

Pre-service teachers' ambivalent experiences of online teaching practice supervision

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WIL requires that pre-service teacher's didactical knowledge is deepened through practice and reflection to improve their teaching. A qualitative pilot study underpinned by digital divide theory explored 31 pre-service teachers' experiences of WIL online teaching practice supervision during work placement with university lecturers in a comprehensive open distance e-learning (CODEL) institution in South Africa to examine their reflections of online teaching practice supervision. Participant reflection notes were gathered as data after Microsoft Teams online teaching practice sessions with third- and fourth-level preservice teachers in the Bachelor of Education and PGCE programs. A reflexive thematic analysis revealed that pre-service teachers reflected on their motivation, usage, resources, and skills for using technology during supervision. Gleaning students' online teaching practice supervision reflections to adjust and improve institutional practices for worthwhile online student supervision experiences is recommended. Recommendations and implications for stakeholders involved in pre-service teaching practice at universities are offered.

Keywords: Experiential learning, online supervision, pre-service supervision, pre-service teaching practice, technology, work-integrated learning.

Teaching practice is regarded as an important component of preservice teacher education programs and has received much attention in the literature (Karunagara & Saimin, 2019; Mokoena, 2017; Mubika & Bukaliya, 2013). It is a critical stage in teachers' professional development (Magwa & Ngara, 2017). Karunagara and Saimin (2019) posit that teaching practice aims to produce professionals equipped to handle the difficulties of the 21st century in the classroom. Further, it should allow student teachers to "explore, practice, and reflect" (Hudson & Hudson, 2011, p. 321) on learning acquired in the theoretical aspects of their coursework. Therefore, teacher training institutions must train and produce teachers with the appropriate skills and knowledge to function effectively in the changing technological environment (Abdullah et al., 2020).

Different concepts, such as applied science education, service learning, internship, practicum, and school attachment, have been used to describe teaching practice. In South African teacher education, the term 'Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)' describes pre-service teachers' placements in schools and refers to learning in the workplace. WIL is an umbrella concept that relates to students' activities at schools or to put the theory they learned into practice. The South African Council on Higher Education (Council on Higher Education, 2011) defines work-integrated learning as "an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces" (p. 78). The students and the workplace must benefit from the collaboration or partnership during student placement. WIL is seen as a purposeful, organized, supervised, and assessed educational activity required for the completion of an initial teacher education program that integrates theoretical learning with its applications in the workplace (i.e., school and community settings).

WIL in South African teacher education refers to the practical component of students learning to teach who work under the guidance of a university supervisor during classroom observation, micro teaching

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with peers, and reflective activities with the allocated supervisor about teaching practice (Mudavanhu, 2015). It is characterized by a collaborative approach between a university and its partner schools where students are placed for teaching practice (Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2022). In partner schools, mentor teachers provide a supportive environment for the mentoring of pre-service educators allocated to them (South African Council for Educators, 2018). However, how the student teacher experiences teaching practice will depend on the university supervisor and the mentor teacher's support.

Supervision refers to supervising students' practical experience or job training that supports their entry into the work environment (Abdullah et al., 2020). During the supervision process, the university supervisors and the mentor teacher play an essential role in ensuring that student teachers are guided, mentored, and provided with the support that they need as they develop to become teachers. As Abdullah et al. (2020) argue, the supervisor and mentor teacher support will determine the quality of teachers produced at the program's end. Gürsoy et al. (2016) affirm that teaching practice is the platform where pre-service teachers can reflect on their philosophy about teaching and education and further refine their beliefs through active participation in teacher training (acting and assisting in their professional development endeavors). Ellen and Wright (2014) argue that teaching practice offers pre-service teachers the opportunity to experience teaching in a natural classroom environment.

It is important to premise that South Africa has its own unique context and challenges with online learning, and for pre-service teachers studying towards the attainment of teaching qualifications in an online learning environment, due to the digital divide for many of its students. The gap between those students who have access and skills to use technology, and those lacking access and skills is referred to as the digital divide (Faloye & Ajayi, 2021; Van Dijk, 2002, 2020). The digital divide has an historical underpinning in South Africa emanating from the apartheid era when disadvantaged students were often denied the means to access technology for learning (Faloye & Ajayi, 2021). Addressing these disparities in South Africa's relatively new democracy has made technology more accessible for higher education students, yet learning platforms are often foreign and confusing for students to work with (Faloye & Ajayi, 2021).

Although the University of South Africa (Unisa) provides access to online learning in higher education for its students as an Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) institution and provides its students with 30 gigabytes of data to access technology monthly, the lack of access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is problematic for many students living in peri-urban and rural areas where internet connections are often poor, sporadic, or non-existent. Consequently, this results in educational exclusion for many (Lembani et al., 2020). Further, many students only have access to mobile phone devices as tools for learning, diminishing their learning experience. Although 92.1% of South African households owned a mobile phone in working order in 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2023) students generally acknowledge and value computers over mobile phones as they easier to work with when accessing and using learning platforms for learning. A lack of finances often disallows the purchase of computers for students, requiring that they use mobile phones out of necessity to access learning (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2013). Further, the recent issues of loadshedding, unplanned electricity supply disruption to users due to the monopoly power supplier being unable to meet electricity demands of users (Kgarose et al., 2023) have proven to be a further barrier to learning for students.

Chang et al. (2014) argue that the issue of the digital divide is complex and multidimensional. The digital divide concerns ICT access, including physical access, motivation, skills, and actual usage of technologies (Soomro et al., 2020). Literature has documented the benefits of access to digital technologies; it improves people's social position, and capital is critical for social justice (Chang et al.,

2014; Soomro et al., 2020). Although different countries experience the digital divide differently, the divide is wider in the context of developing countries (Soomro et al., 2020). The digital divide is regarded as a critical issue for social justice.

Importantly, Motala and Menon (2020) posit that COVID-19 has laid bare online teaching problems associated with equity and inequality in South Africa, i.e., those students who have access to devices for learning, sufficient network coverage, financial resources to cover data costs, and study environments that are conducive to learning versus those students who do not have access to such resources. Sayed and Sing (2020) and Black et al. (2020) concur that online learning lays bare the serious digital divide between and within countries and communities. The challenges of online supervision have been documented in the literature. They include cost and availability of relevant gadgets (Hawkins et al., 2012); internet and connectivity issues, gadgets with a limited field of vision, and poor sound quality (Teo et al., 2015). As Kirkwood and Price (2014) mention, the affordances of technology integration into teaching are overrated, and it is assumed that teaching and learning will be enhanced through technology tools. They point out some considerations related to the type of technological tools needed and the content to be taught. Unclear directions on using technology to create a welcoming environment for students might make it difficult for them to communicate online (Kumar et al., 2020). Learning online does not take place when students have internet connections and sufficient hardware; students need to understand the technology that they are using (Piwowarski et al., 2018). Higher education and the government must ensure authentic access to technology so that vulnerable students are not left behind and placed at risk (Singh et al., 2022).

Despite the growing interest in using ICT in teaching and learning, there has been little progress in integrating technology into teaching practice supervision in South Africa (Taole et al., 2024). Until the COVID-19 pandemic, most teacher preparation institutions globally did not provide universal online teaching experiences for their student teachers and supervisors (Durak, 2021; Loose & Ryan, 2020; Rice & Deschaine, 2020). In response, Unisa piloted online teaching practice supervision in 2022, with a more comprehensive roll-out in 2023 and 2024. The pilot program allows students to choose if they are supervised virtually or face-to-face, to cater for those who may not have access to online systems depending on their means to access technology for this purpose. As the institutional roll-out of online teaching practice supervision at Unisa is in its infancy, pre-service teachers' feedback about their positive and negative experiences of online supervision is critical for improving and refining the initiative at an institutional level. It responds to Paksuniemi et al. (2021) who posit the need for in-depth studies of pre-service educators' experiences to deepen their critical reflection skills.

This study employs the use of students' reflections, allowing the voice of the student to be heard to ensure that constant improvement and refinement of supervision prevails (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). It acknowledges the voice of our students (see Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Chinyamurindi, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Ngabaza et al., 2018; Pather & Chetty, 2016). In South Africa Coetzee and Rau (2017, p. 8-9) highlight that despite the changes since 1994 with the dawn of a new democracy, the country is still plagued by inequality and inequity. A study focusing on positive and negative reflections of students' online teaching supervision experiences heightens awareness of how Unisa can capitalize on pre-service educators' positive experiences and address their negative experiences through a focused lens.

The purpose of this qualitative pilot study is to examine South African pre-service teachers' reflections on their experiences of online teaching practice supervision in a comprehensive, open, distance-learning (CODEL) higher education institution in South Africa. The main research question that guided this study was: what are South African pre-service teachers' reflections on online teaching practice

supervision in a CODEL institution in South Africa? This question was explored using the following sub-questions:

- What are pre-service teachers' positive and negative teaching practice reflections regarding online supervision?
- What do student reflections imply for improved institutional support to pre-service teachers in using technologically mediated tools for teaching practice?

Theoretical Framework

Based on the contextual challenges for students studying in an ODeL environment in South Africa, this study is underpinned by Van Dijk's (2002) theoretical framework of the digital divide. Van Dijk proposes four kinds of access that are at play when students learn through technology. According to Van Dijk's (2002) digital divide framework, four areas that challenge online learning are motivational, skills, material, and usage access. Motivational access includes computer anxiety. Skills access refers to a lack of digital skills caused by insufficient user-friendliness and inadequate education or social support. Material access covers those with no possession of or physical access to personal computers and the internet, including network connections. Usage access refers to a lack of technological usage opportunities or an unequal distribution of such opportunities.

Context of the Study

Teaching and learning in an CODEL institution imply that students and their lecturers are physically separated, and their interaction is facilitated through various technologies such as print and various electronic media (Nsamba & Makoe, 2017). Unisa's main campus is in Gauteng, South Africa, with staff offices and student learning centers nationwide. It currently has over 370,000 enrolled students. As one of the world's mega-universities, it is the largest university in South Africa and Africa. It is an example of a traditional public distance education institution that has developed and transformed from being a first-generation distance education institution to a CODEL institution with a blended model of teaching and learning.

The pilot project's chosen institution is diverse, enrolling students of various social classes, racial composition, and home locations. The institution uses the work-based WIL model, which includes supervision of students in an online mode. The advance of technology and COVID-19 has necessitated the use and exploration of technology for student supervision. Consequently, simulated, and virtual WIL is used as a means of ensuring that students gain the necessary skills and knowledge using technology. For ICTs to enhance education, policies and programs that give teachers and students fair access to digital tools must be implemented (Resta & Laferrière, 2015).

Unisa is currently striving towards offering online teaching supervision. The number of teaching practice students in the College of Education exceeds 130,000 students. Transitioning to CODEL has been described with elaborate positive adjectives such as being open, accessible, flexible, supportive, and affordable (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013). Further, the institution's CODEL Framework assumes that students' learning can be supported by digitization. However, Ngubane-Mokiwa (2017) cautions against assuming students' learning needs in digital environments due to Unisa's many disadvantaged students who struggle to work in an online environment in the first place due to their contextual challenges.

The university currently employs two supervisory modes for WIL: face-to-face and online. The face-to-face mode requires that the supervisor is physically present at the school during supervision, whereas the online mode takes place remotely through technology. This dual method ensures that students in urban and hard-to-reach areas can be supervised. External and internal trained supervisors conduct the supervision during students' third and fourth years of study. Internal supervisors comprise academics in the College of Education who have supervision experience, and external supervisors comprise retired teachers and principals with master's and PhD qualifications and have more than five years of teaching experience. This study focused on students who were supervised online through Microsoft Teams.

Teaching Practice Regulatory Requirements in South Africa

In South Africa, teaching practice is guided by policies that prescribe practical and work-based learning across different education programs. Such policies include the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015) and the South African Norms and Standards for Educators (Department of Education, 2000). All BEd (Bachelor of Education) students are expected to complete an annual placement of 25 days full-time for the four-year program, while Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students are expected to complete ten weeks of teaching practice full-time over the one year of the qualification. During teaching practice, student teachers are engaged in activities such as observing the lesson presented by an experienced teacher, co-teaching, individually presenting lessons, and becoming involved in extra-curricular activities.

Online Teaching Practice Supervision

Online learning has become a staple mode of teaching and learning in higher education. With the development of learning technologies in the late 21st century, the education system has undergone metamorphosis overnight. Online learning is computer-based learning that allows students to study anywhere and anytime (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Nsamba & Makoe, 2017). Students are co-constructors of knowledge. Students are no longer regarded as empty vessels that need to be filled by teachers in the classroom. Technology is seen as providing alternative, easy access, and differentiated teaching and learning environments. According to Czerniewicz et al. (2020), most universities globally, and in South Africa, have gone online on a scale never seen before since the advent of Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning during COVID-19.

Despite the heavy emphasis placed on learning with technology as a tool that provides teachers and students with opportunities to interact globally and share ideas, the world of technology is still an uncertain territory with contentions and caveats for its intended use (Bonk & Wiley, 2020). Although the advantages of online learning in higher institutions may include low costs and flexible accessibility to education (Larmuseau et al., 2018), there are concerns about the issues of practicality, cost justification, and who gets to benefit. For example, Black et al. (2020) cautioned that online teaching should not replace contact teaching but rather supplement teaching and learning. According to Moore (1980), online learning may reduce a sense of community among individuals, and students feel disconnected, isolated, and deprived of personal attention. Nevertheless, Lynch et al. (2021) point to the fact that universities in the USA are seeking alternatives to traditional face-to-face teaching practice in pursuit of new models that will save time and distance travelled and be more cost-effective. Their study revealed that although students experienced Wi-Fi challenges in their study, they preferred virtual teaching practice provided the supervisor was an expert in their discipline area (Lynch et al., 2021). Sletteland et al. (2022) have conducted research on synchronous video-based supervision and

feedback in nursing supervision and allude to the lack of literature evaluating the effect of such supervision, thus allowing this study to contribute to the extant literature.

Microsoft Teams for Online Teaching Practice Supervision

Correia et al. (2020) conducted a scoping review of various widely used videoconferencing systems used for online education, including Microsoft Teams. In their article, they state that the educational experience endured by COVID-19 attracted education institutions to videoconferencing systems to reimagine approaches and pedagogies in education, including WIL. The growth of Microsoft Teams users since the onset of COVID-19 has been exponential, boasting 300 million users in 2023 (Microsoft, 2023). At Unisa, Microsoft Teams is widely used in addition to the Moodle Learning Management System for teaching and learning purposes. To facilitate online WIL supervision, this online tool allows a functional online meeting environment, allows voice or video meetings, and can facilitate collaborative working on shared files in real time. All Unisa students have Microsoft 365 at their disposal which Microsoft Teams integrates well with. For this reason, this application tool was used for online supervision.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological premise of this qualitative explorative pilot study was narrative research, which firmly identifies with the interpretivist paradigm and advocates for constructing knowledge through individual experiences and social encounters. Explorative research is concerned with answering the 'What' question, looking for fresh perspectives, and thus providing a better understanding of the research problem. This study aimed to understand how students experienced online teaching practice supervision (Saunders et al., 2016). To better understand the problem, experiences were viewed from the eyes of the participants (Creswell, 2014). Narrative inquiry understands experience as a "storied phenomenon" (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p. 600). Guided by this approach, the researchers were interested in the participants' experiences of online teaching practice supervision and their emerging reflections as the 'reality' produced by them in their crafted reflection stories.

Participants and Sampling

A combination of 31 teaching practice students teaching primary and high school learners from the BED program (27) and the PGCE program (4) in the College of Education formed the sample for the study. There were 27 female participants and four male participants—in terms of demographics seven students were White and 24 were Black. The selection was based on the availability and accessibility of students' reflections. Students were selected through non-probability convenience sampling: their student reflections were available as they had completed and returned their completed reflection forms at the time of data collection (Vehovar et al., 2016). As such, they were regarded as key informants.

Data Collection

Data were collected after mutually agreed upon online observations of participants' teaching using the Microsoft Teams platform through their written reflections in the form of a reflective note's diary. Participants' reflections were gathered over five months (April 2023 to August 2023). The participants used smartphones or laptops to join mutually agreed-on supervision sessions via Microsoft Teams meetings, using data allocated to them from the university. If a smartphone was used, the mentor teacher would ensure the camera was always facing the student.

According to Alaszewski (2006), diaries or reflective notes are adaptable methods for learning about an individual's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings about a particular phenomenon. Alaszewski (2011) further argues that the use of reflection for data collection reduces the researcher's invasiveness, and it is used as a tool to enhance reflectivity on a phenomenon of interest. Reflective notes allow the participants to discuss issues they might not feel comfortable discussing in an interview or a focus group discussion (Morrell-Scott, 2018). In addition, when using reflection notes, participants can be asked to provide detailed descriptions of their continuing interactions with an interest in the phenomenon under study (Morrell-Scott, 2018). This approach was especially relevant when gleaning a rich picture of participants' experiences on the phenomenon under study. The Teams platform provided students with a safe place to share their experiences. The Microsoft Teams link was a study link provided to student teachers who volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were requested to document their reflections about their experiences of online supervision. Lupton (2021) posits that diaries or reflections from participants could yield a first-hand insight into the experiences of the participants. Reflective practice has been considered a central tool in experience-based learning and teacher education (İlin , 2020; Mortari, 2015; Zahid & Khanam, 2019). Through reflection by pre-service educators, educational theory can be integrated into teaching practice (Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

The participants were given frameworks to develop their reflections where they would describe their experiences according to the "participants guide for preparing the reflections" (Table 1). Participants were allowed to write freely in response to the prompts and were not restricted to the number of words they could use to express themselves. Reflections were formulated and written in a natural and spontaneous context, thus enriching the data. This technique crystallized their "personal practical knowledge" informed by their past and present experiences and their plans and actions, thus becoming a specific method of recreating the past and their future intentions to manage the demands of this current circumstance—the online supervision experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988).

Collected reflections included students' written reflections after the online supervision session. Verbal reflections held directly after observations of their teaching allowed participants to reflect immediately on their teaching and gain insights and feedback from experienced lecturers. The written reflections allowed teaching practice students to reflect on their teaching practice and determine areas of strength and areas for improvement of their craft. The reflection questions, designed by the College of Education Teaching Practice central office and successfully tested prior to their introduction, were posed to students as provided below in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Participants' guide for preparing the reflections.

Pre-service educators' reflection questions
What do you think about the lesson you presented?
How did you feel about presenting your lesson online?
What did you like about the online lesson?
Briefly describe the support you got at the school in arranging the online supervision.
What challenges have you experienced with online supervision?
What do you think (name of university) should do to improve online student supervision?

Data Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) was employed to analyze the student reflections. Their six recursive phases were as follows: familiarization; coding; generating

initial themes; reviewing and creating themes, refining, defining, and naming themes, and writing them up. The reflexive approach required the researchers to examine their presumptions and how these might shape and delimit their coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Transcripts were read several times to promote familiarization with data, and codes were noted and developed into themes.

Trustworthiness

To enhance coding credibility, participant validation was used. This involved giving transcribed data to participants and asking them to evaluate the extent to which it represented their interpretations and views (Cohen et al., 2011). To ensure 'utility'—or usefulness and relevance for practitioners in the higher education context, the researchers stayed true to the 'voices' of the participants, as their authentic accounts of experiences could be useful to practitioners and researchers.

Ethical Considerations

Voluntary participation was employed, and participants were informed of the aim of the study and that their written reflections would be used by the researchers as data for analysis. A written consent letter was sent to all participants, who had to sign it before participating in the study. The study had been reviewed and approved by the Research Permission Sub-Committee (RPSC) of the Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees, and Commercialization Committee (SRIPCC) at the University of South Africa (ethical clearance: 2020 RPSC 036). Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing information from the participants before processing the data, and pseudonyms were used when reporting data. Students could opt out of the study at any time.

FINDINGS

Three themes were identified based on the student teachers' reflections on their online supervision. These were positive and negative reflections by pre-service teachers, challenges, and recommendations for improved institutional support. Each theme is described and discussed below, as noted in the following responses using the following coding, Participant X.

Theme 1: Positive Reflections of Online Teaching Practice Supervision by Pre-Service Teachers

Participants were asked to reflect on their experience of online supervision. Pre-service teachers primarily reflected that they were generally satisfied with the online lessons that they presented. They indicated a preference for online supervision and enjoyed positive classroom experiences during the online supervision. They further shared that they enjoyed positive interactions with their supervisor and mentor teacher. Their experience was positive, as captured in a few selected narrations such as "It did not bother me too much, I saw the online supervision positively and hoped to learn" (Participant 1), "I was given ample time to prepare for my lesson and my online supervisor was helpful and explained the process to me well in advance. While presenting I felt calm and well-prepared" (Participant 5), and "I felt relaxed as I was presenting and gave my all" (Participant 23).

Sub-themes emerging from this theme included a 'preference for online supervision,' 'positive classroom experiences during online supervision,' and 'positive interactions with the supervisor and the mentor teacher before, during, and after the online supervision.'

Preference for online supervision

Most pre-service teachers indicated a preference for online supervision because it is far less invasive, disruptive, or intimidating. Their narrations included, "I enjoyed it being online. I would have been

very nervous if a person had been physically watching me, and I would have made mistakes if I had been nervous" (Participant 25). Participant 10 said, "Not having someone physically watching you was less intimidating than having the supervisor in my class." Similarly, Participant 5 stated that "we were not spooked by having a stranger in the classroom."

Additionally, pre-service teachers noted a further positive aspect of online supervision in that the technology was an enabler in the teaching and supervision process. Participant 16 noted that she/he/they had learned "...that learning can take place from anywhere." Participant 17 added, "I have learned that it is convenient and flexible, giving us a new experience." Participant 23 insightfully commented that online supervision saves time. As pre-service teachers are placed across the country, sometimes in far-flung rural and urban areas, the supervisor does not have to travel to a school to observe a pre-service teacher. Conversely, time was saved for the pre-service teacher in not having to introduce a supervisor to a class and manage disruption in a class for learners due to the novelty of having someone new in their classroom.

Positive classroom experiences during online supervision

Surprisingly, most students reflected that they felt they had achieved mastery of their lessons with above-average interaction from learners during their lessons. Although the lecturers gave feedback to pre-service teachers that lessons could have been improved generally from several aspects (such as methodology, classroom organization, and pacing of lessons), students felt differently. For example, Participant 13 explained, "When the learners understood my questions, they could answer. This response told me they understand." Participant 14 described that "Learners could calculate income and expenses. They could delineate between concepts." Participant 19 stated, "I liked everything about the lesson. It was exciting, and learners had no problem engaging with the topic. Everything was clear to them."

Positive interactions with the supervisor and the mentor teacher before, during, and after the online supervision

The students overwhelmingly enjoyed positive interactions with their supervisor and the mentor teacher. Regarding the interaction with the supervisor, reflection narrations included, "Yes, I loved it; as a distance learner, I do not get the opportunity to interact with a person often. This supervision allowed me to get a feel of I am on the right path in my learning" (Participant 2), "She made it easy for me to feel relaxed" (Participant 23) and "I like the fact that it was less intimidating, and the Prof was helpful in preparation of the setup" (Participant 24).

Theme 2. Negative Reflections of Online Teaching Practice Supervision by Pre-Service Teachers

The second finding revealed that some pre-service teachers reflected that their experiences of online supervision were marred by feelings of anxiety and technology issues that hampered their experience. Anxiety arose for students for two reasons: general anxiety at the prospect of presenting their lesson online, an unfamiliar process for many of them, and explicitly fearing that the technology needed for this process to occur may have or did fail. Secondly, most students' experiences were negative due to technological challenges. The issue of technology illuminates the issue of the digital divide for students.

Feelings of anxiety

Anxiety was heightened for students who experienced technology issues. Participant 3 lamented "I thought I prepared, but I was a bit rushed, felt more anxious than usual. I thought it was nerve-racking. I am still a new teacher, and I'm still learning." Participant 7 felt that "It was overwhelming," and

Participant 23 commented "I was nervous before the lesson because it was my first time presenting online."

Technology challenges

Participants indicated that connection and lack of appropriate resources were a serious problem. These issues were especially so in rural or under-resourced schools: "I could not use the smartboard or projector" (Participant 3), and "I struggled to connect—which made me feel nervous" (Participant 13). Participant 12 also alluded to technology issues: "No problems except network." Similarly, two other students expressed similar concerns: "In our first supervision attempt that did not work, I was stressed, I could not connect" (Participant 6) and "The network has been a problem as the school is in a rural area" (Participant 12).

Theme 3. Challenges and Recommendations for Improved Institutional Support to Pre-Service Teachers in Using Technologically Mediated Tools for Teaching Practice

Students reflected on the challenges that they had experienced regarding the online supervision and also voiced their recommendations for improved institutional support. This theme is divided into two sub-themes: Challenges experienced by pre-service educators and recommendations by pre-service teachers.

Challenges experienced by pre-service teachers.

Only four students of the total sample reflected that they did not experience any challenges with the online supervision. Participant 1 lamented that the personal touch is lost during online supervision; "face-to-face supervision may have helped more in getting better feedback. It would have been more personal." Most students alluded to the technological challenges that negatively impacted them, leading to negative reflections. For example, Participant 6 narrated that her "...challenge was connectivity and my Teams not working well." Participant 14 mentioned load-shedding, stating, "...the electricity went off, so the lesson got cut short." Similarly, Participant 22 cited "...Wi-Fi and connection problems, as the area that the school is based in has a struggle with internet connection problems." Participant 19 shared that "the challenges I experienced were internet bundles. I did not have enough data, but my mentor made a plan for me."

Recommendations by students

Students were happy with the quality of the supervision and would be willing to continue with it if the standards were maintained in lectures as well.

The supervisor has a one-on-one session with the student, whereby they put them well and show them where to improve and where they do an outstanding job. According to me, everything is fine and does not need any improvement. I only feel that the way the supervisor explained to me, that is how the lecturers in my modules should explain to the students. (Participant 9)

Pre-service teachers also reflected that they had experienced communication issues with the Teaching Practice Office of the institution regarding the supervisor who was allocated to them so that they could be proactive in planning the online supervision. For example, Participant 18 suggested giving "...the correct contact details of the supervisor," and Participant 20 narrated that "Unisa should provide a valid contact number of the supervisor that is in charge of our placement forms."

Students also narrated the need for supervisors to supervise more than one session online and to ensure closer communication ties with their mentor teachers that students were allocated to.

Make more supervisions, like two sessions to really see if the students take into account the first feedback or not. Give them more confidence and time to present themselves. Unisa can also communicate with the mentor teacher—for more information/hints/lessons from the student teacher. The mentor might have her own notes and knows the student longer and on a more personal level. (Participant 1)

Further, various suggestions were made for formal supervision in students' first and second of year of study so that they could become accustomed to the process of online supervision. For example, Participant 23 suggested "it should provide the supervisor from the first year, so that we know what is expected and needed from us."

Several students also recommended that they be given a choice to be supervised in an online or in a face-to-face mode. For example, Participant 8 suggested "to improve, Unisa can give students freedom to choose whether they want to be supervised online or face-to-face."

Noticeably, students made the most recommendations pertaining to the technological aspects of the online supervision, which caused anxiety for them. They made suggestions for more online training and online resources for students so that they would be better prepared for online supervision. For example, Participant 6 suggested "Unisa can have 'test meetings' on Teams so that you won't struggle with technical difficulties on the day of the online supervision." Participant 4 suggested that "Unisa can improve student supervision by providing more resources and training on how to conduct effective online supervision."

DISCUSSION

The study findings revealed that participants overwhelmingly preferred online supervision to traditional "face-to-face" supervision. Ambivalently, the same number of participants expressed concerns about online supervision, aligning with Faloye and Ajayi (2021) and Van Dijk (2002, 2020) that students may experience challenges accessing technology for learning. Preferring online supervision, participants cited positive aspects of their experience such as convenience, one-on-one interaction with a lecturer, being less intimidating than having someone in their class, and the quality of supervision, aligning with the positives of learning online reported by Letseka and Pitsoe (2013). The findings of this study are consistent with those of Czerniewicz et al. (2020) and Larmuseau et al. (2018) that online studying is flexible and with the necessary technology infrastructure, supervisors can supervise students from anywhere in the world (Zvavahera & Masimba, 2019). Furthermore, the current study found that pre-service teachers positively interacted with their supervisor and the mentor teacher. The reflections gave a 'voice' to participants (Carolissen & Kiguwa, 2018; Chinyamurindi, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Ngabaza et al., 2018; Pather & Chetty, 2016), allowing them to reflect on their teaching and gain insights and suggestions from their supervisors.

Conversely, participants alluded to challenges that they experienced during the online supervision. In one form or another, most participants in the study reflected negatively on their use of technology during online supervision due to their heightened anxiety in using technology, highlighting the enormous digital divide for many of them. Congruent with Soomro et al. (2020) and Chang et al. (2014), the main challenge that participants faced was having to overcome technological issues associated with the experience, which created anxiety for them. Further, Van Dijk (2002) argued that anxiety results from a lack of primary experience in dealing with digital tools framework on access in an online environment. They were not accustomed to using Microsoft Teams, aligning with Van Dijk's (2002) motivational access area of his digital divide framework. Analogous to Kgarose et al. (2023), who allude

to a lack of electricity supply that may diminish students' learning experiences, and Van Dijk (2002), whose digital divide framework speaks to the issue of a lack of material access where students may have diminished access to technology due to internet connections, the participants were challenged here. They experienced load shedding/network issues, especially those in rural areas, and a lack of data or no data, even though the university allocates 30 gigabytes of data to each student monthly. They reported that the battery on their device was low, and that scanning and sending documents to the supervisor was difficult. This too aligns with the work of Hawkins, et al. (2012), Hassan (2021), and Teo et al. (2015) who all emphasized that online learning is fraught with challenges such as internet and connectivity issues, gadgets with a limited field of vision, and poor sound quality.

One of the important findings of this study was poor communication with the university. Participants felt they did not receive clear guidelines on how online supervision works. Further, they lamented that they were not told in advance that supervision would be online and who their supervisor would be. These aspects are fleshed out by Kumar et al. (2020), who argue that clear communication is essential with students working in online learning environments. In an online environment, communication can be hindered by unclear guidelines on using technologies to create a comfortable atmosphere for students (Kumar et al., 2020). Participants felt ill-prepared for the activities they were expected to be engaged in, especially navigating the Teams platform. The results of the study are incongruent with the Mhishi et al. (2022) assertion that online teaching requires minimal training and preparation. It cannot be assumed that mere access equals authentic access in the South African context. Rather, students need to be capacitated to understand and use the technology available to them (Piwowarski et al., 2018; Van Dijk, 2002, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study was designed to explore and understand pre-service teachers' reflections of online teaching practice supervision in a CODEL institution in South Africa. The study revealed three themes addressing the research question: "What are pre-service teachers' reflections on online or online teaching practice supervision in a comprehensive, open, distance, and e-learning (CODEL) institution in South Africa?" Through reflexive thematic analysis the findings revealed that pre-service teachers reflected on their motivation, usage, resources, and skills for using technology during their supervision. Pre-service teachers' reflections on online teaching practice were simultaneously positive and negative. However, overcoming the technological issues and the resultant anxiety issues that are created for students, needs to be addressed. One of the important recommendations of this study is that online supervision should be used from students' first year of study. They believe that this could improve institutional support to pre-service teachers using technologically mediated teaching tools. In addition, students wanted to be given a choice whether to engage in face-to-face or online supervision, depending on their preference. Although most students liked the idea of online supervision, technological challenges and general or resultant anxiety from technological issues they experienced outweighed their positives. Students highlighted the need for additional training material for online supervision.

Lecturers in teaching practice modules should hold special online teaching sessions to explain the process and technological requirements for online supervision so that students can prepare appropriately in an informed way. Challenges and recommendations as 'voiced' by pre-service teachers have implications for improvement by the institution. The student voice should be heard and used when planning, implementing, improving, and refining online teaching practice supervision.

A limitation of the current study was the small sample of student participants. Further, because data was collected in real-time, little time passed between the online supervision experience and the student reflections. As such, the probability of student retrospection could have been limited, yet the short window of time between the online supervision experience and their reflections seemed to elicit honest and unfiltered responses from participants, thus enriching the data. Further study involving different colleges at the university could give varied student experiences regarding online WIL. Another avenue for further research could include investigating early exposure to online supervision during pre-service teachers' first year of study to determine if it would positively influence their technological competence and lessen technological anxiety in online supervision as they move through their qualification. Further, a comparative study of key differences and preferences in pre-service teachers' reflections and learning outcomes between online and face-to-face teaching practice supervision could better inform supervision practices.

Finally, the findings provide valuable insight into online supervision and the support needed by pre-service teaching practice students to enhance their reflective practice. In addition, the study's results could also benefit supervisors in planning for students' online supervision, implementing online supervision, and assessing online teaching practice supervision. Policy developers can use the study results to improve student-teacher supervision in schools. The study sheds light on how pre-service teachers navigate the online terrain for online teaching practice supervision. Understanding student teachers' journey in online teaching for WIL is critical for developing appropriate support strategies for online supervision. Additionally, the study highlights the need for student teachers to improve their digital skills to stay relevant to the dynamic space in which they are expected to work. Understanding pre-service teachers' reflections of online teaching practice supervision aims to enhance pre-service teachers' and supervisors' collaboration, add value to the design of the teaching practice modules, and ensure that student teachers have a worthwhile experience during their teaching practice period in primary and high schools.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), WACE (www.waceinc.org), WIL Australia (www.acen.edu.au), and the University of Waikato (www.waikato.ac.nz).

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Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion including recommendations.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights into how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

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Reference

Zegwaard, K. E., Pretti, T. J., Rowe, A. D., & Ferns, S. J. (2023). Defining work-integrated learning. In K. E. Zegwaard & T. J. Pretti (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of work-integrated learning* (3rd ed., pp. 29-48). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003156420-4>

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ISSN: 2538-1032

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Publisher: Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ)

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