

# Online Teaching Practice Assessments at an ODeL College: 'Learning in Practice' Perspectives

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<i>Keywords</i>	<b>Abstract</b>
learning in practice, work-integrated learning, mentoring, reflection, online teaching practice assessment	<p>Learning in Practice (LiP) as a dimension of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) encourages student teachers to transform their teaching approaches by implementing innovative and evidence-based strategies that respond to the ever-changing (in this context) South African educational landscape. This research is grounded in the theory of transformative learning and the practice of mentoring. Additionally, it uses the social constructivist-interpretive lens to explore student teachers' lived <i>learning in practice</i> experiences during teaching practice placements. This exploratory study, conducted within an open and distance learning (OdeL) context, employed a qualitative approach, utilising a single-case study design and an online virtual videoconferencing platform for data collection. To generate themes, a manual thematic analysis process was employed, guided by the established thematic analysis framework. The findings revealed that participants echoed sentiments that mentoring in practice helped them grow and become professionals. Mentors also demonstrated effective teaching skills and encouraged them to present lessons that were well-received. Furthermore, mentors were accessible and approachable, providing guidance and constructive feedback on lesson presentations. Participants were exposed to authentic learning in practice contexts. Further research could explore school mentors' views of online assessments for learning in practice.</p>

## Introduction

Higher education institutions in South Africa use the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) framework as a guide to assess and improve the quality of teaching practice as part of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). Within this framework, lecturers (supervisors) evaluate teaching practices to assess their effectiveness. Supervisors encourage student teachers to reflect on their teaching practices in authentic and simulated classroom environments (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015). This process, known as Learning in Practice (LiP), encourages students to transform their teaching approaches by implementing innovative and evidence-based strategies that respond to the ever-changing educational landscape. Conversely, Gravett and Kroon (2023) claimed that the standard of teacher education practices currently is ineffective in preparing student teachers for the complexities associated with their work. LiP forms a vital strategy for improving teaching



methods and developing best practices for student teachers. Through observations and reflections, student teachers can learn from others (Svaricek, 2024).

Gains in LiP primarily relate to developing general pedagogical knowledge, including knowledge of adolescent development and learning. Understanding the importance and value of reflective practice is another positive. Moreover, Resch and Schritteser (2023) opined that professional development can only be attained through deliberate practice on the part of the reflecting practitioner. Likewise, Li and Coper-Gencturk (2024) used the term "learning through teaching" to refer to how teachers should plan, implement, and reflect on their teaching, which enables them to construct new knowledge about the subject matter, teaching strategies, and learners.

Several studies have evaluated online teaching practice (TP) as part of WIL in teacher education (Abetang et al., 2020; Almodaires et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2019; Mokoena, 2017; Wang et al., 2023). Most of these studies were conducted in contact and blended learning contexts but at the point of writing this study, little research on WIL in an ODeL-learning context had been reported. This gap prompted the authors to explore the status of LiP as part of WIL at the School of Education of an open-distance e-learning (ODeL) university on the African continent. This college educates undergraduate and postgraduate students in teacher education. Since 2023, the headcount has shown that only 16,872 (37.5%) of the 44,986 final-year student teachers were visited in 2023. As 62.5% of the students were unsupervised, the task at hand was to assess all final-year student teachers. To pass the TP module (minimum of 50%), a student teacher had to complete a portfolio of evidence (with specific activities) that accounted for 80% and a TP placement evaluation that accounted for 20% towards the final mark of 50%. For this study, we focused on the LiP experiences of final-year student teachers in 2024 (44,986) during TP placements for the Bachelor of Education (BED) and the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE). A blended approach, combining face-to-face classroom visits and online videoconferencing (Microsoft Teams), was used during this exercise.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question the study aimed to answer was as follows: How do final-year teaching practice students experience learning in practice at an ODeL College of Education? The sub-research questions (SRQs) were:

- SRQ1: How are teaching practice students experiencing mentoring in practice?
- SRQ2: What are the teaching practice students' experiences of reflection in practice?
- SRQ3: How did teaching practice students benefit from managing classes in practice?

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The study is based on transformative learning and mentoring in practice theories (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020; Mezirow, 1996; Sammut, 2014). Hoggan and Kloubert (2020, p. 300) postulated that the transformative learning into practice is:

seemingly most the obvious way of thinking about transformative learning in practice is for the educator to purposefully try to foster an epochal transformation... rather, ... fostering the skills and habits whereby learners assess arguments, negotiate their own purposes, values, and meanings, become more aware and critically reflective of assumptions, and become more able to fully and freely participate in discourse.

In aligning our theoretical framework (transformative and mentoring theories) with the research problem and the research questions, we argue that the selected theories provide a

suitable lens for studying mentoring as a critical dimension of LiP, reflection as a dimension of LiP, and the management of class in practice. These themes form the central focus of the literature discussion, mainly because there is a paucity of research on them within the South African higher educational context.

### **Mentoring a Critical Dimension in Learning in Practice**

LiP is always accompanied by numerous challenges for student teachers. Tasks and interactions with students are novel for teaching practice, lesson planning and providing clear instructions for students (Attard Tonna, 2021; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018; Clarke et al., 2014). When inexperienced preservice student teachers fail to understand instructions, they might feel uncertain about their teaching skills, which can stem from their limited pedagogical content knowledge (Becker et al., 2019; Butler & Cuenca, 2012). Student teachers often enter school programmes with rigid views about what and how minority students learn; they are less confident in their ability to influence the learning of students from diverse backgrounds and to develop culturally responsive instruction (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011). Moreover, Arnsby et al. (2024) pointed out that mentor teachers are sometimes not well-trained, inexperienced and struggle to successfully guide student teachers. This is especially true in the complex and challenging educational contexts of South Africa. With the evolution of mentoring models over time (Glover et al., 2024), we argue that current research is limited, hence, this research aims to address these gaps.

Mentoring can be used as a teaching strategy to support student teachers' skills in learning to teach and contribute to their professional and personal growth (Mena et al., 2017; Attard Tonna, 2021). Arnsby et al. (2025) regard mentor education for practice teachers and mentors' professional learning as an underdeveloped area in research. Professional development of in-service teachers is often necessary, considering mentoring has been considered as an effective means for in-service teachers to gain the skills needed for effective teaching and learning (Hairon et al., 2020; Attard Tonna, 2021). Mentoring helps preservice teachers develop proficiency in the pedagogical and management skills essential for effective lesson coordination. Mukeredzi (2017) concluded that mentoring is an effective learning catalyst through reflection as students learn about the 'self' in context.

According to Mbhiza et al. (2024), mentors play a crucial role in providing specialised content, general pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of assessment, thereby facilitating opportunities for mentees to develop skills in various areas. During the supervised situation, mentors provide feedback and help the student teachers reflect on their actions in a positive, supportive, and question-based manner through observation and inquiry (Attard Tonna, 2021). Consequently, meaningful learning to teach should occur when pre-service teachers can develop their ideas about teaching, have the autonomy to practise these ideas, and take the initiative to improve their teaching skills (Kemmis et al., 2014). Mentors play a crucial role in psychosocial and career development, providing role modelling and social and emotional support that enable mentees to develop a sense of professional self, acceptance, and confirmation in a new environment (Hudson, 2017; Maphosa & Ndamba, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2017; Shumba, 2016). Reflection and feedback are crucial as they identify both strengths and weaknesses, aiming to attain the desired goals (Mubuuke et al., 2021). Mentor functions involve encouragement and friendship, which take the form of role modelling of trainee teachers as well as showing continued support, encouragement, and appreciation to the student teacher (Elmahdi et al., 2019).

**Reflection as a Dimension of Learning in Practice**

Reflection in practice is another underresearched theme, despite its various advantages for student-teachers. Wang et al. (2023, p. 1), for instance, reported that “building preservice teachers' capacities with in-depth reflections on their acquired knowledge, and practicum practice has become indispensable as part of the field experience requirements of teacher education programs.” Gravett and Kroon (2023) claimed that reflective practice facilitates the development of new knowledge, skills, and behaviours in student teachers by promoting critical contemplation of actions in real teaching environments. After gaining practical experience, students need to reflect deeply on what they have learned. Sullivan et al. (2016) noted that they should be thoughtful about their experiences, consider their practice from diverse perspectives, and be open to repositioning their beliefs and philosophies based on what they learn. This will lead to a far better understanding of one's capabilities, forcing each student to take a deeper look at their actions (Myers, 2022). Aiming to address the needs of all learners, Slade et al. (2019) affirmed that the purpose of reflective practice in pre-service education is to empower teacher candidates to apply the necessary coursework in the classroom in a way that impacts the success of their diverse students. Grieshaber and Philp-Clark (2024) explained that reflections can spark continuous learning, thereby enhancing the quality of professional practice. In contrast, Slade et al. (2019) noted that reflective practice becomes crucial when teaching at-risk students who are confronted by adverse conditions.

Sullivan et al. (2016) emphasised that there are variations and similarities in the advice, tools, sequences, cycles, and guides that teachers may choose to draw from when engaging in the process of critical reflection. For instance, the pragmatic approach of active reflection involves identifying challenges, ongoing examination, analysis, and verification of beliefs related to those challenges. Slade and her colleagues (2019) believed this higher level of reflection would enable the student teacher to reach a deeper level of transformative learning, and instil a sense of teacher autonomy that challenges conventional assumptions and beliefs. This approach may lead to context-responsive pedagogies that cater to the unique and diverse needs of learners (Slade et al., 2019). The documentation of important experiences is crucial; hence, Myers (2022) argued that thinking should be made visible by combining the reflective elements of description and critical reflection as a sequential framework to develop metacognition skills, self-awareness, and consideration of multiple viewpoints through writing. Student teachers can pin down thoughts, feelings, and reflections on daily, real-life experiences in the classroom, using reflective journals and engaging in discussions with peers and mentors. In the case of our students, reflections should include a discussion of lesson plans, instructional and assessment activities, learning materials, and communication skills, which are discussed with the mentor teacher and supervisor.

**Management of Class in Practice**

According to Trpin (2023, p. 42) classroom management includes “keeping track of attendance, accepting excuses, and recording absences, recognising and praising students for their achievements and in maintaining a positive and encouraging atmosphere in the classroom”. Mbunyuza-De Beer Menlah (in Taole, 2015, p. 139) opined that “for classroom practitioners, management involves table arrangements, materials, time and content to be learned. The mentor, as the experienced teacher, helps the student teacher to break down content into daily packages, and organises the learners' activities into manageable units”. Managing sound discipline is considered one of the greatest challenges for 21st-century teachers, and inexperienced student teachers may find this task daunting due to a lack of classroom management skills and self-

confidence (Aldabbus, 2020; McGarr, 2021). Maintaining control in classrooms and responding to disruptive behaviour, while creating conducive learning spaces, can be demanding. McGarr (2021) added that reflective practice enhances student teachers' understanding of their actions and assumptions when dealing with disruptive behaviour.

## Methods

This research is rooted in the social constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), this paradigm aims to understand and interpret the perspectives of individuals within their social context. This exploratory study employed a qualitative approach, aiming to provide a descriptive interpretation of students' experiences during teaching practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Plano Clarke (2023), case study design aims to gain a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon, which is why we adopted this design. Our motivation was to understand students' experiences during LiP.

Ethical clearance was obtained from an existing project (Ref #2018/03/14/90060059/MC). We planned to evaluate student-teachers' online during teaching practice sessions using Microsoft Teams as a virtual conferencing platform. Before interviewing them, we explained the purpose of the study to them. Participants were informed about the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation, as well as the voluntary nature of their involvement. The validity and reliability of the interview questions were ensured through expert assessment and probing during the interviews (Naz et al., 2022). Four PGCE and six BEd students were coded for easy reference, specifically in the Senior/FET, Intermediate, and Foundation phases (coded as PGCEA1-2 and PGCEA3-4). Of the six BEd students, two registered for the Senior/FET Phase (coded as Intermediate, and Senior/FET 4th year BEd-B1-2) and four registered for the BEd Foundation Phase (coded as Foundation-B3-6). A manual thematic analysis process was adopted, utilising Braun and Clarke's (2013) framework to code the data. This process included familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, the identification of themes, the review of these themes, and naming, followed by the production of the report. The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through the process of member checking (Nowell et al., 2017).

## Findings

The themes reported by the student teachers revealed their learning in practice from school placements.

### **Theme 1: Mentoring in Practice—Bridging Teacher Identity**

The first question explored how students experience mentoring in practice. Most of the participants echoed the sentiment that mentoring in practice helps them grow and become professionals, how mentors demonstrated teaching skills and encouraged them to present effective lessons. One participant mentioned:

She gave me a lot of advice and helped me with resources for integration in my Foundation lessons. My mentor teacher showed me teaching skills in particular for large classes. She just encouraged me to do my best, good teacher and do my lessons with a positive attitude. (Foundation Phase, 4th Year BEd-B5)

Additionally, this participant noted that the mentor was a resourceful person who provided constructive feedback. A female participant expressed her gratitude to her mentor:

She (mentor) was very supportive throughout my supervision. She organised the resources and also provided other resources that were not at school. It makes you feel that supervision is not something that we have to be afraid of, but a constructive way of assisting one another. (Foundation Phase, 4th Year BEd-B3)

In support of the latter view, some participants described their mentors as supportive and as a guide in lesson planning. For example:

My mentor teacher provided me with amazing support and guidance throughout the lesson, she gave me constructive feedback on my lesson plan, and her support gave me the strength to carry on and finish my lesson. (Senior & FET Phase, 4th Year BEd-B1)

The latter sentiment is expressed by the participant as a very important virtue, namely, confidence. Due to the mentor's guidance, this participant stated that she grew in confidence as she learned more through practice:

Yes, a lot. I was lacking confidence, and the mentor supported me to gain Confidence. She shared the Science content. I have gathered knowledge, taught me to believe in myself, and keep practising all the time. (Foundation Phase, 4th Year BEd-B4)

Mentors are experienced in teaching and disciplining large classes. This is evident in controlling, instilling discipline and managing the class. Another participant said:

Yes, I did benefit a lot because he taught me how to plan for a lesson and the method that I can use to keep the class disciplined since he knows these learners better than me. (Senior & FET Phase, 4th Year BEd-B2)

Another participant said:

She helped build my confidence when teaching and how to manage difficult learners. (Senior & FET Phase, PGCE-A4)

Finally, this participant summarised how the mentor was accessible and approachable, providing guidance and giving constructive feedback on lesson presentations. This was a huge learning experience, as is evident in the following excerpt:

The principal and my mentor teacher were accessible and approachable, always willing to answer questions and provide guidance. My mentor teacher assisted me to plan and prepare lesson plans, classwork, homework, and enrichment exercises for the students. She provided me with resources such as textbooks and handouts to enhance my lessons during my supervision. After conducting my lessons, she provided feedback which helped me understand my strengths and areas for improvement. The principal permitted me to use the school Wi-Fi for my online supervision, he also allowed me to use the school library to do research for online supervision. (Senior & FET Phase, PGCE-A1)

In the second question, teaching practice students' experiences of reflection in practice during school placements were captured.

## **Theme 2: Reflection in Practice Enhances Effective Teaching**

It was evident that the participants constantly thought critically and reflected on their LiP in terms of advice, support, and guidance from their school mentors. They reflected on what they had learned from theory about becoming a professional in what, how, and why they teach. This female participant explained:

After I had presented my grade 3 Mathematics lesson, I gave the learners an activity based on the maths problem. I realised...reflects... decided to change the graph activity

because the learners got very confused with the numbering of items starting at 0 and did not colour the blocks in the graph in the right order. (Foundation Phase, 4th BEd-B6)

Furthermore, it was evident from the sentiments expressed by several participants that mentors guided them to incorporate reflection as a valuable skill in becoming a good teacher. It was also stressed that participants reflected on possible strategies for lesson improvement, as can be seen from the reflection of this participant on her Grade 10 lesson:

Some of the learners were not actively involved, and the evidence of improvisation for more clarity and use of technology was poor, but in future, I will make use of forms of LTSM for better understanding. (Senior & FET Phase, PGCE-A4)

The final question examined how teaching practice benefited students by enabling them to manage classes in practice.

### **Theme 3: Classroom Management during LiP**

The participants alluded to how mentors guide and support them in classroom management practice, especially in setting a trend for learning behaviour and rules for effective teaching. At some schools, participants mentioned that they were also exposed to a school disciplinary committee that dealt with school rules, general discipline, and a learner code of conduct. One of the participants mentioned:

Lesson planning for Grade 11, Setswana: Helped me with effective classroom management, setting clear rules of what is expected in class, which improved lesson quality, allowed for consistent learning, and fostered classroom confidence and preparedness. (Senior & FET, 4th year BEd, B2)

One of the other student teachers was impressed by how his mentor and learners collectively set class rules. In the Grade 6 class, for example, he reminded his learners about their code of conduct, and the need to adhere to rules:

I learned many useful ways from school rules, learner code of conduct and the disciplinary committee, which is part of managing the classroom. (Intermediate Phase, 4th year BEd, B1)

Another participant also gained confidence, which enabled her to communicate well and control herself while simultaneously noting:

My confidence has increased, I am able to talk to a congregation and I can also manage my temper with the learners and in general, especially learners who misbehave. (Senior & FET, PGCE-A3)

Table 1 below presents a summary of the main findings.

**Table 1: Summary of the Main Findings**

<b>Sub-Research Questions (SRQs)</b>	<b>Summary of Findings Related to SRQs</b>
SRQ1: How are teaching practice students experiencing mentoring in practice?	Students are positive about learning support, as it is transforming their learning experiences. Mentorship advances professional and personal growth, confidence, effective lesson planning, content management, and a focus on teaching.

Sub-Research Questions (SRQs)	Summary of Findings Related to SRQs
SRQ2: What are the teaching practice students 'experiences of reflection in practice'?	Mentors provided feedback and supported lesson reflections. Feedback and dialogue promote reflection and understanding.
SRQ3: How did teaching practice students benefit from managing classes in practice?	Students realised the value of classroom management as a transformative process.

## Discussion and Implications

This study emphasised transformative learning and mentoring in practice theories, focusing on the learning experiences of distance education student teachers in practice. We assert that selecting this theoretical framework was justified because the different learning spaces exposed students to real classroom dynamics and practices. This equipped student teachers to be critical of their lessons, taught in order to become competent and manage classroom spaces effectively.

First (SRQ1), student teachers were positive about the quality of mentor support and how it transformed their LiP experiences. Scholars emphasise that a good mentor will utilise this as a powerful teaching strategy to assist student teachers in their professional growth (Mena et al., 2017; Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017). Participants expressed their belief that mentorship is about transferring the knowledge and skills of a seasoned teacher. Researchers agree that mentoring is an effective means of preparing student teachers to acquire the skills necessary for conducting effective lessons and is the most effective way to enhance teachers' professional knowledge, competence, and well-being during student placements (Depaepe & König, 2018; Hairon et al., 2020). The findings revealed that mentorship supports the participants' self-belief and confidence in lesson planning, content management, and an improved focus on teaching. This finding corroborates the ideas of Mitchell et al. (2017), who suggested that student teachers should receive assistance in these areas.

Second (SRQ2), the student teachers were requested to reflect on their LiP experiences. The findings indicate that the mentors provided feedback and supported students with lesson reflections. Nel and Marais (2021) suggested that feedback is crucial for student teachers, as they should be allowed to reflect on their lessons, incorporate the guiding feedback of their mentors, ask questions, and participate in conversations with them (Kemmis et al., 2014). Dialogue promotes reflection and exploration of understanding, involving encouragement, friendship, and appreciation for the student-teacher (Elmahdi et al., 2019). Thus, feedback should be an ongoing dialogue between mentors and student teachers should be observed repeatedly to ensure changes to teaching practice approaches. Importantly, Brooks et al. (2019) confirmed that feedback facilitates student self-assessment, leading to improved professional practice. It emerged from the extracts that participants had to reflect constantly on how to improve their experiences with advice and support from school mentors. Slade et al. (2019) concurred that the best way to learn in practice was to expose students to field-based learning experiences. This approach can enhance and instil a sense of reflective practice, connecting course content (theory) to real-world applications (authentic learning). It is argued that reflection in practice as a means of LiP enhances student teachers' ability to reflect and connect classroom experiences during TP placements. In doing so, student teachers utilise the theoretical knowledge and pedagogical skills they have gained during their studies and apply them effectively in practice (Gravett & Kroon, 2023; Nielsen, 2024).

Finally (SRQ3), participants noted that they had benefited from mentor support in managing their classes. Classroom management, a transformative process, refers to teachers' actions to create, facilitate, and maintain an effective learning environment (van Wyk et al., 2015). Teaching practice provides an authentic context within which student teachers are exposed to the reality of being a teacher. Since student teachers are exposed to this new learning environment, their ability to process such events depends significantly on their experiences in perceiving and interpreting classroom events. This finding aligns with Çakmak (2019) that experience is critical for student teachers encountering challenges in unfamiliar circumstances. The role of knowledgeable mentors is invaluable in assisting student teachers during critical decision-making and while managing students with behavioural issues (Abetang et al., 2020). The teaching practice programmes aim to prepare student teachers to become quality teachers equipped with the teaching skills and capabilities necessary to meet the demands of the teaching profession (Pramesti, 2021). This study was unable to demonstrate that student teachers struggled with learner behaviour. This finding mirrors that of McGarr (2021, p. 275), who explained that there is “the need for opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience aspects of challenging pupil behaviour in less ‘pressurised’ environments”.

### **Limitations**

The generalisation of these findings is subject to certain limitations. This study explores only one dimension of WIL, namely LiP and not LfP (Learning for Practice). By not addressing LfP, the study might not fully depict how students reflect on their practical experiences. Second, the current exploratory qualitative design study was limited to a small sample of final-year students registered at an ODeL university. While the study may provide profound insights into the experiences of the specific group studied, it could lack the breadth to make broader claims about the student population. Therefore, the results should not be generalised. Furthermore, this study utilised only the online Microsoft Teams videoconferencing platform, rather than other online platforms, which might yield different outcomes compared to face-to-face TP assessments. Finally, a major challenge emerged: the unscheduled power outages (load shedding) by the South African power utility Eskom (the sole electricity supplier) created anxiety for both student teachers and supervisors during the online assessments.

### **Contribution of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research**

However, the present study makes several noteworthy contributions to the epistemology of learning in practice as a dimension of WIL stipulated in the MRTEQ policy. The primary objective should therefore be to design guidelines for all undergraduate TP modules, with a focus on the blended supervision of LiP and LfP. Further research could explore the views of school mentors about online assessments for LiP and LfP. A comparative study of Microsoft Teams as an online tool and face-to-face teaching practice assessments is needed to examine their potential impact on the TP policy and assessment practices at the ODeL college.

### **Conclusions**

The positive feedback from student teachers regarding the quality of mentor support highlights its crucial role in enhancing their learning, skills, and confidence during practice experiences. These findings showed the importance of quality mentor support in schools. Additionally, it provides valuable information to researchers whose scholarship is centred around this topic.

The findings highlighted the critical role of mentors in supporting student teachers through feedback and lesson reflections. For practitioners, this study underscored the crucial role of mentorship programmes in reflective practices to improve teaching skills. It suggests a valuable area for further research on the impact of mentor feedback on student-teacher development.

The study exposed the importance of encouraging regular reflection sessions where student teachers can analyse their classroom experiences within authentic contexts for improvement. Therefore, research is needed to investigate the specific effects of experiences and reflective practices on the development of such analysis skills. Additionally, this study highlighted the need to research how student teachers encounter difficult learner behaviour, as this can provide valuable information to improve teacher training.

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