

Becoming a Teacher in a Pandemic

Four student teachers on training during the Covid-19 pandemic



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We invited students from four undergraduate initial teacher education programmes in Ireland to recount their experiences of what it was like to be a student teacher during the Covid-19 pandemic. Here they describe the challenges, practicalities, unexpected benefits, and hopes for the future.

Ellen Corr, Dublin City University (DCU)

As a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Education in DCU, I appreciate that our year group are in the unique position of having been trained both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, leading us to have classroom and theory training for teaching in a broad range of conditions! However, becoming a teacher during a pandemic has had its challenges.

Online learning

Like most college students, we spent the last year and a half learning online. Students from my year group never got to return to campus since the first closure in March 2020. The Bachelor of Education course is usually very hands-on and interactive. We would spend most of our time in large classrooms in groups of 20–30 using a range of teaching and learning resources, and we would regularly go off-campus or into the college grounds as part of our seminars.

This is something that I really missed when we were learning online, and it was a lot harder to fully comprehend how to use resources or to structure lessons without being able to experience it first-hand. Our course is also notoriously busy and full-on, and students lean on each other a lot for support during assignment and exam season. I found online learning much more stressful and isolating than previous years, and as a class representative I have heard of many other students who also found it extremely challenging and stressful.

School placement

My year group were extremely fortunate that our school placements weren't majorly affected by the lockdowns. We did first-year, second-year, and third-year placement unaffected, and we still got to do two in-person placements in our final year too. I feel it was important for us to complete school placement and to be in a school environment under the Covid-19 regulations and precautions, as it prepared us for teaching in

those conditions next year. I am very grateful that we did get to go out to schools this year, as I feel that my experiences on placement this year really helped shape me as a teacher.

Missed opportunities

Many of us missed out on opportunities to work with children from local primary schools through our specialism classes. My drama specialism group had spent four weeks preparing to do a series of lessons and workshops with local infant classes, and we never got to carry out those workshops. Opportunities such as these would definitely have increased our skill set in these areas even more, and the online equivalents just didn't exist.

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Benefits

However, it's not all bad! As our online learning was a mixture of synchronous (live) and asynchronous lectures, we had a lot more control over when and how we did our work. This meant that students could fit college work around other commitments, which was especially useful for students who were caring for family members or working. Another big advantage of pre-recorded lectures was that you could rewind or rewatch them if you missed anything or wanted to go over something.

Learning online also saved many commuting students a lot of time and money, and lots of other students didn't have to move to Dublin and pay rent for the year. In some ways I feel lucky that I qualified during the pandemic, as we were taught about teaching online and how to use online learning platforms, which is something that many current teachers never had.

Our teacher training experience definitely wasn't what any of us had imagined, but I am glad that I have graduated feeling prepared to teach under any conditions – in the classroom, online, outside, pre-Covid-19, during Covid-19, and, hopefully soon, post-Covid-19!

Jade Kelly, Froebel College of Education

This past year has allowed for a lot of reflection. In particular, I have reflected deeply on the four wonderful years I have spent at the Froebel Department in Maynooth, completing my teacher education. After three years of learning about Froebel's main principles through active methodologies, we had to transition to online learning six weeks into our final year due to Covid-19.

We returned to our computer screens, tuning in from all over the country. Gone were the days of expensive coffee-drinking and socialising! From the very first day of online learning, it was clear that the lecturers did their utmost to ensure that lectures were both interesting and engaging. Several opportunities for reflection and discussion were offered, which is crucial for a Froebelian teacher.

In early January 2021, the remainder of our final placement was transferred online due to the pandemic. At first, teaching online felt like running a marathon. There was a finish line, but I did not know how far I had to run. I

was tired, but I knew it would be worth it. It was a whole new experience. As Froebelian teachers, we did what we did best. We adapted. We were flexible. With outstanding support from the department, our schools, supervisors, and fellow classmates, we crossed the finish line together.

Like every other placement, this one required me to be innovative, creative, and flexible, but with a heavier focus on information and communications technology (ICT). It was challenging at times, to plan a variety of ways to engage students who were absent from the classroom but present through a computer screen.

This September, I entered the profession with a whole new perspective on teaching. Covid-19 has exposed weaknesses in the education system, but it has also revealed to me what is at the very core of being a teacher: relationships, another key value of Froebel. It is in our nature, just as much as it is in our job description, to be there for our students when they need us.

This was more challenging to navigate as a student teacher, teaching online with little information about the children. As a newly qualified teacher, teaching a senior infants class in rural Roscommon, I am committed to forming these positive relationships and ensuring that my class feel safe in their learning environment, in a world full of uncertainty.

It is all a unity; everything is based on unity, strives towards and comes back to unity. (Friedrich Froebel, in Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from His Writings, by Irene M. Lilley, Cambridge University Press, 1967)

Consequently, there are many factors that need to be considered in our first year of teaching. Everything takes a little longer. This includes more time for sanitisation and to get to know staff due to staggered break times and staff bubbles. However, due to Covid-19 guidelines, I continue to uphold one of Froebel's core values excellently, by using the outdoor environment to learn. My class are thoroughly enjoying all the singing, exploring, and playing outside at every opportunity, and as a result, learning.

As our final year of college came to an end in mid-September with our virtual graduation, it was unfortunate we could not cross the finish line of our Bachelor of Education degree together on campus. But we were fortunate to spend three incredible years and the beginning of fourth year on campus. For the foreseeable future, we will continue to smile behind our masks, to sanitise, to social-distance, and to adapt in an ever-changing world.

Tierna Maguire, Marino Institute of Education

I wasn't fazed at all when I found out I was moving to online learning. I was actually looking forward to the experience. I felt that this new way of learning would have its perks: I wouldn't be travelling to and from college, I wouldn't have to get up as early in the morning, and I would have more time to complete assignments. I was also looking forward to enjoying home comforts, as my meals would be cooked for me and I wouldn't have to worry about boring, time-consuming tasks like shopping for food. I honestly felt

I would be much more productive in my learning, because it was the only thing that I would need to focus on.

It wasn't long until I realised that what I had anticipated was far from the reality of online learning. I found myself relying on Zoom, which I had little or no previous experience of using. Early-morning lectures were fine, but as the day progressed I found it really difficult to stay focused. Because I live with quite a few people, I logged into lectures and did assignments mostly in my bedroom – a mistake, because this room is for sleeping, chilling, and generally being lazy.

By the end of the day, my attention span would drop to almost zero, and I found myself daydreaming in some lectures. Yes, I did have more time for doing assignments, but completing them seemed to get more and more difficult as the weeks progressed. At the end of a long day sitting staring at a computer screen, I found I was physically and, more importantly, mentally exhausted, with zero motivation to do more academic work. I found starting assignments really difficult, because there was always something else I just 'had to do'. My bedroom became tidier than I have ever seen it before.

Tiredness, lack of motivation, and procrastination were just the tip of the iceberg when it came to making time for college work. In college, there are lecturers, other students, tables, chairs, a library, classrooms, and most importantly an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. Moving home for online learning meant living on a busy farm. A day rarely went by that I wasn't called upon to block a gap, fill doses for cattle, or help with one of the many everyday jobs of a farmer.

Away from the farm, with college moving online, my role as education officer on the Students' Union changed quite significantly. Aspects of that role had to be adapted to meet the needs of the new virtual reality. I found that I needed to rely on Zoom and email communication a lot. Although I had lots of experience of using email, I found it was difficult to keep on top of things because I was getting so many emails.

I did however find that as I got more used to online learning, it got a lot easier. I became used to Zoom, and I used it to keep in virtual contact with my friends, and we supported each other throughout. Also, my college, Marino, is quite small compared to places like Trinity College and DCU. Because the college is small, I know every student in my year and, equally important, all of my lecturers know me. This might seem insignificant, but without the help of the college community, students, and lecturers, online learning would have been much more difficult for me. I knew that if I was really struggling, there would be someone at the other end of a phone, whether it was a student or a lecturer, who would help me overcome whatever obstacles were in my way.

Oisín Ryan, Mary Immaculate College (MIC)

I was delighted to be invited to share my experience of becoming a teacher during the Covid-19 pandemic. Believing that school placement is at the centre of initial teacher education, I would like to focus on my school placement experience in autumn 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic.

I was teaching senior infants for both my strand work engagements and the teaching block, in order to ensure that I only interacted with one bubble during the placement. This was a fantastic experience, as it allowed me to develop a fantastic relationship with the children over the course of the placement. I also got the opportunity to work with one of my ex-primary teachers in my old school during the strand weeks, and it was an amazing experience to observe such a super teacher, who left during the mid-term to start a new adventure as principal of a nearby school.

Due to this, I got the opportunity to work with a new teacher during the teaching block, which was another great experience. I helped her settle into her new job, which she was very thankful for. Thankfully, neither my school nor I was affected by Covid-19 during the placement, which allowed me to develop my learning experience to the maximum. Because of Covid-19, we could not have in-class visits from tutors. Instead, we engaged in ongoing discussions with our tutor over Microsoft Teams. Tutors communicated via telephone with both my teachers and my principal on several occasions.

I thoroughly enjoyed the teaching and learning experience that I engaged in over the placement. I also improved my teaching in the areas of assessment and differentiation, which my tutor complimented me on. I enjoyed engaging with Physical Education (PE) as my specialism area, as it allowed me to unite theory and practice and promote meaningful PE for children. The school staff complimented me on my work ethic and wished me the very best for the future. I am really looking forward to using this experience to progress in my teaching and learning journey in the future.

While I could never have imagined, when I started my initial teacher education journey at MIC in 2017, that I would be completing it as the world experienced a global pandemic, doing so has enabled me to explore and discover so much about myself as a newly qualified teacher. Traditionally, there is huge pressure surrounding grades during final-year placement. But this pressure was removed for us.

Although I personally would have liked a grade, I feel there are many positive aspects of criterion-based assessment. This style of assessment allowed me to take a step back and work on each of the areas for assessment, which included teaching and learning strategies, planning and preparation, classroom management, assessment and differentiation, and reflective practice. I felt less overall pressure, which enabled me to put effort into developing in these areas. The scale from *ar fheabhas* to *mishásúil* was also a great addition, as it allowed me to be recognised for my hard work in the criterion areas. The commitment to student voice at MIC was an immense support to me on my journey, as I always felt that my views mattered and were listened to.

As we are all learning to live in a post-Covid-19 world, it is important that initial teacher education programmes in the future learn from the experiences of becoming a teacher during Covid-19, as we have learned much that will help make us all better teachers and create the best learning opportunities we can for children.