

Developing an Online Community to Promote Engagement and Professional Learning for Pre-Service Teachers Using Social Software Tools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To support students undertaking an initial teacher training program, a communities of practice model (Wenger, 1998) was implemented, supported by a social software-based technology framework, to enable mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Participants formed peer-to-peer mentoring relationships, creating and sharing web log (blog) entries and voice recordings of critical incidents while on their practicum. Data from the students' discourse was analyzed to explore issues and patterns that were indicators of a learning community. This data, together with data collected from post-practicum focus group discussions in which students reflected on the benefits of these media for peer mentoring and support, attests to the relevance and effectiveness of the adopted approach to developing a socio-professional community to support the development of pre-service teachers. The authors believe that best outcomes are achieved when activities are structured, when students are adequately trained in using the technologies, and when instructors or experts are available to scaffold reflection processes as the need arises.

Keywords: Asynchronous Discussion, Computer-Mediated Communication, Distributed Learning, Online Learning Community, Teacher Education, Technology-Mediated Learning, Web-Based Learning

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

ACU National is the Australian Catholic University, a public university funded by the

Australian Government and open to students and staff of all beliefs and backgrounds. There are six campuses in Australia, which offer programs to students throughout the country and overseas. Campuses are located in Brisbane (Queensland), North Sydney and Strathfield (New South Wales), Canberra (Australian Capi-

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tal Territory), as well as Ballarat and Melbourne (Victoria). Through fostering and advancing knowledge in education, health, commerce, the humanities, the sciences and technologies, and the creative arts, ACU National seeks to make a specific contribution to its local, national, and international communities. The University explicitly engages the social, ethical, and religious dimensions of the questions it faces in teaching, research, and service. In its endeavors, it is guided by a fundamental concern for social justice, equity, and inclusivity.

ACU National began operations in 1991 following the amalgamation of four Catholic tertiary institutions in eastern Australia. The institutions that merged to form the university had their origins in the mid-1800s when religious orders and institutes became involved in the preparation of teachers for Catholic schools and, later, nurses for Catholic hospitals. All in all, more than twenty historical entities have contributed to the creation of ACU National, through various amalgamations, relocations, transfers of responsibilities, and diocesan initiatives. Today, the university operates within a rapidly changing educational and industrial context. Student numbers are increasing, areas of teaching and learning have changed and expanded, there is a greater emphasis on research, and e-learning plays an integral role (ACU National, 2003).

The Canberra campus is one of the smallest campuses of ACU National, where there are approximately 800 undergraduate and 200 graduate students studying to be primary or secondary school teachers through the School of Education (ACT). (Other programs offered on this campus are nursing, theology, social work, arts, and religious education.) A new model of pre-service secondary teacher education commenced with the introduction of the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) program at this campus in 2005. It marked an innovative collaborative venture between the university and a cohort of experienced secondary school teachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and its surrounding region. This partnership was forged to allow the student teachers undertaking the program to be inducted into the teaching profession with the cooperation of leading practitioners from schools in and around the ACT.

During the one-year Grad.Dip.Ed. program, students undertake two four-week block practicum placements, during which they have the opportunity to observe exemplary lessons, as well as commencing teaching. The goals of the practicum include improving students' access to innovative pedagogy and educational theory, helping them situate their own prior knowledge regarding pedagogy, and assisting them in reflecting on and evaluating their own practice. Each student is paired with a nominated mentor at the school where they are placed.

In 2007, a new dimension to the teaching practicum was added to facilitate online peer mentoring among the pre-service teachers and provide them with opportunities to reflect on teaching prior to entering full-time employment at a school. The creation of an online community to facilitate this mentorship and professional development process forms the context for the present case study. While on their practicum, student teachers used collaborative Web logging (blogging) and threaded voice discussion tools that were integrated into the university's learning management system (LMS), to share and reflect on their experiences, identify critical incidents, and invite comment on their responses and reactions from peers.

In planning, evaluating, and analyzing the outcomes of the initiative, the project facilitators sought to find answers to the following questions:

- a) **Research Question 1:** How can a communities of practice (CoP) framework, based on Wenger's (1998) work, be adopted to create an e-learning community and support professional development experiences for pre-service teachers?
- b) **Research Question 2:** What elements of a CoP were evident in the peer-to-peer relationships and interactive dialogues that occurred in the online community?

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