

**Bringing “Grammy” to the classroom:  
Integrating personal connections into online education**

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Sometimes in post-secondary teaching, a professor’s personal life can merge with their professional life in the most interesting ways. While it is not uncommon for instructors to modify their teaching from one semester to the next, unanticipated situations such as personal illness, sudden tragedies, or, in this case, a global pandemic, encouraged me to become very creative in the ways in which I attempted to connect with and reach my students. When teaching face-to-face, it is not unusual for me to share personal anecdotes or teaching vignettes to elucidate concepts or maximize learning of course objectives. But teaching a fully online class has proven more difficult for me in bringing my life as a parent and my experiences in elementary classrooms to bear on my teaching. I wanted to ensure that true learning occurred in my newly-designed online classes, while still providing opportunities for my students to get a glimpse into my world as an experienced childhood educator, mother to three children, and “Grammy” to two little girls.

As part of their teacher preparation program, my students, who are mostly preservice early childhood educators (PECE), are required to take a course called Introduction to Child Development. This course introduces PECE to theories related to the growth and development of children prenatally through age eight. The course covers the developmental domains including physical, motor, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development; it explores developmental theories as related to those domains.

In order to ensure that PECE have met the course learning outcomes, they are required to observe a child under age eight, taking observational field notes while watching their child in natural settings. Using these field notes, PECE apply the concepts introduced in class to the information about their particular child gathered during the field observations.

When I began teaching this course in a fully asynchronous online format, the ability to collaborate in small groups, as well as opportunities for PECE to go out in the field diminished. In order to continue using the developmental domain observation forms as a way to assess my students’ efficiency of their field observational practice and their overall ability to evaluate children’s words and behavior in the field, I needed an alternative process. While finding videos of children in classrooms or homes online is not a difficult task, I wanted a range of videos that would show one specific child performing in all of the developmental domains. As a result, I decided to use videos of one of my own granddaughters, Everly, for the “practice” portion of this assignment. I explained to the students that we would be using videos of my granddaughter in various stages of life and engaging in a variety of activities to practice observational praxis, but

also to connect with my students on a personal level. I wanted to show them that observing children as not just a task for classroom assessment but was a critical (and interesting!) part of engagement with young children in various aspects of our lives. I also wanted to make my personal life real to them and to show them that what they are doing in the course is something I consistently do in my roles as teacher, mother, and now, grandmother.

In the module devoted to this activity, I posted approximately six videos of Everly at two different developmental periods. I provided some basic statistics about her such as height and weight at both ages, as well as general background, e.g., that she was born full term, was being raised by two parents, and was an only child. I provided three videos of her at age two walking on a beach, swimming, and getting into a chair; the other three videos were taken at age four where she was catching frogs on a shore, running, and pedaling a bike with training wheels. I required PECE to take observational notes on the videos and complete a discussion board post where they shared information about what they saw, how they would evaluate her physical and motor development at the two different ages, as well as discuss the relative growth they saw during the elapsed time. They were also required to respond to three of their peers' posts.

I did not require that PECE complete a mock-up of the observational domain forms as I did in the pre-pandemic course; however, the resulting exchanges on discussion board provided insight into what my students knew and understood and where additional instruction was required. Additionally, because the entire class was focused on the same child, there appeared to be more depth and interaction than I had observed in my traditional course. Rather than focusing primarily on the "how to" process of completing the form, the discussion was fixed on the child—what she was able to do, what developmental milestones were reached in the videos, and, surprisingly, what they, as PECE would do as her teacher to encourage her progress. Because the videos showed Everly at two different ages, my PECE students were able to view changes over time, something they would not have been able to see if only getting a snapshot of her at one age.

The feedback on this activity was surprisingly positive and moved me to continue the practice in two more modules focused on cognitive/language domains and social/emotional domains. In fact, several PECE indicated in course evaluations that it was one of the favorite activities in the course. It is no surprise then, that, moving forward, I will keep this activity as part of the course.

When I return to in-person teaching, I may choose to use the videos as part of an in-class process, but I am currently thinking that I will leave it as an online component. I found that the discussion board aspect of this allowed me to be "present" during the evolving conversations in a way I could not be when there were several real-time conversations occurring simultaneously. I was also able to interject questions and ask for clarification such that all students could see my inquiries and read the responses of the classmates. While the practice session in the online session did not specifically familiarize my students with the process of completing the form, I do believe that it allowed me to more fully assess PECE's ability to apply theories. The new and improved activity also allowed for a robust conversation that included all of the critical components and added a layer I had not previously considered: what recommendations or ideas they may have as PECE.

I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to grow as an online instructor, and even more appreciative of what I have learned about my students' need to really connect with who I am outside of the classroom. While I am their teacher, I have many other important roles that they may not see. In addition to acting as a teacher educator, I have engaged in this practice of child observation throughout my life—both in my own teaching of young children and in the rearing of my own children. As I remind my PECE in every class that I teach, the three R's of reading, writing, and arithmetic are an important part of our focus as teachers, but the fourth R—relationships—is what drives our practice. We must always remember that we are not teaching content, we are teaching individual humans, and the ability to relate to our students is the conduit through which true learning occurs. Being both “Grammy” and professor simultaneously has definitely added something to the learning process for us all.