

Being and Becoming a Teacher Educator in an Online Work-Integrated Learning Excursion for Future Super Teachers



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Abstract This chapter reports on the professional development of novice teacher educators in an online work-integrated learning (WIL) excursion for future teachers. A self-study research design was used to explore how a novice teacher educator participating in an online WIL excursion, developed professionally through reflecting on their roles and experiences. A reflective journal, feedback from colleagues and participants, and video recordings were used to gather qualitative data, which were subsequently thematically coded in order to find key patterns and themes. The findings indicated both strengths and areas for improvement in the novice teacher educator's social, communication, and technological roles in the online educational setting. The implications for further research underscore the importance of integrating peer feedback, reflective practices, and qualitative methodologies to support the development of novice teacher educators in online educational settings.

Keywords Novice educators · Online learning · Reflective practice · Teacher educators · Work-integrated learning (WIL)

In this self-study, the first author was the primary researcher. Being a novice in the field, he however required substantial support in two key areas: in designing and conducting the research, and in organising the information into a manuscript. The second author took on both roles, and provided significant guidance throughout the process. As a result, both authors made substantial contributions to the writing of the manuscript.

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1 Introduction and Rationale

Massification of university education, with increasing “emphasis on widening participation, throughput, and lecturer accountability” (McMillan & Gordon, 2017, p. 778), implies that university teacher educators must continuously reflect on and reconsider their practices as part of efforts to align their practices with these obligations. For teacher educators, this becomes an even more complex task, as they have to prepare students as future teachers by facilitating “learning related to the different roles of the teacher, for example, the teacher as a facilitator of learning, critical reflective practitioner, agent promoting social justice and being an inclusive teacher” (De Beer et al., 2020, p. 194). Teacher educators’ reflections on and about teaching often change and shape the teacher educators themselves, resulting in them developing profound insights into practice through their own praxis (Loughran, 2005).

Reflective self-study is a research methodology where teacher educators (both experienced and novice) analyze their own viewpoints and experiences critically in order to become more self-aware, and comprehend how their own biases could affect their research (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). According to Berry (2010, p. 10), “[t]eacher educators who adopt a self-study perspective understand well that they are navigating a changing and complex terrain.” Reflection can contribute meaningfully to the transition from being a novice teacher educator to becoming a more experienced scholar. McMillan and Gordon (2017) report a lacuna in the literature about how novice teacher educators understand their learning environment, enabling them to thrive and develop professionally. To address this gap, the current chapter reports on the case study of a novice teacher educator’s critical reflective thinking on his contextual strengths, and the limitations of facilitating teacher preparation in an online virtual excursion, which is a compulsory component of work-integrated learning (WIL) at the university where the study was conducted.

The aim of this self-study was to explore my own strengths and limitations as a teacher educator in the context of an online virtual excursion reflectively. The purpose of the reflective self-study was to develop insight into additional avenues I need to pursue as part of my professional development, to overcome my limitations, and to enable me to guide and facilitate the preparation of future teachers for a complex profession better. An additional purpose was to delineate my strengths as a teacher educator, which could then serve as a foundation upon which I may construct further scholarship and professional development in this field.

These professional development objectives were intended to contribute to attaining the broader university goals of increasing student participation and throughput, as well as lecturer accountability (in this case, that of the teacher educator), as recommended by McMillan and Gordon (2017). The overarching goal of the current research was to contribute to the existing scholarship on professional development and preparation of novice teacher educators to prepare future teachers for a complex career, especially in contexts where online excursions are utilised.

I therefore share my story of how my lived experiences as a novice teacher educator in a teacher preparation excursion contributed to my professional development as a

young teacher educator. I believe that others might gain insight from my experiences to help them overcome similar issues to succeed—or even thrive—in higher education.

At North-West University (NWU), where I started my academic career as a novice researcher, work-integrated learning (WIL) is a compulsory component of the first year of the four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) qualification. Within the larger WIL programme, a compulsory annual excursion contributes to student teachers' preparation for their future careers. This excursion:

- focuses on the application of theory in authentic education contexts;
- addresses specific teaching competencies identified for teacher training in related training programmes;
- develops practical and contextual skills and knowledge that will make the teacher–student employable in schools;
- provides a real context in which the theoretical, practical, interpersonal and reflexive competencies of the teacher–student are developed in an integrated manner, and;
- provides structured opportunities for experiential teaching strategies within teaching practice through supervised and assessed teaching practice and work-based learning (Du Toit & Petersen, 2023).

Some years, the excursions in the WIL programme are offered as virtual or online experiences. In online WIL excursions, the programme intends to foster online interaction in a safe space that takes students out of their comfort zone, to bring them closer to the Vygotskian “zone of proximal development [ZPD]” (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978, p. 86). The excursions aim to contribute to students' development as ‘future super teachers’, a motivational term coined to inspire students toward greatness (De Beer et al., 2022). Developing students as ‘super teachers’ was the leitmotif for the excursions, and students were “encouraged to identify their own ‘super-powers’ as teachers, and ... their own strengths and growth opportunities” (De Beer et al., 2022, p. 234).

As I had limited online teaching experience at that early stage in my lecturing career and had never participated in such excursions in the WIL programme, I viewed the opportunity to participate as a way to contribute to my professional development as a teacher educator. This view was particularly based on the five foci bulleted above for these excursions. I believed that these would add to my understanding of the breadth and depth of teacher preparation required in these programmes.

2 Theoretical Underpinnings of Reflective Practice in Teacher Education

Teacher education and reflective practice have become almost inextricably linked (LaBoskey, 2010). The research reported here was theoretically underpinned by Dewey's (1933) contextualization of reflection, as explained by Rodgers (2002). Rodgers (2002, p. 842) presents four criteria that could serve "as a starting place for talking about reflection, so that it might be taught, learned, assessed, discussed, and researched, and thereby evolve in definition and practice". Her four criteria contribute to meaningful, deep reflective practices and, in brief, state that reflection ...

- contributes to meaning-making, and leads to deeper understanding through linking experiences and ideas;
- is rooted in scientific enquiry, following a rigorous, systematic and organised manner of thinking;
- is not individualistic but includes interaction with others; and
- requires that a person value both his or her own intellectual growth and that of others.

Based on these four criteria, reflection explains how "human beings learn from their experiences to improve themselves and their society" (LaBoskey, 2010, p. 629). Using these criteria to scaffold reflection as part of self-study "will [therefore] not only be informative to the individual conducting the research but also meaningful, useful and trustworthy for those drawing on such findings for their own practice" (Loughran, 2005, p. 6). A reflective self-study, based on these four criteria, was therefore deemed appropriate for exploring my own strengths and limitations in order to contribute insights, which subsequent scholars and novice teacher educators could use for the construction of meaning-making.

Openly examining personal experiences might encourage others to reflect on their abilities and areas for growth. Common challenges can be identified, and strategies for overcoming such challenges can be shared to provide valuable guidance.

3 Relevant Concepts from the Literature

Certain key concepts, identified from the literature, contributed to my exploration, meaning-making, and understanding in the self-reflective study on which this chapter reports. Firstly, I outline the requirements for teacher preparation in South African higher education. I then describe how WIL, as one of these requirements, was facilitated as an online excursion in the teacher preparation programme of one South African university to contribute to the preparation of future 'super teachers'. The focus then shifts to the roles of teacher educators in teacher preparation programmes. The discussion concludes by emphasizing the importance of carefully preparing

novice teacher educators for the important roles they have to fulfil in teacher education, through well-structured professional development programmes.

3.1 Teacher Preparation in South Africa: Exploring Key Concepts and Reflective Practices in the Context of the NWU

In general, teacher education programmes aim to develop and expand the knowledge, skills, and perspectives of student teachers (Burn et al., 2022). Teacher education is nevertheless often much more complex than this. In South Africa, for example, teacher preparation is guided by the policy on the minimum requirements for teacher education qualifications (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2011). The above policy on minimum requirements provides a foundation for the extended breadth and depth of learning needed to ensure future teachers are exceedingly well prepared (RSA, 2011). The “notion of integrated and applied knowledge” encapsulates all learning associated with the policy on minimum requirements, which emphasises not only “*what* is to be learned [but also] *how* it is to be learnt” (RSA, 2011, p. 9) (emphasis added). Practical learning is outlined in the policy on minimum requirements as one of the core types of learning contributing to the “acquisition, integration and application of knowledge for teaching purposes” (RSA, 2011, p. 11). In this context, practical learning is underpinned by learning *from* practice and learning *in* practice, to close the gap between teacher education and the reality of teaching in a classroom. Work-integrated learning (WIL) includes aspects of learning *in* practice, such as preparing lessons and reflecting on these, as well as learning *from* practice, for example when observing other teachers in action (RSA, 2011). It is therefore clear why WIL forms an integral part of all teacher preparation programmes in South Africa.

The drastic limitations placed on face-to-face contact brought about by the Covid pandemic resulted in the restructuring of WIL excursions presented in an online learning environment so that students would not miss out on the extended learning opportunities embedded in this programme. The WIL programme was restructured to be offered in a synchronous online environment using the Zoom platform, which allowed students and teacher educators to “interact in real time, through videoconferencing software that includes video, audio, and instant messaging” (Grammens et al., 2022, p. 2). The processes and implementation of these adaptations to WIL at NWU are described in detail in a book edited by De Beer et al. (2023). Evident from the compilation of studies in this book, is that—although there were many benefits as part of the teacher preparation programme—it was a steep and often difficult learning curve for teacher educators. Similarly, Burn et al. (2022, p. 442) describe how “some teacher-educators saw new technologies [such as online learning] as offering opportunities” for facilitating learning using alternative approaches; however, it “resulted in a steep learning curve for [other] teacher-educators”. Furthermore, Burn et al.

(2022) note that teacher educators had to revise how they could “enable student-teachers to build relationships and work collaboratively”. That meant that we, as teacher educators, had to reflect, reconsider, plan, revise, and re-implement aspects of the excursion in an effort to optimise the online learning experience and process for the students. To this extent, authors such as Burgueño et al. (2022) highlight the motivational role, which teacher educators play in shaping future teachers. Likewise, I became increasingly aware of the potential of my real influence on the students, and the various roles I was expected to fulfil in the online environment, while facilitating important learning content.

3.2 Content Included in Our Work-Integrated Learning Programme

To guarantee that WIL experiences are relevant and in line with curriculum goals, educational institutions must include current and relevant learning as part of the WIL programme. In keeping with the ‘super teachers’ leitmotif of the excursions, the content included in our WIL excursions are, therefore, aimed at supporting student teachers in self-reflection to identify their own ‘super-powers’ as future teachers (De Beer et al., 2022). Current and relevant content topics that are necessary to strengthen teacher education in South Africa are purposely included to contribute ‘tools’ to our future super teachers’ ‘toolboxes’. In other words, the WIL programme content is selected to contribute meaningfully to the preparation of the student teachers “to enable them to face challenging realities in their future classrooms” (Du Toit & Petersen, 2023, p. 2). Some examples of the content in our WIL programme, and how it is intended to prepare these future teachers for their careers, include:

- using real-world examples of injustices that have taken place in South African classrooms, to prepare student teachers for critical reflection toward social justice and help them to avoid similar situations by creating inclusive spaces in their future classrooms where a sense of belonging can be fostered (Du Toit & Petersen, 2023; Kruger & Mdakane, 2023);
- using game-based learning to bring home the breadth of diversity (socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and more) which future teachers may expect in their classrooms, and how they could become inclusive practitioners (Bunt et al., 2023);
- explaining and demonstrating the use of shoestring approaches—that is, using affordable or freely available resources creatively to support the teaching–learning process, especially in under-resourced schools (Du Toit & Petersen, 2023);
- developing entrepreneurship education as part of the South African school curriculum, to enable future teachers to merge this critical content with existing subject content, as part of efforts to ameliorate youth unemployment in this country (Du Toit, 2023).

The inclusion of this content will guarantee that our students graduate from university with the knowledge, insights and abilities required to succeed in their future careers in the South African context.

3.2.1 Elements of Online and Work-Integrated Learning

Online learning and WIL have become essential aspects of the ever-changing educational landscape because they help students prepare for the working world by bridging the knowledge gap between theory and practice. This integration is in line with the movement in pedagogy towards experiential learning approaches, where the emphasis is on problem-solving situations and real-world experiences in addition to traditional classroom settings (De Beer et al., 2022). The central goal of WIL, as expressed in the creative curriculum designs of Du Toit and Petersen (2023), is to bridge the gap between theory and practice by allowing students to apply academic theories in real-world contexts. Several elements are included in the WIL programme to contribute to attaining this goal. These elements include teaching–learning of content, guided facilitation in the learning process, and utilizing appropriate teaching–learning strategies, such as those mentioned above by De Beer et al. (2022) to prepare student teachers for real-world application thereof. These same elements must be included when WIL is offered in online settings. Creative and innovative adaptations are, therefore, necessary to ensure that the content, facilitation, and teaching–learning strategies utilized in online WIL mirror those used in face-to-face (in-person) settings, without loss of quality (Du Toit & Petersen, 2023). Adaptations that were made to these elements for the online environment include presenting the content as small, interactive videos; facilitating students' learning process in online break-away rooms, followed by synchronous, large-group discussions; and using (or sometimes demonstrating) play-based and experiential teaching–learning strategies as part of our online facilitation. Du Toit and Petersen (2023) further highlight that creating a sense of belonging for students participating in the online environment remains a key element to maintain in online WIL excursions.

Nonetheless, a thorough grasp of the roles and skills needed by educators in these settings is essential for the effective execution of online WIL experiences. Effective online teaching techniques necessitate that educators handle the instructional, social, managerial, and technical domains skilfully, according to Baran et al. (2011). The complex job of the teacher educator highlights the necessity for educators to manage learning processes, build a welcoming online community, provide crucial technical assistance, and develop and lead learning activities that encourage active engagement. These skills are essential for making sure that WIL experiences occurring online are worthwhile, interesting, and helpful in reaching the intended learning objectives. Furthermore, as Grammens et al. (2022) point out, adding synchronous components to online WIL activities adds complexity that calls for teachers to be adaptable in their communication and teaching techniques, underscoring the importance of honing these skills for the success of WIL programmes.

The Roles of Teacher Educators in Online Learning Baran et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive literature review to analyze the roles and competencies of online educators with the extensive purpose of promoting online educators' reflection. More recently, Grammens et al. (2022) conducted another systematic literature review on the roles of educators in online learning environments, starting with the framework of roles identified by Baran et al. (2011). Grammens et al. (2022) particularly intended to expand the original framework by exploring the roles of online educators in synchronous settings and by refining and clarifying the roles in the original framework of Baran et al. (2011). An amalgamation of the key roles and core competencies of online educators developed by Baran et al. (2011), as adapted by Grammens et al. (2022), are presented in Table 1. Based on the findings of the latter study, there was significant overlap between the 'pedagogical', 'facilitator', and 'instructional designer' roles included in Baran et al.'s (2011) original framework. Grammens et al. (2022) therefore opted to merge these three roles into the 'instructional role' only, as shown in Table 1. In addition, Grammens et al. (2022) added the 'communication role' to include aspects of the synchronicity and complexity of real-time interaction in online environments (Table 1).

The same roles and competencies are important for teacher educators in higher education. Care should however be taken that the aspects of learning *in* practice and learning *from* practice are adhered to in order to enable the attainment of the goals of the WIL programme. The original aim of Baran et al. (2011), namely to promote reflection in online educators, should also not be disregarded, as reflection is critical for personal growth and professional development.

3.3 *Novice Teacher Educators' Roles and Expectations*

Novice lecturers—and particularly novice teacher educators—are individuals who are beginning their careers as educators in higher education institutions (HEIs) after gaining some teaching experience in high (i.e. secondary) schools (Kember & Leung, 2020). The authors further state that, in high schools, novice teacher educators have a set curriculum that they must follow, and they are often in control of their classrooms (Kember & Leung, 2020). After joining an HEI, novice lecturers generally face many challenges in their initial years of teaching, especially challenges related to their three key roles and responsibilities, namely teaching, research, and community service (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Unlike in the school environment, novice teacher educators in HEIs are expected to be researchers, scholars, and mentors to their students, in addition to their teaching responsibilities (El-Hussein & Cronje, 2019). They are also responsible for designing their courses, teaching materials, and assignments. Novice teacher educators are also expected to create courses that align with the goals of their departments, institutions, and national standards (Jonsén & Fosslund, 2021).

Table 1 Teacher roles and competencies required for effective synchronous online teaching

Key roles for online educators	Core competencies developed for each role
Instructional designer (<i>including pedagogical and facilitator roles</i>)	• Organising the learning process • Stimulating active learning • Designing and recreating learning tasks and materials • Implementing assessment • Providing feedback • Meeting students' personal learning needs • Motivating students
Social	• Building an online learning community • Being considerate of cultural differences • Building a teacher–student relationship • Contributing to the development of student interaction
Manager	• Leading and controlling the learning programme • Establishing and monitoring protocols and rules • Managing equipment • Organising and planning the learning programme
Technical role	• Providing technical support • Having knowledge of using different technical tools • Understanding the affordances and limitations of various online tools • Having and maintaining a positive attitude towards utilising online learning • Encouraging and using safe digital behaviour
Communicative role	• Facilitating and encouraging communication • Pedagogically mastering the different communication channels • Selecting the most appropriate channels for various scenarios • Exhibiting and using good communication skills

Source Adapted from Baran et al. (2011) and Grammens et al. (2022)

Bathmaker and Avis (2007) reveal that the challenges novice teacher educators experience in their professional development journey could cause them to feel disempowered, which could negatively affect the development of their teacher identities, especially in the early years of their career. Difficulty in developing a strong and positive identity could negatively affect a novice teacher educator's sense of self within the context of the teaching and academic profession (Conklin, 2020). In turn, such negative experiences affect teacher educators' own praxis, something that is especially pertinent in the case of novice lecturers involved in teacher preparation, which necessitates careful construction of learning experiences that student teachers,

in turn, could transfer into school contexts (Burke, 2020). It is therefore important that novice teacher educators understand their roles and responsibilities, and that they reflect on and plan their professional development in the tertiary organisation to be(come) effective instructors. Conklin (2020) notes that novice teacher educators could facilitate their adaptation to their new roles and expectations by means of engaging in reflection. In the next section, the utilization of reflective self-study as a research methodology for the present chapter is presented.

4 Methodology

The question that guided this reflective case study was:

What are my strengths and limitations as a teacher educator in the context of an online virtual excursion, and how do these strengths and limitations contribute to my professional development?

Following the so-called Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) research design, reflective self-study was used to design and implement the research on which this chapter reports. The starting point for self-study is one's own lived experiences and understanding how meaning is made based on lived practices (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). According to LaBoskey (2015, p. 97), "self-study was developed specifically by and for teacher educators", underscoring its appropriateness for the current investigation. LaBoskey recollects that a cluster of teacher educators who formed a special interest group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in 1993 coined the name Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) for their SIG (LaBoskey, 2015). S-STEP has since been used extensively to design and implement reflective self-study research, especially by (but not limited to) teacher educators (Dobbs et al., 2022).

S-STEP utilizes various research methods and frameworks, including case studies, and employs qualitative data sources (Percy & Sharkey, 2020). S-STEP is not limited by a single method or design but has five identifying characteristics. S-STEP research is namely self-initiated, focused, interactive (or collaborative), based on qualitative methodology, and utilizes exemplar validation (Pinnegar et al., 2010). In the current study, as a novice teacher educator, I initiated the research to explore my professional development in which I was both a practitioner in the excursion and the researcher. The study focused on exploring my strengths and limitations as a teacher educator in the context of an online virtual excursion. I did not rely solely on my own reflections but also on peer feedback, participant observations, and relevant literature.

S-STEP literature has drawn attention to the crucial role of colleagues, peers and students as participants, and sources of knowledge, criticism, and guidance (Trumbull & Cobb, 2000). I included interactions and feedback from a more experienced colleague (the second author), as well as from many of the 1340 students who participated in the online virtual excursion I facilitated. My own comments and those of others were in the form of qualitative data—using a reflective journal and informal

communication, both in person and during online interactions (as explained in detail in the next paragraph). Exemplar validation, according to Pinnegar et al. (2010), refers to how I collected data, analyzed it, and made meaning of it. According to these authors, the trustworthiness of self-study relies on “ontology rather than epistemology”, follows a process that “is empirically grounded in dialogue rather than the scientific method” and “is grounded in a study of personal practice in the space between self and others in the practice” (Pinnegar et al., 2010, p. 204).

Data for this case study were collected from my own reflective journal, notes from meetings with facilitators after the excursion, video recordings of the excursion, and formal and informal conversations with colleagues. Having data from various sources enabled me to compare my journey from *being* a teacher educator to *becoming* a teacher educator in an online WIL excursion for future super teachers. My ability to concentrate on everyday events made keeping a reflective journal helpful. Each entry had a date and accompanying contextual information. Thematic coding was employed to analyse the data, allowing for the identification of meaningful patterns, concepts, and recurring ideas. The initial codes were organised into themes that represented my social role, communication role, and technical role as an online teacher educator. Through rigorous review and comparison of the data, the emergent themes were refined and defined to depict my experiences accurately. The iterative process of data analysis, coupled with triangulation for validation, ensured the reliability and credibility of the themes, providing valuable insights into the growth and development of novice teacher educators in online educational settings, as explained by Creswell and Creswell (2018). I carefully examined the information, distinguished what was significant from what was not, and categorized it into strengths and areas for improvement or where professional development would be needed, as discussed below.

5 Findings and Discussion

As a novice teacher educator, participating in the online WIL excursion for the first time in 2022, I encountered several obstacles in my role as an online educator. I followed the S-STEP research design to explore the challenges I faced, and the ways I managed to overcome them. Based on the steps for reflective teacher educator self-study, I report my experiences in line with three of the five key roles for online educators listed in Table 1, namely the social, communication, and technical roles of the facilitator as described by Baran et al. (2011) and Grammens et al. (2022). The other two roles, that is, the role of instructional designer and the managerial role (Table 1), are not discussed in the findings of this case study, as I was not involved in the 2022 WIL excursion planning or management. Through this discussion, I offer insight and recommendations that could potentially benefit other novice teacher educators in the field of online education, particularly in the context of WIL, which will contribute to attaining the goals set for these excursions. As the university continually endeavours to appoint young (often novice) lecturers and thereby

offer them opportunities to grow and develop professionally in its programmes, the contribution of my reflections in this regard could be meaningful for novice lecturers in the same situations.

5.1 My Social Role as an Online Teacher Educator

I attended 8 of the 12 excursion sessions conducted in 2022, mainly in the capacity of a participant-observer, as described by Nieuwenhuis (2010). I was asked to join random virtual rooms and witnessed students' discussions and interactions in their small breakaway rooms. In my reflective journal, I noted that most students appreciated my presence during their breakaway sessions when they had to discuss common issues. In my social role, I supported student groups in refocusing their attention on the issues to be discussed, and I provided guidance for them to explore ideas in a less structured format. One student, for example, mentioned, "we were lost during the first task and did not know where to start, but Mr Sekano came to our rescue". This comment supports my notes that, in my social role, I contributed guidance in the students' online learning process. These findings align with the literature where various researchers advocate the need for online teachers (or in the current case, a teacher educator) to establish a supportive and interactive learning community among students (Burgueño et al., 2022; Burn et al., 2022). It is thought that the presence of the online teacher educator—whether overt or covert—affects how students view and engage with online learning (Ou et al., 2004). The core competency of contributing to developing student interaction in an online environment afforded some students a meaningful learning experience. This aligns with excursion and WIL principles that emphasize the significance of collaborative learning and community engagement in enhancing student teachers' learning experiences. Moreover, the researcher's role as a participant-observer in the WIL excursion aligns with the experiential learning aspect of WIL, where students and teacher educators actively participate in real-world settings to support the integration of theory and practice (Du Toit & Petersen, 2023).

Data collected from my reflective journal revealed that I had learned the importance of building relationships with my students to facilitate a positive and productive learning environment. For example, on 3 May 2023, I noted how I had made an effort to learn students' names and inquire about their interests and concerns in order to build rapport with them during breakaway sessions. After addressing them by name and showing genuine interest in their comments, I noticed a significant improvement in their level of comfort and engagement in the excursion. Building these relationships helped create a positive and productive online learning environment where students felt valued and connected. According to research by Chen et al. (2015), lecturer–student relationships are critical to student engagement and achievement. By establishing a rapport with these first-year students, I contributed to creating a supportive community where students felt comfortable asking questions and seeking guidance. My purposeful social interaction contributed to students

feeling more comfortable, or in a better position for learning in the social and interpersonal planes of learning, in line with similar reports on the same excursions by Du Toit and Petersen (2023). Additionally, as is evident in video recordings of the WIL excursions, allowing students to work cooperatively and collaboratively in small groups could foster a sense of teamwork and enhance students' self-directed learning, as reported by De Beer et al. (2023), which aligned with the overarching goals for teacher preparation at the study university. These findings are supported by Johnson and Johnson (2013, 2019), who found that cooperative learning could improve student engagement and knowledge retention. The collaborative approach to learning mirrors the principles of WIL, where students are encouraged to work in teams, interact with industry professionals, and gain hands-on experience to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Overall, my experience as an online teacher educator has taught me that effective facilitation of learning in online environments involves more than just delivering 'content' (as described earlier in the chapter); it also requires a focus on building relationships and creating a sense of community among students.

One of the key strengths identified from the meetings with facilitators after the excursion is my ability to contribute to students' sense of belonging, by providing them with insights into the teaching profession and suggestions for improvement, informed by my own experiences as a schoolteacher. For example, sharing my personal experiences motivated students and provided them with feedback in terms of effective classroom management and student engagement, in line with suggestions by Grammens et al. (2022). Creating a sense of belonging for students was a key objective of the WIL excursions, as reported by Du Toit and Petersen (2023); therefore, this is a significant finding. In addition, I had to put aside my own feelings and reactions to see the situation through the students' eyes (i.e. had empathy), and carefully managed my own emotions by staying calm and rational amidst a few stressful or problematic circumstances during the excursion (i.e. showed poise under pressure). This I noted in my reflective journal, and was also reported on by Du Toit and Petersen (2023, p. 6) as "tensions" experienced in these excursions. This finding is consistent with previous research that highlights the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment for future teachers (see De Beer et al., 2020). According to the literature review, Baran et al. (2011) emphasize that the roles of teacher educators in online learning require a combination of technical, pedagogical, and interpersonal skills, as well as a deep understanding of the online learning environment and the needs of the students. These personal strengths therefore served as a foundation on which I could construct my own growth and development as part of becoming an experienced teacher educator and scholar (Burgueño et al., 2022).

5.2 My Communication Role as an Online Teacher Educator

As I looked back at video recordings of the excursion, I realized that my communication role as an online teacher educator was not as effective as it could or should

have been. According to research by Venter (2019), online communication can be challenging due to the absence of nonverbal cues, which are essential for conveying emotions and intent. In my experience, I struggled to connect with the students during the session, which sometimes led to misunderstandings and confusion. Likewise, Du Toit and Petersen (2023, p. 13) emphasize the importance of optimizing “interactions between learners and content through efficient communication channels while designing an educational online environment in order to optimise learning in the ZPD [zone of proximal development].” Additionally, while I endeavoured to provide constructive feedback to the participants, it was not always delivered in a way that was “constructive” or “supportive” (Du Toit & Petersen, 2023, p. 7). One possible reason for this could be that I am still developing my academic language and the appropriate terminology, and I had to think quickly during the discussions. My vocabulary was therefore inadequate at times, as I had noted in my journal. This, in turn, negatively affected my confidence to participate in the discussion. I was so focused on getting through the material that I did not take the time to ask my students questions or encourage them to participate. According to Sadler and Good (2021), not providing constructive or supportive feedback during online teaching and learning could have several disadvantages, including reduced motivation, poor performance, and a lack of student engagement. This made some of the sessions feel impersonal and disconnected, which is not the kind of learning environment I wanted to create. To address these issues, I have since focused on improving my communication skills, such as active listening and clear messaging, and developing my academic vocabulary to ensure that my students can understand and engage with the material effectively on a tertiary level. Grammens et al. (2022, p. 5) also identified “encouraging communication” as one of the competencies that are important for effective teaching in online environments. These authors argue that teachers who can communicate clearly, listen actively, and provide timely feedback could help create a positive and engaging learning environment for their students, whether they are teaching asynchronously or synchronously online (Grammens et al., 2022).

Concerning my communication roles, the reflective journal highlighted that my proficiency as an online teacher educator was hampered by insufficient use of formal academic language and a deficiency in self-confidence during presentations. Additionally, from the notes of the meeting with other facilitators, I also noticed that I tended to dominate the conversation at times. While this was not intentional, it did “limit the opportunity for other participants to contribute their ideas and insights” (Martin, 2009, p. 77). I believe I could benefit from taking a step back and allowing others to take the lead in discussions. These limitations indicate that I need to explore additional professional development opportunities to learn and apply new knowledge and skills during my professional growth, as recommended by Kabashi et al. (2021), particularly to strengthen my listening skills. This will strengthen my abilities as a teacher educator and set an example of preferred teacher behaviour for the student teachers in the WIL excursion to adopt for use in their future classrooms. For instance, increasing my self-confidence might enable me to talk with greater authority and clarity, which in turn might help audiences comprehend and respond

better to my message (Martin, 2009). According to Gao and Gao (2021), this, in turn, could create a pleasant overall presentation experience for the students and myself.

5.3 My Technical Role as an Online Teacher Educator

Formal and informal conversations with colleagues regarding knowledge of using different technical tools and providing technical support in online learning have taught me the importance of flexibility, patience, ongoing learning, and learning from mistakes. Technical issues can be frustrating for an online teacher educator, and it can be tempting to act on frustrations or with impatience when trying to troubleshoot issues. From the conversations with colleagues, I have learned, however, that remaining patient and empathetic could help to create a positive learning environment and promote a sense of collaboration between my students and myself. This is a beneficial skill to have as a teacher educator, and models preferred teacher behaviour for the student teachers in the WIL excursion—again something they could adopt for use in their future classrooms (Uunona & Goosen, 2023). Furthermore, when faced with technical challenges during online sessions, my behaviour set an example for my students. This is something I always have to keep in mind during interactions with students. These findings are similar to those in a study by Yu et al. (2019), who found that patience, empathy, flexibility, and adaptability were important factors in successful online teaching.

Data from the notes in my reflective journal also reveal that I have learned that understanding the affordances and limitations of various online tools is essential for effective online teaching, which is a requirement for the facilitation of effective online learning (Uunona & Goosen, 2023). For example, during my technical role as an online teacher educator, I participated in sessions that utilized breakaway rooms to enable small-group discussions. While this approach allowed for additional personalised interactions and profound engagement, I also had to consider the potential that students might get distracted. In turn, this realisation underscored the need to set clear expectations for student participation and collaboration. As a result, I found it helpful to provide students with structured prompts and guidelines to support their group work. From the video recordings and discussion with fellow facilitators, it was clear that many of the students did not participate or contribute to the group discussions. This finding implies that I need to explore skills, techniques, technical tools, and applications further to support extensive student participation. Considering that Du Toit and Petersen (2023, p. 25) report that online educators in these excursions sometimes had to spend “more time sorting out and helping groups to form functional units than supporting the intended reflective learning and skills development”, my need to further my professional development in this regard becomes even more critical. Research by Pynoo et al. (2011) emphasizes the importance of selecting appropriate tools based on the learning objectives and the needs of students. Through my experiences, I have found that being knowledgeable about the different online tools available and their potential benefits and limitations could help

to create an effective and engaging learning environment. I should therefore always try to explore and experiment with new or unfamiliar tools before I use them with my students. Overall, my experience with providing technical support and using different technical tools has taught me that, while these are essential for online education, they should be accompanied by flexibility and adaptability to ensure a successful learning experience (Yu et al., 2019). I need to ensure that I continue my professional development to keep track of changes and updates in existing tools, but also to be informed about new tools and applications, which could enhance my technical role as an online educator.

6 Recommendations for Professional Development Goals to Strengthen My Contributions in Future WIL Excursions

Based on the findings and discussions presented, I have set the following professional development goals as recommendations for myself—and possibly other novice teacher educators—to enhance my (but also *our*) social, communication and technical roles in online education:

- **Develop interpersonal skills:** As an online teacher, it is important to establish a supportive and interactive learning community among students. Novice teacher educators therefore need to focus on building relationships with their students to facilitate a positive and productive learning environment. This can be achieved by developing rapport, demonstrating empathy, and managing own emotions well when difficult situations emerge.
- **Enhance communication skills:** Effective communication is critical for successful online teaching and learning. Novice teacher educators should work on improving their active listening and messaging skills to ensure that students can understand and engage with the material effectively. Developing—and continuing to develop—academic vocabulary would be useful to support this goal. Additionally, teacher educators should encourage communication and provide constructive feedback to help create a positive and engaging learning environment.
- **Understand the online learning environment:** Novice teacher educators need to have a deep understanding of the online learning environment and the needs of the students. This requires a combination of technical, pedagogical, and interpersonal skills.
- **Improve teaching skills continuously:** Novice teacher educators should continually seek opportunities to improve their teaching skills for in-person as well as online contexts. This can be achieved by attending professional development workshops, engaging in peer mentoring programmes, and seeking feedback from students and colleagues. Staying informed and up to date with new technical developments and applications would contribute to this goal.

By setting these professional development goals, novice teacher educators could enhance their online teaching skills and provide students with a positive and engaging learning experience in the online this environment.

7 Conclusion

Case study provided valuable insights into some of the professional development needs of novice teacher educators in the context of online excursions. I used the S-STEP research design to investigate the challenges I faced as a novice teacher educator, and to explain how I overcame them. My experiences were reported in line with three key roles for online educators, namely social, communication, and technical facilitation roles (Baran et al., 2011; Grammens et al., 2022). The findings highlight the importance of ongoing reflection and continuous learning to overcome limitations and enhance strengths as a teacher educator. Overall, my communication skills can be seen as the area where I need professional development most. This is not surprising, as academics in tertiary environments guide and lead students by voicing their opinions and critical insights. I will therefore continue striving to improve this role. By reflecting on these strengths and areas for improvement, I was able to gain insight into additional avenues required for my professional development. Such insight could assist universities in designing opportunities for similar development for their novice teacher educators. Future research could focus on preparing novice teacher educators for optimal functioning in online environments to narrow the gap reported by McMillan and Gordon (2017) further. Ultimately, such research could contribute to the preparation of future super teachers who are equipped to thrive in a complex profession.

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