

Preparing 21st Century Teachers

USF's virtual-teaching internship – one of only two in the nation – helps prepare education majors for 21st century teaching.



Photo: Aimee Blodgett

College of Education students Luke Birge, Chad Miller and Dana Bertoncini are majoring in physical education. They spent half of their pre-internship semester working with a co-op teacher from Florida Virtual Schools gaining experience in online teaching.

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TAMPA, Fla. (Nov. 8, 2010) – Chad Miller, a senior physical education major in the University of South Florida's [College of Education](#), spends a lot of time on the sidelines of Steinbrenner High School's football field.

He coaches the school's junior varsity team. He loves it – the students, the sport, the competition – and he is eager to land a permanent position as a high school physical education teacher when he graduates next spring.

Like all undergraduate education majors, Miller must complete a pre-service internship to gain practical teaching experience. That means working with high school students on athletic fields and also in classrooms and gyms.

Unlike education majors at just about any other university in the country, however, Miller also is gaining valuable 21st century teaching experience working in a more non-traditional environment.

A virtual one.

According to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, online classes and virtually learning at the K-12 levels is growing at an estimated 30 percent annually. Beth Miller, Outreach/Partnerships manager with Florida Virtual School (FLVS), says that rapid growth means the probability a college of education graduate will teach in an online classroom at some point during his or her career is very high.

And that's why USF is partnering with FLVS – one of the first virtual schools in the United States – to offer pre-service teachers a robust virtual-teaching experience.

USF is one of only two institutions in the nation to offer a virtual-teaching internship. The opportunity is available to all students in the [School of Physical Education and Exercise Science](#), and several graduate students in school counseling and counselor education also have participated.

“We started partnering with Florida Virtual Schools last year – piloting a virtual-teaching internship – to enhance our curriculum,” said Stephen Sanders, director of the School of Physical Education and Exercise Science in USF’s College of Education. “We wanted to supplement how we prepare students for 21st century teaching by offering them the opportunity to experience online teaching.”

USF students spend half of their pre-internship semester working in a traditional “brick and mortar” classroom under the supervision of a cooperating teacher in the partner school. The other seven weeks of the internship are spent assisting a co-op teacher from FLVS in teaching a course called Health Opportunities Through Physical Education (HOPE), which enables high school students to complete their physical education requirement for graduation. Their responsibilities include communicating daily with students and, as needed, with parents; assessing tests and quizzes; and developing course content. Students meet face-to-face with their cooperating FLVS teacher at the beginning of the internship and then collaborate by telephone or electronically daily throughout the seven weeks.

Students agree that virtual teaching presents some new challenges, particularly since the course is in physical education. “You have to rely on students to complete their workouts, and on their parents to vouch for the fact that they did the physical activities,” said senior Luke Birge.

On the other hand, Birge appreciated the opportunity that virtual teaching gave him to provide students with immediate feedback and to adapt activities to meet individual student needs. He adds that he worked with an “awesome co-op teacher at FLVS,” and enjoyed teaching a unit on cardiovascular activity and tutoring students via Skypad – an online chat room.

The highlight of Chad Miller’s experience was the 30-minute class on muscular strength and endurance he taught for 20 students using innovative web conferencing technology. “Students were actively engaged and it felt like a real classroom.”

Regardless of whether they teach online or in a classroom, USF students say they learn lessons and sharpen skills, such as time management and organization, which they will be able to apply to either environment. For Dana Bertoncini, teaching virtually drove home to her the fact that as a teacher she needs to be sensitive to students' different learning styles. "Kids learn in different ways. Some may learn better face to face, while others learn better virtually," she said.

During the 2009-2010 school year, FLVS served more than 97,000 students in 213,926 half-credit enrollments, compared to 10,050 students in 2001-2002. "The near future holds more growth and course development to provide Florida students with excellent educational opportunities," said Miller. "And as we grow we are looking for teachers who have experience in an online classroom."

"Putting this experience on an employment application will give me an advantage over other students applying for the same position," said Birge. "There's a tremendous need for online teachers, and it's certainly another route I could take."

"Virtual teaching is definitely an option," said Bertoncini. "Having this experience will open more doors."