer to question number 17, a little over 27% (6 out of 22) of respondents expressed they had not experienced any issues. The rest (16, close to 73%) mostly focused on the issues related to the digital environment they were faced with, such as the paradigm shift in teaching activities, managing all the documentation digitally, getting lost in numerous folders, coping with the unavoidable loss of control over students' presence (who would leave the online session without notice), and effectiveness of classroom assignments (wondering whether they had completed them or not), as well as getting used to teaching in complete silence, with students' microphones muted and, for most of the time, cameras switched off.

Some issues raised in responses were not related to the digital switch, such as the unexpected extra workload of the teacher-trainees, corresponding to invigilating make-up exams at the end of the year, conducting the duties of the "class teacher", attending crisis meetings, managing the weight of paperwork, class preparations

and reflective writing, managing the knowledge gap for topics not covered by the teacher-trainee, and the like.

Despite the deliberate formulation of the two questions selected, which was aimed at pushing the teacher-trainees towards examining their TP experience from a critical perspective, the respondents' reflective process allowed for a balanced view of their experience. While having noted the obvious and expected issues resulting in inescapable difficulties in implementing the TP online, the respondents acknowledged the inevitability of the situation they were faced with and displayed a high level of maturity in the way these circumstances were handled. Although the concepts of adaptability and flexibility cannot be over-emphasized in the context of teaching practices, the results of the current investigation highlight the overall appreciation for the more traditional teaching practices involving the ever irreplaceable in-person human interaction and transfer of knowledge, which is further supported by the reflective essays' results and analysis in Section "[Results and Analysis of Reflective Essays](#)".

Results and Analysis of Reflective Essays

In reference to the analyzed content of the teacher-trainees' reflective essays, there were quite a few aspects of their COVID-19-lockdown-related teaching experience that were addressed, displaying considerable overlap with issues brought up in the surveys. Due to the latter, and in order to classify the issues mentioned in the essay narratives, the principles of thematic coding have been applied. As a result, the following categories are proposed (see Table 18.4), grouping the responses into positive and/or negative aspects of the three main thematic clusters of *teaching*, *students*, and *technology*. The first category (teaching) targets the process of class instruction, involving the use and management of teaching tools, time management, as well as the more positive aspects of it, such as the value of teaching as contribution to society. The second (students) groups together the references to the responses from the student audience, such as classroom discipline, control of class, building rapport. The third (technology) highlights the most prominent concerns primarily related to fear of technology failure and other effects of dependence on technology.

A few additional aspects of the results' analysis were noted in connection to the frequency of occurrence of the above-listed categories. The most frequently mentioned (occurring 18 times in 22 essays, accounting for almost 82% of the respondents) was *the value of teaching as contribution to society*. Many were assured in their choice of study and future profession and were experiencing positive reinforcement of their decision. Others realized just how difficult the job of a teacher actually is and what an asset teachers represent in any society. Their reflective writing was often accompanied by expression of pride in their career choice.

The second most frequently occurring aspect in the reflective essays (mentioned 15 times, thus accounting for a little over 68% of the respondents) was the realization about *the value of the teaching experience*. In most cases, it seemed to have been the

result of the effort it required and the level of response from the class the teacher-trainees received as a result of their time and energy investment.

Unsurprisingly, among the top three, we find in third place (mentioned 14 times and accounting for over 63% of the respondents) the effect of having to *switch the TP online* and dealing with the subsequent adaptations to teaching practices. The latter was not as relatable as they usually are to the teacher-trainees' own experiences of learning, subject to the reflective model, but had to be invented or at least newly learnt.

The next (mentioned 8 times and accounting for a little over 36% of the respondents) was the significance of the *transfer of knowledge from mentor to trainee*. It proved to be of utmost importance to have someone to rely on for professional advice, which is something only first-hand experience with teaching can provide and cannot be compensated for by any amount of higher education theoretical instruction.

A number of other mentions were distributed across the 4 *technology-related* categories, amounting to a total of 14 mentions, with *worry of internet connection failure* and *adapting to various online environments* topping the list (at 5 and 4 mentions, respectively) and only one mention of *Zoom fatigue*, placing it at the bottom of the list.

Many single mentions were also in reference to the beneficial nature of the online teaching experience and TP in general, as an integral part of teacher-training, in particular as regards building the trainee's confidence and realizing the size of investment required to develop the skills of a successful teacher. A substantial share of reflection fell on the importance of mastering computer skills, with suggestions of implementing the e-literacy training into the university level teacher-training curriculum. The amalgamation of all the skills any teacher needs to develop and master inspired awe and admiration in many trainees. In addition to computer skills, there were also mentions of classroom management, building rapport, motivating and engaging the students, mentoring, maintaining interest, earning respect, handling emotional response, giving feedback and constructive criticism, all the while displaying adaptability to unpredictable situations and handling the entire workload.

Discussion and Implications for the Context

In reference to our first question What are the challenges, related to online teacher training and e-practicum?, we were able to compose a lengthy list of issues which were raised by the respondents in the surveys or addressed in their reflective essays. The research expectations revolving around the stress related to the online switch being the prominent issue were met to a certain extent. They were reflected in the number of categories the respondents relayed in the two surveys and the essay. However, these stress-related issues did not top the list in regard to their frequency of occurrence, as might have been assumed prior to this investigation. Quite the contrary, in fact. They were preceded by the teacher-trainees' realization of the tremendous importance and significant social standing of the teaching profession. The survey

results imply that, although the online switch had presented them with many training- and teaching-related challenges, the teacher-trainees were more concerned with finding solutions for successfully coping with the circumstances rather than resorting to criticism on the level of merely voicing their objections. In the process of meeting these unfamiliar challenges, they displayed a high level of adaptability and flexibility.

The second research question *Did the shift of the education process into virtual environment spell a return to more traditional ways of teaching?* was in part answered by the responses to the first question, where the respondents expressed their pride in the teaching profession. The remaining share of the responses highlighted the issues related to handling the various digital environments and those related to maintaining a clear educational focus, while having to switch between delivering content and using technology. The respondents also mentioned a number of concerns about the increase in the teachers' workload and (in-)adequate e-literacy, the strain of having to adapt the teaching materials to online implementation virtually overnight, as well as the weighty administrative work that was expected of them. The results on the second research question lead towards an affirmative answer in reference to spelling a return to more traditional ways of teaching, as the weight of the survey results fell on the negative aspects of the switch to the digital environment. The implications for the educators would be to evaluate the limitations of the online against the physical classroom instruction and adjust it in a manner appropriate to the current circumstances. Since among their main concerns were those relating directly to students (lack of social contact, establishing rapport, classroom management, and similar), adjustments to education processes should primarily be reflected in meeting the students' needs. And, at this point, the latter seem to be better met in physical classroom instruction mode.

It is obvious and it was inevitable that a shift into the virtual educational environment would place a considerable strain on the teachers in having to adapt their activities, adjust to altered teaching environment, often resulting in loosening control over the class in reference to monitoring their assignments and maintaining class discipline, on top of having to manage additional administrative workload. But the adaptations on the part of the students were as inevitable and strenuous as the young generations had to quickly develop stronger self-reflective and self-monitoring mechanisms, albeit in consequence granting them a higher level of autonomy in their learning process. All of a sudden, they had to cope with even more home assignments, with expectations from parents and teachers alike that they would be able to accomplish the goal of reaching high levels of autonomous learning by the sheer power of internal motivation. They were even expected to study new materials on their own, which was practically impossible as there had been no prior research into the area of understanding learners' needs in online teaching and learning environments and planning the curricula accordingly (cf. the study by Šebalj and Komljanec 2020, pp. 30–31). According to the research findings (ibid.), not all teachers were keen on or able to make the instant online switch, so they had to resort to various models of student–teacher interaction (via online chatrooms, email, and suchlike), chose to test the students only on content covered in the physical classroom, thus reducing the students' workload by half, while there were some teachers who did not

make the switch at all and thus left the students without any instruction or interaction for the duration of the spring 2020 lockdown (ibid., pp. 42–45).

In these conditions, the teacher-trainees more often than not turned out to be a real asset to those more experienced teachers who, to a certain extent, struggled with the online switch of the educational classroom activities. It was one of the rare benefits of the digital classrooms where the trainee-mentor relationship enjoyed the opportunity of passing knowledge and experience in both directions, resulting in reducing the stress levels for both parties involved: the teaching professionals had the opportunity to share their methodological experience and insights, while the teacher-trainees came to rescue with composing and implementing online materials as well as assisted with the use of digital tools and resources. The concept of the inter-generational engagement and support could thus come full circle, with future prospects of even tighter mutual endorsements between skilled professionals and their beginner counterparts.

Conclusion

The “reflective methodology”-based design of the pre-service teacher education was heavily affected by the sudden online switch of the entire university program, thus making it difficult to follow its basic principles of instruction through hands-on activities, class discussions, pair work, brainstorming sessions, and the like, as pointed out in the introduction. But even with copious teacher-trainees’ responses leaning towards a more critical view of the online teaching experience, there remains the other half of the respondents who did not convey any issues related to their online TP. While it would warrant a closer look at the reasons behind their seemingly positive attitudes, we might at this point observe that, with the current generation of teacher-trainees being predominantly digital natives, any traditional instructional models will inevitably be subject to modification and adaptation. The “reflective methodology”-based approach, however, seems to fit into any teacher-training model simply due to its reach into the depths of the trainee’s professional development. And for that reason, it remains the appropriate option, regardless of the mode of instruction.

Appendix 1: Summary of Survey Results

See Tables [18.3](#) and [18.4](#).

Table 18.3 Summary of the TP online survey

Q1	Odgovori										Skupaj	Veľjavni	Št. enot	Povprečje	Std. Odklon	
	1	2	3	4	5	6										
	Podprašanja															
Q1a	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	2 (13%)	3 (20%)	2 (13%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	3.5	1.6				
Q1b	0 (0%)	1 (7%)	3 (20%)	6 (40%)	4 (27%)	1 (7%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	4.1	1.0				
Q1c	4 (27%)	4 (27%)	2 (13%)	1 (7%)	4 (27%)	0 (0%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	2.8	1.6				
Q1d	3 (20%)	5 (33%)	2 (13%)	1 (7%)	4 (27%)	0 (0%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	2.9	1.6				
Q1e	5 (33%)	6 (40%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	2 (13%)	0 (0%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	2.3	1.4				
Q1f	0 (0%)	1 (7%)	4 (27%)	1 (7%)	5 (33%)	4 (27%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	4.5	1.4				
Q1g	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	3 (20%)	1 (7%)	6 (40%)	3 (20%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	4.3	1.5				
Q1h	5 (33%)	4 (27%)	3 (20%)	1 (7%)	2 (13%)	0 (0%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	2.4	1.4				
Q1i	0 (0%)	5 (33%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	3 (20%)	3 (20%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	3.8	1.6				
Q1j	1 (7%)	6 (40%)	1 (7%)	4 (27%)	1 (7%)	2 (13%)	15 (100%)	15	15	15	3.3	1.6				

(continued)

Table 18.3 (continued)

Q1	Podvprašanja	Odgovori						Veljavni	Št. enot	Povprečje	Std. Odklon
		1	2	3	4	5	6				
Q1k	use of textbook material	6 (40%)	4 (27%)	3 (20%)	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	15 (100%)	15	2.1	1.2

Table 18.4 Reflective essay analysis: categorization of results

Teaching	<p>Negative:</p> <p>the strain of writing numerous lesson preparations</p> <p>difficulty in sticking to lesson plans due to online time management</p> <p>teaching modifications related to switching to online mode</p> <p>technology related issues and the importance of e-literacy</p> <p>difficulty in shifting focus during class between technology and content of classroom instruction</p> <p>Positive:</p> <p>the value of teaching as contribution to society</p> <p>the value of the teaching experience</p> <p>successful trainee/mentor cooperation & transfer of knowledge</p> <p>time saved on not commuting</p> <p>reduction in teaching requirements</p>
Students	<p>Negative:</p> <p>lack of social contact reflected in students' attitudes</p> <p>difficulty establishing rapport and providing support</p> <p>discipline, classroom management, student engagement</p> <p>coping with grades and students' responses to them</p> <p>handling the knowledge gap (content already covered)</p>
Technology	<p>Negative:</p> <p>worry of internet connection failure</p> <p>adapting to various online environments (Teams, Zoom, etc.)</p> <p>silent classrooms/muted microphones</p> <p>Zoom fatigue</p>

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