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Remote supervision of teacher trainee internships: Using digital technology to increase social presence

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When digital technologies are used to supervise teacher trainees, internship supervisors adjust their practices to enhance their presence within their cohort in order to reduce the isolation felt by those who choose to do their internship locally, when home is in a remote location from their campus or university. In this article, we will share findings about the concept of social presence through a description of practices according to three indicators from the online community of inquiry theoretical model: emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion. From a qualitative methodology, our results attest to the humanistic nature of the remote supervision. During their online interactions with trainees, the internship supervisors interviewed share their feedback about videos and graded work tactfully, bearing in mind the distance that separates them. Despite how difficult it is to show empathy in mediated communication, they try by many means, including video and immediacy, to comfort trainees who may feel alone. They offer them frequent practical support and check in with them at the beginning and throughout the internship. Their support is bolstered by the authenticity of the situations observed in video footage, above and beyond the institutional systems.

KEYWORDS

remote supervision, internship, distance, social presence, teacher training, digital technology, community of inquiry

1. Hands-On teacher training in Quebec (Canada)

An increasing number of universities are developing means to accommodate remote learning, for courses as well as internships (Petit et al., 2019). The need for this option was certainly heightened by the coronavirus pandemic, but it initially came to be mainly due to students' international mobility and the vast area over which those requiring supervision are spread.

In Canada, most universities are located in urban centres and offer young adults the opportunity to complete an internship in the rural or semi-rural region they call home, or in another country or Canadian province or territory to dip their toes into other pedagogical and cultural contexts.

Each Canadian province and territory has its own education system. In the French-speaking province of Quebec, teacher trainee internships are most often organized in cohorts of approximately 15 trainees who are supported by an internship supervisor who represents the university. The supervisor visits the trainees a few times in their respective schools, but this travel adds to teaching program operating expenses (Grable et al., 2008). The great distances that must be travelled can also affect the quality of the support provided (Nault and Nault, 2001). For these reasons, trainee supervision is sometimes performed remotely without in-person visits. While the aims of remote trainee supervision remain the same as when the internship supervisor attends in person, the supervisor performs their job differently (Hamel, 2012).

The development and ease of access of high-quality digital resources have paved the way for a multidimensional approach to supervision (Pellerin, 2010). Internship supervisors can use digital solutions to overcome certain limitations of remote supervision (Petit et al., 2021) while enabling trainees to optimally develop their professional abilities (Boutet and Rousseau, 2002). However, the confinement periods imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted on a larger scale that student isolation is a serious issue when it comes to remote learning (Poellhuber et al., 2013). Keeping students committed to their studies is an even greater challenge (Traver et al., 2014). When supervising trainees, internship supervisors therefore look for various ways to make the most of digital technology (Petit, 2016) to foster a feeling of being present in their cohort despite the distance.

2. Problem statement

Internship supervisors play an undeniable role in teacher trainees' transition between the university setting and the practice setting (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). In performing their various duties (Dionne et al., 2021), they support trainees' professional development, among other things (Boudreau, 2009). There exist many digital supervision tools (Conn et al., 2009) – videos, web conferencing, discussion forums, blogs, digital portfolios, etc. – with greatly increased (and adapted) functionality in response to pandemic urgency (Petit and Dionne, 2020).

However, the technical aspect is not enough to support high-quality remote supervision. The educational engineering of remote learning (Charnet, 2019) – in terms of digital, as well as pedagogical, organizational and ethical considerations (Petit, 2015) – must take into account “remote presence” (Jézégou, 2010, translation) as perceived by the trainees. On this topic, we have previously shown that in cases when trainees are supervised exclusively remotely, the trust-based relationship established with trainees and the internship supervisor's involvement (in the form of their reachability and the regularity of their interactions, among other factors) promote the development of a feeling of presence among trainee cohorts (Petit, 2016, 2022). This presence perceived by students is a pertinent starting point to reflect on remote learning (Watanabe Traphagan et al., 2010).

A literature review on presence during remote learning reaffirms the importance of the instructor's role (Petit et al., 2015), but also sheds light on the role students can play in these new learning contexts by suggesting different avenues, such as self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 1990). Despite the abundance of studies investigating remote learning, only a few of them have specifically looked at teacher training (Young and Lewis, 2008) and the remote supervision of trainee internships (Routier and Otis-Wilborn, 2013). Moreover, it seems few publications, apart from our own works, address remote supervision practices specific to the concept of presence in teacher training programs. For this reason, and to the extent that internship supervisors' remote supervision practices make it possible to reimagine hands-on training in teaching programs in accordance with their use of digital technology, we hoped to answer the following research question: when internships are remotely supervised using digital technology, how do internship supervisors adjust their practices to increase their presence within their trainee cohort in order to reduce the isolation felt by trainees who choose to do an internship in a remote location or abroad?

3. The online community of inquiry theoretical model

The originality of our research lies in the fact that it addresses hands-on teacher training in the digital era in terms of the perception of presence within cohorts of trainees who are supervised remotely. We consider the university supervisor to be one of two instructors within a triad – alongside the associate teacher in the practice setting and the trainee themselves (Boutet and Rousseau, 2002) – and therefore address internship support from a collaborative rather than normative point of view (Wallace, 1991). In this perspective, it seemed logical to us to choose Garrison et al. (2000) online community of inquiry (CoI) theoretical model as the main basis for our research.

For students to continue to be committed to their remote courses and achieve significant learning online, a sense of community is considered necessary (Lambert and Fisher, 2013; Traver et al., 2014). Garrison et al.'s (2000) model presumes that in the absence of a physical meeting, members of a CoI resort to various forms of negotiation, using the digital technology, to try to reproduce the professional development process that usually takes place in person. Learning therefore stems from this search for meaning in interactions between students (Kozan and Richardson, 2014), who find themselves playing an important role (Engel et al., 2013) in the CoI and share responsibility with the instructor for creating a perception of presence.

The social constructivist CoI model (Arbaugh et al., 2008; Garrison et al., 2010; Akyol and Garrison, 2011) has gained a foothold since its creation (Petit et al., 2015) and is widely used in works on remote post-secondary education. It builds on Short et al.'s (1976) theory of social presence but divides presence into three categories: teaching, cognitive, and social.

In Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI model, the three types of presence encompass various indicators, and their interrelationships offer a broader, more comprehensive view of the remote educational experience (Arbaugh et al., 2008). That being said, before arriving at this big picture that will be the subject of a future article, we address in this work a single category of presence. The CoI model suggests that social presence connects teaching presence and cognitive presence, being dependent on teaching presence and critical for cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2010; Kozan and Richardson, 2014). Thus, to follow up on the publications in which we delved into the practices of teaching presence (Petit et al., 2021) and cognitive presence (Petit et al., 2023), we share here the results for social presence.

Social presence refers to “the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally in a community of inquiry” (Rourke et al., 1999, p. 52). The learners (and the other members of the CoI such as the teacher or the supervisor) thereby present themselves – and are seen – as “real people” (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan et al., 2008; Ke, 2010). In the CoI model, social presence is perceived in the form of three types of indicators.

The first type is indicators pertaining to emotional expression. Social presence is perceived by members of a CoI when they, for example, offer emotional support, use various means to convey encouragement, tailor their interventions and show signs of empathy or understanding. The second type is indicators pertaining to open communication, which is defined by the felt possibility of “risk-free communication” with other CoI participants. Perceiving that peers respond quickly, are adequately reachable and listen attentively (and doing the same in return) can be considered important indicators of

social presence. As for the third type of social presence indicators, it includes practices that pertain to group cohesion. This cohesion can be observed in how CoI members intervene to instill mutual respect, perceive each other as real people, notwithstanding distance, and, as Garrison et al. (2000) write, choose devices or media to communicate. The fact that a collaborative climate is encouraged (by organizing group activities, sharing tasks, having friendly discussions, etc.) is another aspect of this indicator type.

4. Methodology

The research project was developed as an evaluative study aimed at improving the systems used (van der Maren, 2003), namely those supporting the remote supervision of internships. The descriptive component presented here is based on a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Paillé and Mucchielli, 2021) of semi-structured one-on-one interviews conducted with 11 internship supervisors using an adapted version of an interview guide developed as part of a previous study (Petit, 2016). This convenience sample was composed of supervisors from six universities in different regions of Quebec, Canada that offer (1) one or more teacher training programs and (2) remote supervision when internships are completed in a remote location or abroad.

The eight women and three men in the sample had different profiles in terms of:

- Their cohort's training program (teaching at the preschool and elementary level, at the secondary level or special education)
- Their supervision experience (3 to 17 years)
- The number of trainees under their responsibility (6 to 38)¹
- The workload expected by their specific institution (number of visits per trainee, work to correct, seminars to lead before or after the internship...)

Although the internship supervisors all received training on how to support trainees, it should be noted that the training did not specifically address remote supervision. Only two supervisors were trained about the use of digital technologies.

The semi-structured interview took the form of open-ended questions ("Describe the typical course of a remote internship supervision," "What are the main challenges you encounter on the relational level during a remote internship supervision?," "How do you perceive your role as a remote internship supervisor?," etc.) enabling the internship supervisors to demonstrate Garrison et al. (2000) different types of presence, including social presence. Transcripts of the interviews were then thematically analyzed using the computer software Nvivo with a coding grid whose rubrics corresponded to the three types of presence and their respective indicators (Anderson et al., 2001). Three members of the research team validated each other's results (Miles and Huberman, 2003), which led to adding emerging codes and clarifying the definitions used for coding (Bardin, 2013). A node matrix made it possible to cross-reference the passages identified by the code "à distance" (translation: remote) with those pertaining to the different types of

presence. The matrix cells of each crossover were then summarized using reduction and triangulation. The summary of the results linked to the indicators of social presence is presented below.

5. Results

The data collected enabled us to describe the practices of the three indicators of social presence – emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion.

5.1. First indicator of social presence: Emotional expression

Remote internships seem to offer supervisors additional opportunities to tailor their interventions since they, surprisingly, have much more contact with trainees than when they are able to visit the host school. For example, in preparation for an internship abroad opportunity offered at the university where Lucy² is an internship supervisor, five pre-departure meetings are held with trainees. The first interventions involving emotional expression admittedly do not take place remotely, but they serve practices that are later mediated by computer. To a similar end, Alan consults his cohort to ensure that each trainee has access to all the resources they need, that everything "is alright" (translation) before they leave.

These two internship supervisors also manifest their presence through informal emails upon the trainee's arrival in the foreign country. Alan writes an email the first day to check whether "everything went smoothly" (translation) and then waits 2 or 3 days before contacting the trainee again about matters pertaining to the internship. Lucy, for her part, does not expect any immediate communication, but asks trainees to email her once they have settled in, maybe 2 or 3 days after they arrive. As for Paula, she schedules a one-on-one web conference "after their first week on the job" (translation), which enables her to show support remotely, ask "how's it going" (translation) and ask about the start of the internship.

The use of video technology for remote internship supervision also provides other benefits that enable internship supervisors to offer, from their point of view, better support. For example, Gina shared her perception of the "remote presence" of a trainee she is observing: "I listen to what my trainee has to say from start to finish, even their sighs" (translation). According to Anne, using video may also make "trainees more comfortable" (translation) teaching than when she is physically present in class to observe them; in her absence, the practices observed will be closer to those used in real-life teaching.

The log, in the form of a shared document or emails, enables some internship supervisors to personalize their follow-up and to share "day-to-day events" (translation) as much as "social references" (translation) with their trainees. Each week, Jack "starts a conversation [by email] with them to stay in touch" (translation). Similarly, Alan writes positive comments, sends encouragement and invites trainees to read each other's logs.

¹ The number of trainees under the responsibility of a supervisor did not change with remote supervision.

² Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' anonymity.

The internship supervisors interviewed perceive a limitation in remote internships during delicate situations, when manifestations of empathy are necessary:

It's more difficult when giving feedback, and it's all the more difficult when it's feedback that leads us to give the trainee a lot to work on, when things are not going so well. Then, I do not hear the little tremor in their voice as clearly; I do not see the little tear at the corner of their eye as easily. When we are around the same table, we feel... It's easier to change the pace, take a little break, find the Kleenex box... In fact, the proximity makes it so that we are better able to sense those little non-verbal cues, which are more difficult to perceive remotely. (Gina, translation)

Alan also recognizes that “providing comfort remotely” (translation) has its limitations when meeting with a trainee. After a web conference discussion, Lucy sometimes second-guesses the effectiveness of her intervention; she continues to wonder whether the trainee “is okay” (translation). Despite everything, video contact is for her a lesser evil and makes it possible to offer some signs of empathy by listening and making eye contact: “Just the fact that you listened to them, sometimes... After that, you see their shoulders relax and their smile return” (Lucy, translation). Like Lucy, Gina and Joanne believe they offer better emotional support when they can hear the other person's voice; they both prefer to use the phone or web conferencing for such communications.

Anne stresses that care must be taken when using computer-mediated communication. When she records voice comments, for example, she makes sure to alternate between praising the trainee and giving them constructive feedback “to [not] discourage them” (translation), knowing that asynchronous video feedback does not allow for the same adjustments as a synchronous or in-person meeting does.

In short, the internship supervisors interviewed speak mainly of expressing emotion with trainees: communication with associate teachers seems courteous and professional, but nothing is mentioned during the interviews about signs of empathy or support, other than by Alan. He is the only one to explicitly mention his desire “to establish a relationship before the work begins” (translation). That being said, it is also possible that the supervisors who participated in our study have never encountered situations that required them to have a closer connection with the associate teacher.

5.2. Second indicator of social presence: Open communication

The results for this type of social presence indicator can be divided into three sub-types: communication between (1) internship supervisors and associate teachers, (2) internship supervisors and trainees, and (3) trainees.

5.2.1. Communication between supervisors and associate teachers

Internship supervisors' social presence with associate teachers during remote internships is expressed less through emotional displays than through openness to communication, particularly at the beginning of the process. Jessica and Frances explain the nature of the internship, their role and their expectations over the phone, whereas Joanne does it in writing: “I really send an email [to] introduce myself and tell them... to feel free to contact me if they have any questions” (translation). For her, this initial contact by email replaces the first meeting at the school.

In Jonathan's and Gina's case, they use web conferencing to get to know associate teachers, and Lucy seems to also prefer web conferencing, but when it comes to internships abroad, she notes that teachers in foreign countries are a bit more resistant to it: “We always open the door, but we cannot force schools to do it either” (translation). In those cases, she opts for an introductory email, keeping in mind the educational and cultural differences that associate teachers abroad may notice.

Internships in remote locations also present a unique situation for hands-on training; Gina pays special attention to establishing transparent and personalized communication at the beginning of the internship, especially when she learns there are new associate teachers involved. She then considers it necessary to visit in person, sometimes travelling hundreds of kilometers, to explain to them how a remote internship works and “offer them adapted training” (translation) specific to this type of internship. Communication is maintained thereafter using various digital tools.

As for Lucy, she acknowledges with mild resignation that despite the desire to have two-way communication, contact is most often limited to three messages from her: an email at the beginning, a reminder email about co-evaluation, and another “at the end to thank them” (translation).

5.2.2. Communication between supervisors and trainees

With trainees, the focus on being reachable is probably the aspect of communication that stands out the most in the responses gathered. The internship supervisors interviewed said they offer trainees many ways to reach them. For example, Paula shares her Skype ID, her email address and her work phone number; Lucy also gives trainees her Skype ID and tells them how to reach her by FaceTime and Facebook Messenger as well. According to her, her trainees sense her reachability “by how they write” (translation): their messages are short and concise, and she feels they are comfortable writing to her as soon as they have a question.

Gina and Anne also give their personal cell phone number to trainees. Gina does not seem to mind: “Personal, professional. For me, there is no longer a distinction” (translation), but Anne concludes in hindsight that that was “a mistake” (translation): “There are some who exaggerate, who call me Saturday at 11 [p.m.]. It's always an emergency, and I end up supervising 24/7” (translation). This level of open communication is nevertheless a means of emotional expression: she acknowledges that a quick response to a text message sent outside of office hours “reassures” (translation) trainees, and she says she has a “mothering side” (translation). Anne therefore speaks of internship supervisors' obligation to respond to trainees as quickly as possible, regardless of the method of communication used, as an underlying reality, and sometimes to the apparent detriment of her personal life. Jessica responds to messages “within 24h” (translation), and Alan, “almost immediately” (translation). Alan mentions, however, that it is partly due to the intensive internship that he supervises:

They need immediate answers... So even though I am not supposed to work evenings, I work in the evening because that is when they do their planning – they have a question, I can answer. If I am online, I can answer. Otherwise, 12 hours... max 24 hours. (translation)

According to Gina, students have developed the habit of emailing her to receive an immediate answer to questions they could often find the answer to themselves if they took a few minutes of their time: “There

is a good chance that...if I did not respond, the students would figure it out for themselves” (translation).

When the supervisor is physically present to observe the trainee in class, they schedule time after the lesson for the triad to talk after the observation exercise. Although Joanne and Jonathan still do this for remote supervision using FaceTime or Skype, the flexibility that digital technology offers makes it easy to schedule the meeting at another time, which opens the door to added periods of reachability on the part of the internship supervisor. Joanne and Gina usually extend the web conference that is already underway with the trainee to observe the class, but the discussion with the associate teacher takes place later, either individually (Joanne) or in a triad (Gina). Alan, for his part, leaves sometime between observing and giving feedback; he therefore opts for a later meeting, by Skype or phone, with the trainee and the associate teacher. Thus, while it is possible to take advantage of the benefits digital technology provides, there remains concern for fairness, a desire to offer remote trainees supervision comparable to what is offered to those who are supervised in person.

Beyond being very reachable, some internship supervisors focus on maintaining routine contact to punctuate their communication with trainees. For example, Elizabeth schedules one Skype meeting per week to talk to the trainee and the associate teacher. In other cases, messages are regularly posted in the course forum (Lucy) or sent by email (Jessica), which seems to support open communication. Similarly, Jack requires that trainees send him weekly emails, which he responds to individually.

5.2.3. Communication between trainees

Since internships are activities that are credited by universities, the schools offer internship supervisors access to the standard remote learning environment to oversee internships, whether they take place locally or remotely. These remote learning environments provide a number of features (messaging service, forum, assignment upload space, shared calendar, etc.), and it seems that Moodle is the most frequently used platform in Quebec: five of the six universities to which the internship supervisors interviewed belonged used that platform.

The supervisors in our sample generally support using this “formal” communication channel, but Jonathan “likes to show students there is more than one way to do things” (translation). To do this, he created a group board in Padlet to share resources among the members of the CoI and a shared log in a Google cloud space. Paula opts to use the cloud space offered by her university to facilitate practice observation by peers: she asks trainees to upload their videos there and to watch the other trainees’ videos before the remote group meeting.

Several of the internship supervisors we interviewed are aware there exists a teacher trainee Facebook group, and some of them have even been invited to join it. However, some supervisors, like Jonathan, prefer not to: “It enables them to share their own thoughts [that] I do not necessarily need to be aware of” (translation).

Gina, too, prefers to remain left out of some of these “private” (translation) spaces, and, like Jonathan, she believes it is not necessary for her to be present on all possible platforms with her trainees: “Facebook is there, and I know that they, [the trainees] are in fact not all alone...” (translation). Lucy admits this parallel communication space for trainees requires that she “let go” (translation). This reflects that she, like Jonathan and Gina, trusts this type of discussion space.

With this addition of informal spaces like Facebook alongside the formal spaces proposed by the internship supervisors, trainees communicate within the CoI in different configurations – with and without the supervisor – but bring together individuals who are both

reachable and able to relate to their teacher trainee experience. Thus, despite the physical isolation inherent in a remote internship, trainees use the means of communication necessary to continue to be a part of the group (at least remotely).

5.3. Third indicator of social presence: Group cohesion

In Quebec, the internship structure that our partner universities choose to use relies on the formulation of trainee cohorts, small groups of students signed up for the same type of internship, most often in different schools. These groups of trainees do not necessarily start off as CoIs. A certain level of cohesion can, however, develop between the members of a cohort over the course of one or more in-person meetings held before their departure; four internship supervisors from four different universities mentioned this.

Paula was the only one to mention holding a remote pre-internship meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to provide training by web conference to all the associate teachers involved in the remote internships. Since trainees attend as well, it is reasonable to think that this meeting as a large group enables them to connect with not only their peers who will go through the same experience as them, but also their associate teacher.

Once the trainees have left and started their internships, the internship supervisor requires or recommends some activities that can help to maintain cohort cohesion using a variety of digital tools: web conference platforms, remote learning environments, blogs, documents shared online or social media. These activities might be for all interns, individual sub-groups or individual dyads.

5.3.1. Cohort cohesion

Periodic cohort-wide meetings, in the form of workshops, are an integral part of practical teacher training; attendance at these meetings over the course of the internship is mandatory, even for those who are doing their internship abroad (Cambier and Deprit, 2020). However, network (or bandwidth) unreliability in some places can sometimes complicate attendance. In such cases, steps have been added to Gina’s job: “for a student located near another university, we make sure to reserve them a room; the student goes there and attends the workshop by videoconference” (translation). The majority of remote trainees do not seem to face any major obstacles attending these workshops remotely. Jonathan, for example, says he is comfortable facilitating bimodal discussions (Loisier and Marchand, 2003): if we have “two trainees attending virtually and four others attending in person, we use screen sharing and have a videoconference. So, the fact that they are located elsewhere does not mean they miss the workshops” (translation).

It is a situation that Frances has never experienced but can easily imagine, from the cohesion that already exists within her cohort: if it were to happen, she said, we “would have to do it remotely by Skype. I would delegate a student who knew the trainee in question well, and [I would tell them]: ‘bring your computer and, you know, you look after (let us say) Louis. Bring Louis with you’” (translation).

5.3.2. Trainee subgroup cohesion

The subgroups most likely to exist are those created informally by trainees on social media, particularly in a Facebook group. Beyond what was previously mentioned about the use of this social network, Alan encourages his trainees to discuss it together and seems to think that the space helps the cohort to gel.

Lucy also knows that some students choose to do their internship abroad with friends and that, from the outset, “some will decide between themselves to visit each other: they have weeks off, so they travel and go and see each other” (translation). But it is also entirely possible that the members of a cohort are not friends outside of the internship context. It is then up to the internship supervisor to create opportunities for trainees to work together, in keeping with the spirit of the CoI. Formal activities completed remotely in subgroups seem rare, however: only one of the 11 internship supervisors we interviewed, Paula, offers team workshops in virtual rooms:

I’m not there. I go around and check in – “do you have any questions?” – but I really let them talk. I try hard to form different groups each time so that everyone gets to know each other. (translation)

Paula has also transformed a common workshop activity – having peers analyze each others’ videos – into a remote workshop. She asks students to upload a video clip to the cloud space, watch the others’ clips before the workshop and be ready to discuss them in subgroups. According to Alan, who has previously observed his trainees his trainees were not comfortable re-watching the video of their practice exercise when it was shown to their peers, this method may be less intimidating. It also has the benefit of allowing internship supervisors to prepare their comments and choose their words to carefully express their point of view.

5.3.3. Trainee pairing

Another way that group cohesion is encouraged is by pairing up trainees within a cohort so they connect with someone who they are not necessarily friends with. Alan noticed that if he tells trainees to work together, for example, “when they post comments [on the forum] or read each others’ logs, it will always be the log of a friend or of someone they are closer to” (translation). To avoid this natural tendency, he chooses the pairs himself: “we ask trainees to post on the forum beforehand, during the internship, and then we ask someone to respond, we assign a person” (translation). In the same vein, he acts as matchmaker when two trainees have similar concerns: “I strongly recommend they read others’ logs” (translation).

Lucy also recommends that trainees kick off the compulsory pairing exercise with a virtual coffee meet-up, which she describes as follows:

We pair them up, and we strongly recommend that they meet up on Skype (but do not force them to). We skip those who are in the same city or school. They told us that some of them were doing it reluctantly, but in the end, they got something out of it. [It enabled them to talk to] people they had never connected with before, or had spoken to very little, and they enjoyed it. Some of them even wanted to do it again. (translation)

According to Lucy, the coffee meet-up activity between two people who are not initially friends had sufficiently interesting outcomes for her to consider making it an internship requirement.

5.3.4. Cohesion with associate teachers

Although the CoI leads to pairing trainees, it also involves a two-way relationship between the individuals responsible for trainees’ hands-on training – the internship supervisor and the associate teacher. However, since visiting in person is not possible in the case of remote internships, the cohesion of this duo is less strong, according to the internship supervisors interviewed. This is particularly apparent in international

internships according to Lucy. Jack noted that remote internships weaken his relationship as supervisor with the associate teacher: “it actually creates distancing, and personally, I’m really far away” (translation). Perhaps to compensate for this difference, Alan feels the need to draw attention to his connection with the associate teacher when assessment time comes by recognizing everyday observations during their phone conversation: “I say, ‘Wow! Well said; that is totally right. I noticed the same points, the same things’” (translation).

However, the “right” distance to have between the internship supervisor and the associate teacher during a remote internship remains difficult to gauge. While Jack and Alan put effort into getting to know the associate teachers, Jonathan keeps his distance: “It works for me in my relationship with them” (translation). According to him, the close connection that trainees may develop with the associate teacher who is hosting them for their remote internship is likely to interfere with triad dynamics. Jack sometimes feels that “the trainee and the associate teacher form a strong duo, [develop] rapport on a daily basis” (translation). In one case, he has even faced organized opposition: “I felt they were teaming up against me to prove the internship was going well” (translation). His perception seemed accentuated by the distance (and the use of digital technology that cannot faithfully convey non-verbal cues) and demonstrates the impact such an imbalance can have on the triad.

6. Discussion

The preceding results on social presence within a CoI (Garrison et al., 2000) describe the current practices of certain supervisors involved in the remote supervision of internships using digital technology in the teacher training programs of various universities in Canada.

Since digital technology can improve the effectiveness of – but not replace – supervision, it must be perceived as a mechanism for human interaction (Carter, 2001, in Mabunda, 2013). The internship supervisors interviewed contribute to this mechanism. Our results attest to the humanistic nature of the remote supervision they offer. When possible, they can also meet in person, whether with their trainee cohort before students leave for their internships or with a new associate teacher. Like in other studies (Conn et al., 2009; Chipchase et al., 2014), a hybrid supervision system seems preferable when training teacher trainees.

During their online interactions with trainees, internship supervisors share their feedback about videos and graded work tactfully, bearing in mind the distance that separates them. For Scherff et al. (2013), online supervision requires empathy. Despite how difficult it is to show empathy in mediated communication (especially asynchronous and written communication), internship supervisors show they try by many means, including video and immediacy, to comfort trainees who may feel alone, for example during an internship abroad. They offer them frequent practical support and check in with them at the beginning and throughout the internship. Their support is bolstered by the authenticity of the situations experienced by the trainees in class, observed in synchronous or asynchronous video footage (Hartshorne et al., 2011; Naffziger and Fawson, 2013). Beyond an institutional learning environment (sometimes restrictive), the supervisors interviewed rely on tailoring their use of online digital tools. This personalization of remote learning environments for remote internship supervision is also evident in the work of Cameron et al. (2015).

To combat the isolation felt by students who choose to do an internship in a remote location or abroad, internship supervisors increase the number of communication channels used to show they are

very (even overly) reachable despite the distance. “The significance of this ongoing communication with [online] supervisors should not be minimized because, it is one of the richest resources for interns, which offers them rapid, if not immediate feedback” (Cicco, 2014, p. 5). Unfortunately, the willingness to be accessible to trainees at (almost) any time can represent an excess burden for internship supervisors, which highlights the “right to disconnect” (Bellalou, 2019, translation) that prevails since the recent shift to working from home.

Like in the teaching presence component of this study (Petit et al., 2021), internship supervisors’ tailored use of their universities’ remote learning environments and of informal platforms like Facebook – which falls under a mixed techno-pedagogical model (Charnet, 2019) – also fosters the creation of spaces that encourage informal communication among trainees. This promotes a sense of social presence within the online CoI that the trainee cohort may form. Mabunda (2013) even mentions informal emotional support when the system involves peers. Moreover, within the CoI, groups of different geometries (subgroups, triads, dyads) are created by internship supervisors or proposed by trainees, which is why self-regulated learning on the part of trainees is important, as Rousmaniere and Frederickson (2013) point out.

Remote internship supervision does not seem to prevent collaboration between associate teachers and the supervisors interviewed, but its mediation remains a real challenge, as recognized in some of our previous works (Petit, 2018). This geographic distance is sometimes considered healthy to maintain professional distance between the internship supervisor and the associate teacher, but most supervisors in our sample said they were willing to have associate teachers more involved in the internship CoI.

7. Conclusion

Our results for social presence in remote internship supervision attest to the adaptation of the interviewed internship supervisors’ practices when supporting their trainees using digital technology. These practices illustrate how to enable a social presence within practical training of future teachers. Our findings show many ways of handling social presence across hybrid or online supervising scenarios with some of the pitfalls and hurdles that come with it.

Although our results only cover one type of presence, we can point out a strong interdependency between social presence and teaching presence. For example, the activities and environments for the interns supervised remotely seem to be designed with a social empathy approach, filled with compassion and a desire of connectedness.

For the people involved in teacher training programs in Canada or elsewhere, these empathic practices seem useful to any reflection aimed at improving the use of digital technology in distance support practices. If our results come from a situation that prevails in the practical training of future teachers supervised remotely (or in a hybrid way), they could also be taken up later in other fields of university training where the need for innovation requires a humanistic digital integration. In other

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words, our findings are relevant within any online environments design since the social presence and related practices are the « glue » of learning.

This paper complements published results on teaching presence (Petit et al., 2021) and will be supplemented by an accepted publication on cognitive presence (Petit et al., accepted), a category of presence that can be predicted based on the degree of teaching presence and social presence perceived in the CoI (Shea et al., 2010).

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Comité d’éthique de la recherche - Éducation et sciences sociales of Université de Sherbrooke. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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