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A Blackboard Infusion: Strengthening the teaching experience for pre service teachers in the field.
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Abstract

This paper examines the use of the Learning Management System Blackboard, as a means of communication with pre service teachers when they are out in the field in school environments during the Professional Experience Program [PEP]. It reports on a small study that investigated the communication exchanged between the Professional Experience Coordinator and a group of pre service teachers. Communicative contributions by the PEP Coordinator were based on communication categories that provided supportive and organizational information. Pre service teachers' communicative contributions were essentially contained around teaching experiences they had to plan for in their classrooms. Requests were made for ideas to motivate students, manage student behaviour and for resources that could be used to enhance student learning. Pre service teacher communication also included a sharing of successful teaching experiences and events. Insights gained on the nature and extent of communicative contributions between pre service teachers and the PEP Coordinator using Blackboard during the PEP allowed for an understanding of the issues and concerns that were experienced. It further suggests that the accelerated communicative support and feedback accessed asynchronously by pre service teachers when they are in the field has the potential to strengthen and enhance their teaching experience during the PEP.

Introduction

The Professional Experience Program [PEP] is a fundamental component of the Bachelor of Education [Primary] at ACU National. It is also a necessary requirement of the Queensland College of Teachers for teacher registration, where a minimum of 80 days must be spent in school settings. The value of professional experience in developing teaching competence has been established (e.g. Bell, Barrett & Allison, 1985; Dodds, 1985). However, pre service teachers undertaking PEP encounter a number of challenges when they are in the field. They often experience anxiety and feelings of isolation; they are concerned about who they can trust to share any difficulties that arise; they find that the knowledge and understanding they have about teaching is far removed from what they encounter when they are actually in school contexts and they face concerns relating to accessing resources and ideas for implementing lessons they have been asked to teach. (Cohen, 2000).
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There are a number of support networks available to pre service teachers in the field. Studies have highlighted the value of peer support during PEP. Discussing the practicum and sharing classroom experiences and concerns with peers, facilitates a shared understanding of varied classroom contexts and the challenges pre service teachers face during PEP. Dialogue is particularly effective when the relationship between peers is one of friendship. Peers act as 'critical friends' who provide a safe and trusting arena for advice and support. More importantly, the dialogue that is exchanged can be an impetus for powerful self reflection and the cultivation of collaborative work practices. (Dobbins 1994; Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Cornu, 2003, La Master & Tannehill, 2001). Support for pre service teachers in the field can further be based on school- university partnerships. School university partnerships support the important contribution schools and teachers play in the development of beginning teachers (Langdon, 1999). The contributions made by such partnerships help to enrich the learning environment for pre service teachers. Carpenter (2002) acknowledges the challenges associated with

developing school –university partnerships. She suggests that such a partnership should move away form a hierarchical tertiary weighted model to one where there is an equal partnership between Education and the Professional Experience Program.

Pre service teachers also have substantial opportunity for support through shared experiences during their on-campus days in lectures, tutorials and workshops. However, they are not limited to face to face communication. Pre service teachers also engage in shared communication electronically via email. These shared experiences can be viewed as an extension of the social functioning tertiary students engage in within their own personal environment. The combination of face to face communication and electronic communication provide meaningful opportunities for pre service teachers to address concerns and issues relevant to their course work. However, during PEP the usual support that exists through social interaction and shared communication is not readily available because pre service teachers are in the field in varied and sometimes isolated school environments. In more recent times, it has been suggested that technology has the potential to alleviate the isolation and disillusionment that manifests in pre service teachers' classrooms. The use of email, list serves and bulletin boards can address the need for support for pre service teachers during PEP. (Carpenter, 2002; Cochrane-Smith, 1992; Liebermann, 200; Murray-Harvey, 1999).

The Study

The aim of this small initial project was to explore the socially constructed communicative repertoires pre service teachers engage in during the Professional Experience Program. In particular, this project sought to examine the opportunities the email communication facility within Blackboard had for providing support and encouragement to pre service teachers when they are in the field in school contexts. Blackboard is a learning management system that Australian Catholic University implemented in 2003 to support its face to face teaching. It provides a closed

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environment where email communication is self contained and not subject to the usual spam that affects the general global email system. This provides a clean environment uninhibited by extra distractions that are peripheral to the business at hand.

Electronic mailing lists and email communication are useful in providing support to tertiary students because the electronic list can be perceived as "a tool that can be used to connect students and create a community of learners" (Allen & Slutsky 2003 p.11). In this project eighty two, Bachelor of Education (Primary) pre service teachers completing their second Professional Experience Program (PEP2), their ACU Visiting Supervisors and the Professional Experience Coordinator were provided with access to the Professional Experience Program (PEP) Blackboard site. It was anticipated that the email facility within Blackboard would offer the opportunity for interaction and shared communication during the practicum. In order to examine the use of Blackboard's email facility, pre service teachers were invited to participate in an on-line anonymous survey at the completion of the Professional Experience through the PEP Blackboard site. The focus of the survey was to gather information about the nature and extent of the communicative contributions that were made during PEP2.

The Sample

There were forty six pre service teachers who completed the on-line survey at the conclusion of their second Professional Experience (PEP2). Forty one pre service teachers completed their two week block practicum for PEP2 in schools within the Brisbane CBD. Five pre service teachers completed their block practicum outside the Brisbane CBD in schools located at either the Sunshine Coast or the Gold Coast. The pre service teachers were asked to record the frequency of use of the PEP Blackboard site during PEP2. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of use of the Blackboard site

Use of Blackboard site Number of respondents Percentage of respondents
More than once per day 2 4
Daily 11 24
3-4 days per week 13 28
Weekly 12 25
Fortnightly 0 0
Occasionally 8 17
Never 1 2
Total 46 100

These results suggest that the pre service teachers were regular users of the Blackboard facility during the PEP.

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The features of the Blackboard site used by pre service teachers during PEP2 are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Features of the Blackboard site used by pre service teachers.

Features of Blackboard site used Number of responses Percentage of responses
Email 43 37
Announcements 40 35
Calendar 23 20
Discussion 1 1
Other 8 7
Total 115 100

The way in which the pre service teachers used the features of the Blackboard site offers some insight into the value of the site for shared communication.

The pre service teachers using the Blackboard email facility were asked to state their reasons for using the facility. Responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Reasons for use of the email feature.

Reason for use of email Number of responses Percentage of responses
Support 17 24
Organisational (e.g. supervisor
visit)
41 57
Social 8 11
Sharing achievement/success 6 8
Total 72 100

These results indicate that the pre service teachers who responded to the survey were regular users of Blackboard during PEP2. The survey research data further indicates that many of the pre service teachers used the email facility to access information and to gain clarification about procedural and organisational aspects of the Professional Experience, as well as to communicate with their Visiting Supervisors. Leading reasons for using the email feature tended to be for managerial issues rather than personal issues.

Discussion

The results from this small initial project suggest that the email facility in Blackboard was be used as a support network for pre service teachers through the use of interactive

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and shared communication between pre-service teachers and the PEP Coordinator when pre-service teachers are in the field during the Professional Experience. In particular, the communication facility was further used in ways that were non-hierarchical and supported cross communication between the groups. For example, shared communication between pre-service teachers - pre-service teachers, pre-service teachers - ACU Visiting Supervisors, pre-service teachers- PEP Coordinator, ACU Visiting Supervisors- PEP Coordinator. The high level of communicative contributions made during this small initial study reinforce Blackboard as a suitable medium for providing support and

encouragement to pre-service teachers when they are in the field. Communication was made by the PEP Coordinator through group emails to all pre service teachers and through personal emails to individuals. Group emails ensured that the same message was being received by all. This was found to be very useful by pre service teachers because they were able to discuss the contents of the email with each other and develop a shared understanding of what had been communicated by the PEP Coordinator. A small number of pre service teachers indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to clarify their understanding of group emails with their peers. Receiving group emails connected them to their peers and helped to minimise the feeling of isolation. It provided a sense of security that came with belonging to a group.

All emails sent during the PEP could be asynchronously accessed by pre-service teachers and the PEP Coordinator. This helped to overcome the problems usually associated with trying to communicate with pre-service teachers via telephone during the school day when they are in classrooms engaged in purposeful observations and teaching. The PEP Coordinator in this study was not always available by phone during the school day as she had school visits and a lecturing load. Asynchronous access to pre service teachers' email communication allowed the PEP Coordinator to address emails efficiently. There was some urgency noted in emails requesting support and encouragement, and lesson content information from individual pre-service teachers who no doubt anticipated a speedy reply. The accelerated reply to the emails provided the necessary support needed by the pre-service teachers as some requests were for lessons that were to be taught in the next day or two, or requests for managing behaviour strategies that were required immediately for effective and successful teaching experiences.

It is particularly interesting that these results suggest the possibility of a cultivation of collaborative work practices through interaction and shared communicative opportunities encouraged during PEP2 as suggested by Groundwater-Smith et al (2003). The dialogue exchanged in the emails was an impetus for powerful reflection, allowing pre service teachers to develop an ability to talk about teaching and interact in a professional way.

The high levels of communicative participation recorded by the pre-service teachers reinforce Blackboard as a suitable medium to affect the benefits of collaborative work practices. Direction setting and influencing practices were enacted by all pre-service teachers who possessed a wide range of expertise and skill in using Blackboard. Blackboard communications also appeared to be successful in connecting pre-service teachers and building relationships between the groups. The intensity of communicative

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contributions relating to organisational aspects of the Professional Experience also underpins the notion of collaboration. Between 50% and 75% of pre service teacher communication were in this area. Communication is critical to collaboration. It appeared that it was indeed the facilitation of reciprocal processes that enabled those involved in the Professional Experience to define a sense of being part of a supportive and collegial educational community (Harris, 2006).

Sample quotes

It reassured me that I was on the right track

It was comforting to know that the support was there for me

It really acted as a support network

The survey data revealed that the pre-service teachers used Blackboard as a communicative tool in ways that reflected a shared understanding of professional responsibilities and an appreciation of the freedom and scope that was available to them to access information concerning essential organisational and administrative requirements.

Sample quotes

It provided a central point of communication that saved time

If I had difficulties understanding anything I could email other students or lecturers for information and clarification

It enabled us to touch base with the University

It was a useful means of communicating with PEP organisers regarding urgent and other matters

It allowed contact and messages to be sent immediately

The relatively high volume of communication approximately 25% (Refer Table 3) dealing with support issues was consistent with findings of Scapp (2006) that communities of participation that contribute to education and learning in some way are created. This is evidenced in the following quotes that were indicative of 24% of the results.

Sample quotes

The opportunities for communication were helpful as it helped me to feel connected to uni and messages of encouragement were very helpful

It was reassuring to have friends and lecturers there

I used it often for advice for lessons from my friends. It is a quick and easy way to share concerns and ideas. Sometimes I just needed to bounce ideas, Then I could clarify and get on with planning and it was great to know I was having similar challenges to others

I found it was the connection, which allowed me to see what was happening with others, and to find out what was happening in their class.

It acted as a support network and a reflection tool during my professional experience

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The responses of the pre-service teachers highlight the value of supportive networks that promote trusting relationships. This enabled the pre-service teachers to have a psychological safety net that offered freedom to connect with others, to find and give reassurance and to build relationships. This tentative finding supports the view of Harris (2005) that patterns of relationships enable participants in a community to construct meaning and knowledge together. From a constructivist perspective there were elements of emerging collaborative work practices involving reciprocity, purposive learning and action in the Professional Experience community (Lambert, 2005).

Conclusion

This small initial project explored the opportunity for providing support and encouragement to a group of pre-service teachers during their second Professional Experience (PEP2), through shared communicative contributions using the email facility within the Learning Management System - Blackboard. Results of the on-line survey highlight the significance of the email facility in providing opportunities for reciprocal and shared communications between pre-service teachers, ACU Visiting Supervisors and the PEP Coordinator. The value of the email facility can be linked to efficient, speedy and asynchronous communication that can be readily accessed by pre-service teachers in the field and the PEP Coordinator.

The results of this project further suggest that the pre-service teachers in this project have been provided with experiences in their Professional Experience Program that both support and suggest a cultivation of collaborative work practices. By providing preservice teachers with opportunities to participate in multi-dimensional communication, they are being presented with experiences that promote the sharing of ideas and their effectiveness as communicators. In particular, they are presented with opportunities to collaborate and reflect on their teaching experiences and the many challenges faced as pre service teachers in the field. In doing so, the support provided by shared communication through Blackboard will contribute to enhancing pre service teachers' learning, reflective practice and ultimately their future performance as teachers in school

contexts.

Implications for learning and teaching

This project was carried out as a small initial study to explore communicative
contributions during a Professional Experience (PEP2) using Blackboard. The results are
by no means extensive, nor did they include the three other cohorts of pre-service
teachers who participated in the Professional Experience Program. However, the
connection between support for pre service teachers in the field and collaborative work
practices through shared communication that became evident in the study should be
further examined as a means of modelling collaboration to pre-service teachers. It is
anticipated that further investigation into the use of the Blackboard site will be carried out
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in the near future in order to fully examine the interactive and communicative support
that can be offered to pre-service teachers during their Professional Experiences.
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