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CHAPTER 7

Using iPods to capture professional dialogue between early career teachers to enrich reflective practice

Jessica Mantei and Lisa Kervin

Abstract:

Teachers early in their careers usually describe classroom teaching as complex and at times overwhelming as they endeavour to put into practice their beliefs and understandings about learning. For many, their university experiences seem removed from the reality of the classroom, they struggle to make strong links between theory and practice and as the collegial networks forged in the tutorial setting become less accessible, many teachers feel isolated from familiar and trusted networks. In this study, iPods were used to extend an established learning community beyond the university setting by creating audio files of professional dialogue captured during workshops and uploading them to a repository for teachers to access as needed. This chapter explores the process of capturing and sharing dialogue around teaching reflections between and among early career teachers.

Challenges for teachers in transition

The literature describes teaching as a complex task that draws on a range of attributes, both personal and professional. From the outset of their employ, teachers face many of the same responsibilities and dilemmas as their more experienced colleagues (White, 2005; McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2004), and it is this combination of simultaneously teaching and learning how to teach that creates tension for early career teachers (Manuel, 2003; Pajares, 1992 in McCormack et al., 2004). Opportunities to collaborate and build collegial networks during this transition from preservice teacher to early career teacher is important in the development of professional identity as it supports strong connections between theory and practice and an understanding of what it is to be a teacher (Bintz & Dillard, 2007; Allen, 2005).

Hammerness, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) argue that the transition from preservice teacher to teacher can be examined through three principles of learning as follows.

Principle 1

Preservice teachers enter the profession with a number of preconceived ideas about the nature of teaching based on their observations as a primary or secondary school student and their subsequent inferences about 'what good teaching looks like and what makes it work' (p. 367). These beliefs are not necessarily the reality of teaching and are therefore challenged early in a teacher's experience.

Principle 2

Teaching requires deep theoretical, content and organisational knowledge and the ability to enact that knowledge as it is required. This is supported by White's (2005) observation that experienced teachers are able to make 'split second' and intuitive decisions that result in success for their students (p. 15). The ability to make these types of decisions in the moment can remain challenging for some time as deep

understandings continue to develop (Griffin, 2003). Teachers early in their careers are often tempted to revert to methods of teaching and learning that they perceive to be safe, that is, experiences from their own education (Griffin, 2003).

Principle 3

A metacognitive approach enables the transition from preservice teacher to early career teacher through reflection on their development, the acknowledgement of their strengths and the identification of areas for professional growth. The metacognitive approach can be supported by a reflective journal enabling the construction of professional knowledge throughout their careers (Griffin, 2003); such a method affords reflective practice that is rigorous and systematic rather than simply mentally replaying an event (Rodgers, 2002).

It is acknowledged that no amount of preservice education can fully prepare or equip teachers with all of the skills and strategies needed for successful classroom teaching (Gore, Williams & Ladwig, 2006). However, teacher education programs that attempt to develop in students the ability to challenge preconceptions, to build deep understandings and to systematically reflect on practice have the potential to prepare teachers who are competent in their capacity to learn from their teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Strengthening professional networks through dialogue is one way early career teachers may be supported in this transitional period.

Technology affords these opportunities

Mobile technologies such as iPods have the potential to support early career teachers in their transition from preservice teacher to teacher as they work both within and beyond the physical university context. Whilst much of the research is focused on the use of iPods as a tool for dissemination of information from teacher to learner (e.g., Scott, Nishimura & Kato, 2006; Miller & Piller, 2005; McCombs & Liu, 2006), Frydenburg (2006) argues that their potential is greater, describing iPods as not only a ‘useful tool for disseminating course information to students but [that they become] even more powerful when students are responsible for creating that content for their classmates’ (p. 9). It is within this creation of audio texts as a tool for reflection both on one’s own dialogue and on the dialogue of others that the opportunities are realised for quality learning and community building.

Quality learning occurs when learners have time and space to make connections between theory they have studied and the experiences they have had in practice (Billings, 2005); and mobile technologies can create these opportunities. A blended learning environment—one that includes both online and physical learning experiences—is identified in the literature as powerful in catering for a range of learning preferences because it builds on the community within the physical environment and provides flexibility in the virtual (Soccio, 2005). Frydenburg (2006) argues that one is complemented rather than replaced by the other, observing that audio files such as podcasts ‘added value to, but did not replace the in-class experience’ (p. 9).

This finding is exemplified by Ito's (2003) observation that the power of the blended system is not only its convenience but that it also facilitates learning that is 'non-threatening and extremely flexible' (p. 47).

Using iPods to capture professional dialogue between and among early career teachers creates the opportunity for these conversations to be revisited. Frydenburg (2006) found that the majority of tertiary students who accessed audio files in his study did so to clarify understandings. Pownell (2006) identified the opportunities for students to access such professional experiences outside the confines of the traditional tertiary teaching setting and at times suitable for the learner as a benefit of using mobile technologies to support learning. It is this chance to revisit, clarify, challenge and integrate new understandings that make the opportunities afforded by the capture and provision of professional dialogue files valuable for learners as they transition from preservice teacher to early career teacher.

Theoretical framework

A community of learners is defined as a 'place where caring, responsive people nourish each others learning in the context of authentic relationships' (Miller, 2000, p. 9), these relationships are enriched through just inclusion of all members in discussion and decision making in a safe and supportive environment (Wells, 1999). Members in the community take responsibility not only for their own learning, but for the development of the collective knowledge of the group as well (Groundwater-Smith, 1999). Such a framework supports this study through its focus on the development of the collective professional knowledge of all early career teachers within the group and their transition from preservice teacher to early career teacher.

Common to the research around communities of learners are the principles of trusting relationships between members, reciprocal learning, diversity in experience, expertise and interests of members, commitment to learning and the development of shared understandings for the benefit of both community and the individual (Cooper & Boyd, 1997; Grundy, 1999; Miller, 2000; Collins, 2006). It is through the lens of a community of learners framework that the development of professional identity and professional growth may be examined.

The context of the research

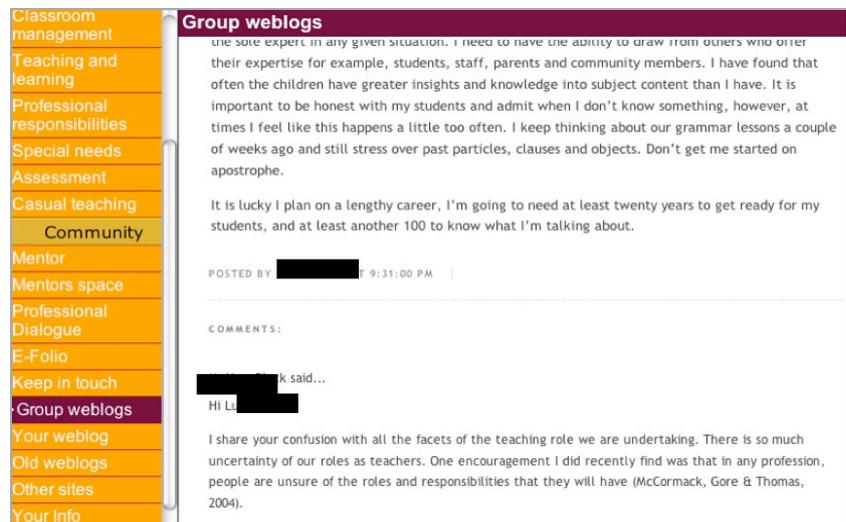
A total of 48 early career teachers, nine men and 39 women participated in this study. The participants were enrolled at the University of Wollongong in the Bachelor of Education degree. Having completed a three year Bachelor of Teaching degree, these early career teachers are qualified to teach in primary school classrooms while they complete their fourth year of study – the Bachelor of Education. The opportunity to teach and study simultaneously provides these participants with opportunities to test out their beliefs and approaches to facilitating learning in classrooms and to reflect on their efforts within an academic environment focused on enriching the theoretical underpinnings of sound pedagogy. At the

time of this study, the participants were completing *Reflective Practice*, a core subject within their degree that explores the complexity of teaching and the crucial role that systematic and sustained reflection plays in the development of professional identity and deep understanding of the nature of learning.

The *Reflective Practice* subject engages learners in both physical and virtual environments. The early career teachers participate in face to face workshop sessions for three hours per week over a 13 week semester and also interact as an online community of learners on the BEST website (*Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers*). This website was created for the use of students within the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong. Among its many features, it affords a range of interactions between community members including online mentoring and the creation and sharing of weblogs (Herrington, Herrington, Kervin & Ferry, 2006).

Figure 1 shows an example of interactions through blogs on the BEST site.

Figure 1: Interactions through blogs on the BEST site



Describing the context of the study

Professional reading and reflection form a significant component of the workload for early career teachers in the *Reflective Practice* subject. Readings are selected to support and develop the focus of workshop sessions and in response to the needs of those enrolled in the subject. In this study, ten readings were selected that represented the diverse circumstances of the early career teachers in the subject.

Table 1 lists the focus of each workshop and the corresponding reading selected to support the focus and to stimulate dialogue between and among the readers.

Table 1: Reading and its focus for workshops: Professional Reading Schedule

Reading	Dialogue focus
McCormack, A., Gore, J., & Thomas, K. (2004). Learning to teach: Narratives from early career teachers. <i>Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education</i> , University of Melbourne, Melbourne.	Values and identity
Cambourne, B. (2001) What Do I Do with the Rest of the Class?: The Nature of Teaching-Learning Activities. <i>Language Arts</i> 79(2), 124 – 135	Curriculum
Lapp, D., Flood, J. & Goss, K. (2000) Desks don't move – Students do: In effective classroom environments. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 54(1) 31 – 36	Planning
Hopkins, D. (2003) How to teach better: Good pedagogy is good learning. <i>Curriculum Corporation Conference</i>	Learning
Rodgers, C. (2002). Defining Reflection: Another Look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking. <i>Teachers College Record</i> 104(4), 842 – 866	Assessment
Labbo, L. D., Montero, M. K. & Eakle, A. J. (2001). Learning how to read what's displayed on school hallway walls - and what's not. <i>Reading Online</i> 5(3). Available: http://www.readingonline.org/newliteracies/lit_index.asp?HREF=labbo/index.html	Organisation
Clarke, M. (2000) Direction and support for new non-Aboriginal teachers in remote Aboriginal community schools in the Northern Territory. <i>Australian Journal of Indigenous Education</i> 28(2), 1-8 OR Trimingham-Jack, C. & Hitchen, H. (2004) Giving all/reaping rewards: An account of a new graduate teaching in remote Indigenous community schools. <i>Education in Rural Australia</i> 14(1), 32-50 OR Cameron, J. M. R. (1994) Beginner's tale. <i>Education in Rural Australia</i> 4(2), 15-21	Values and identity
Townsend, D. (2005). Facing reality: Talking about the big educational issues is the key to school success. <i>Australian Educator</i> , 45, 24-27	Communication

The task for each person was to read, reflect and respond to the literature in relation to his or her existing understandings, ready to engage in professional dialogue with their peers during workshops. The expectation was conveyed during initial workshops that everyone would be prepared to contribute to the discussion and to explore the issues and themes within each reading. A framework was provided to support reflection on the reading and subsequent sharing during professional dialogue. The framework allowed the readers to consider each article in response to the following questions:

- What are the key points in this article for me and why?
- What puzzled or confused me?
- What are the implications for my professional identity as a teacher?

The early career teachers self selected into groups of three to five members and one iPod and microphone was allocated to each group. Consent was obtained from each participant to capture the professional dialogue of the group and for it to be uploaded to the BEST site for the benefit of not only group members, but for other members within the *Reflective Practice* learning community as well. Each week students met as a group to discuss the reading with the

goal of capturing 15- 20 minutes of sustained professional dialogue on the iPod. All workshop members were asked to refrain from naming schools, staff members and students throughout the dialogue in order to maintain confidentiality and protect their identity. The researchers monitored the dialogue and used editing software to remove identifying remarks prior to converting them to mp3 files and uploading them to the BEST site.

The professional dialogue files were available to participants as they reflected on their practice, constructed and modified weblogs, responded to the issues raised in both the virtual and physical communities and as they completed assessment tasks. Although not assessed as a separate entity, the professional dialogue informed reflection, analysis and synthesis conducted in assessment tasks throughout the *Reflective Practice* subject.

Framing questions

The following research questions framed our investigation of the role of professional dialogue in the professional growth of early career teachers:

- How do early career teachers describe the process of reading, reflecting and sharing their emerging professional understandings?
- How can mobile technologies support the processes of reflection and sharing?
- How does the creation of a repository of professional dialogue audio files support early career teachers studying and teaching in the *Reflective Practice* subject?

Subsequent to reading each article, groups met to discuss their response using the framing questions as a guide. Group members were observed to build on each others emerging understandings as they made connections to personal experience, experiences of those within the group and the stories they knew from their extended networks. By way of example, the dialogue below shows how discussion began with the framing questions, moved into personal response and then encapsulated the varied experiences within the group.

Excerpts from one group's response to a dialogue task

P1 I thought the article was very insightful with regard to...

P2 Yes, I agree – I agree with...

P3 And I agree

P1 What are the key points of this article?

P2 I'll just read this quote, shall I?...

P3 Well I agree with it.

P1 Totally! 100%

P2 ...do you agree?

P4 Absolutely

P2 Do you want to hear the quote again? (Reads the quote)

...

P4 Who defines who's... And that's the big debate – that's kind of like...

P1 But I'm talking about...

P4 But doesn't that come back to your own personal opinion? ...

P3 Well, that's exactly what I was going to say...

P2 Yes, well see for me, what I think – listening to that quote – I think...

P3 And do you think that comes with time?

P2 Yes

P1 Do you think a new, new out teacher actually has that?

P4 That's exactly what it's sort of like on my prac...

P3 Yes, I've read that in there somewhere.

P1 And I think that's a really good quote that sums it up.

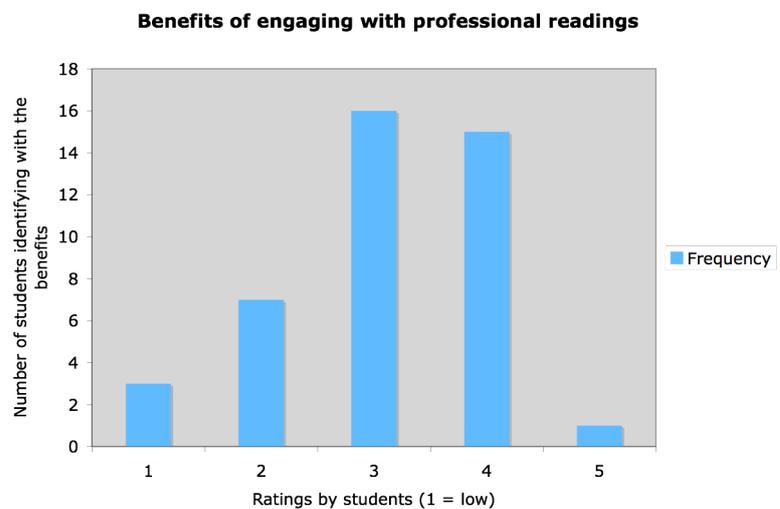
P3 Yes! Totally!

Findings

Students were asked to evaluate the learning opportunities offered through the professional dialogue recordings through both closed and open questions. Forty two students completed this survey and questionnaire designed to explore the ways that they conceptualise the task within the context of their own professional growth and experience. Quantitative data (closed questions) were collected as the students were asked to rate the benefits of the experiences on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with a score of 5 indicating that the student believed the activity to be of the highest benefit to their learning. Qualitative data (open questions) enriched this information as the students elaborated on the challenges and benefits of using iPods to capture and share professional dialogue. For the purposes of this chapter descriptive statistics generated will be examined in connection with our preliminary analysis of open ended questions.

Question 1 asked the students to identify the degree to which the professional dialogue task supported their engagement with the set readings for the *Reflective Practice* subject and the results are graphed in Figure 2. Most students identified that the responsibility attached to the expectations for professional dialogue was either somewhat or quite beneficial in supporting them to engage with the readings, whilst only 3 of the 42 students felt the task was low in benefit for supporting their engagement with the readings.

Figure 2: Engaging with the professional readings

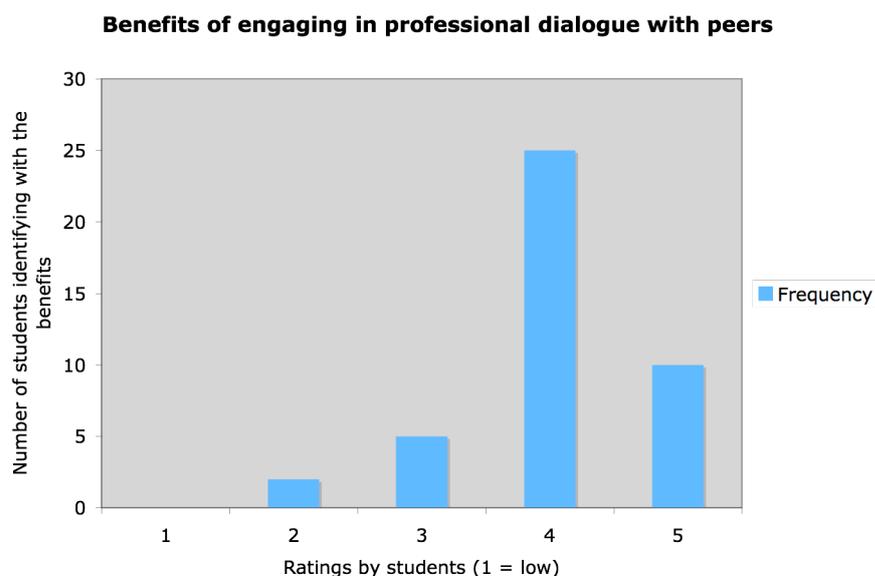


Analysis of responses to open questions in the questionnaires revealed commonalities between responses; students identified the opportunity to explore points of view within the literature, meeting the responsibilities of completing and reflecting on the readings each

week and being prepared for peer discussions as benefits of the requirement that the readings were read in preparation for each tutorial workshop. One student's response encapsulated the responses of many, '...it forces you to do the readings – Ha! But no, it goes further than that as it forces you to think about them as well'.

The second question explored the students' opinions about the value of participating in professional dialogue with their peers and the results are graphed in Figure 3. Each week, the students met with the same (self selected) group and many used the framework of questions each time to guide their discussion. Data analysis revealed that the students considered the opportunity to spend time engaging with their peers was of considerable benefit to their learning. No student identified the opportunity as being of low benefit and just 2 of 42 students considered it of little benefit.

Figure 3: Opportunities for professional dialogue with peers



Reasons the students valued the opportunity to spend time in professional discussion were revealed within the questionnaire. Most students indicated they felt it was a valuable opportunity to 'talk out issues, questions and thoughts', to gather different perspectives or to confirm developing beliefs of their own.

A smaller group identified as beneficial the chance to hear about the experiences of others, both in the readings and in the professional dialogue group. For example, on reading the experiences of a range of early career teachers in McCormack, Gore and Thomas' (2004) article, *Learning to teach: Narratives from early career teachers*, one student explained

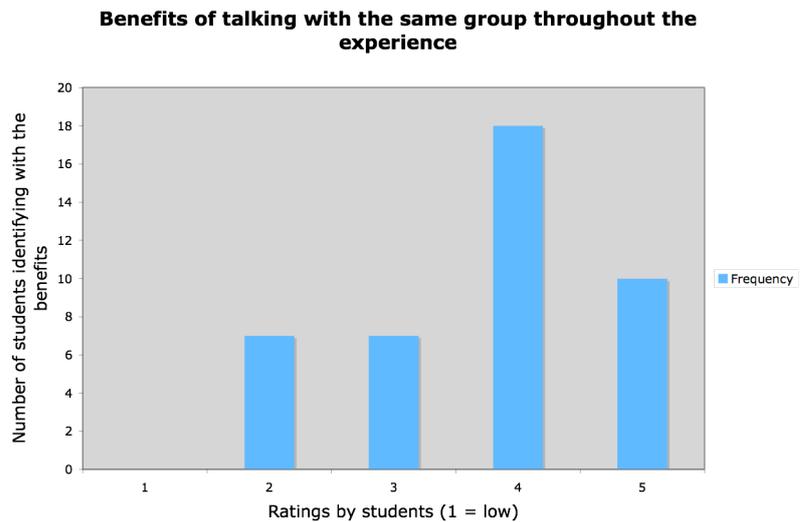
I really took to heart the fact that all these people are coming out here [to teach]...all of them are finding the same thing, so it makes me feel so much more reassured. Yes, reassured that when I go out and go, "Oh my gosh, I cannot believe that happened", that other people are feeling the same way.

Those who identified the task as being less beneficial observed that some of their peers took the time as an opportunity to demonstrate

their superior knowledge and thinking and that they felt somewhat intimidated to share what they really believed due to ‘worry about what others may think’.

In responding to the third question, exploring perceptions of the benefits of working each week with the same group, the students demonstrated a strong bond within the groups. Evident in the graphed results in Figure 4, most students identified as quite beneficial (18 students) or highly beneficial (10 students) the chance to regroup with a familiar set of people each week. No student indicated that retaining the same groups was of low benefit to their learning.

Figure 4: Benefits of talking with the same group each week



Whilst all students provided informed consent to participate, almost all described initial discomfort about being involved in the task, they used such terms as ‘nervous’, ‘awkward’, ‘apprehensive’, ‘intimidated’, ‘weird’ and ‘self-conscious’. One student responded ‘I really don’t want to do this’, whilst another felt that the task was an ‘invasion of privacy’. What is interesting, though, is that the majority of students indicated that their discomfort eased as they became accustomed to the group dynamics and the dialogue process. Later descriptions revealed that the students felt ‘fine’, ‘more confident’, ‘looking forward to the discussions’, ‘comfortable’ and even ‘excited’. In fact, the student who felt indignant about the invasion of privacy later said

[Now I am] not so worried about what I have to say and I like finding out what’s in their [other group members’] heads. I enjoy it, especially when we get to go outside and relax on the grass and enjoy the afternoon. It’s a nice way to wind down after a flat out lesson with the copious amounts of work and thinking that is required.

Questions 1 to 3 on the survey aimed to gather information about the students’ perceptions of the recording of and the implications on their learning. The final questions sought to understand the role of the professional dialogue audio files in supporting reflection and developing understandings. Students were asked about the benefit of being able to download the audio files from the BEST site to listen to

the dialogue outside the tutorial setting in support of their learning preferences and learning styles. Initial reservations shared were organisational, some students expressed concern about the time required to listen to a file and also the inconvenience of breaching the university quota for allowable student downloads.

More promising, though, were the comments of the students who had solved these issues of management. These students made strong connections to the value of belonging to this community. One student described it as valuable in providing an ‘insight into how others took the readings and the experiences they’ve had’, while another felt reassured ‘knowing that my fellow peers are feeling the same as me and experiencing similar situations, knowing that I am not alone – which makes me feel a whole lot better!’. Evidence of a growing professional identity among some responses was clear as the students referred to themselves and their fellow students as ‘teachers’, ‘professionals’ and ‘colleagues’.

The potential for learning beyond the tutorial setting was also recognised as a benefit of the professional dialogue task. Responses included the observation that the use of iPods and the BEST site enabled them to ‘listen in’ to the conversations of other groups that they were not part of, further informing their professional understandings. The opportunity to revisit the dialogue as part of reflection also allowed the students to clarify their understandings of their own conversations and also to check the interpretations within the conversations of others in the group.

An unintended, yet pleasing benefit was also identified within 10 of the evaluations from this group; the use of iPods was recognised as supporting these teachers in developing technology skills for use in their classrooms. The ability to ‘stop and start a recording’, to ‘learn about another use for iPods’ and to ‘learn the technology of the iPod’ was something deemed useful to add to the teaching armoury. While this may not have been a learning objective as we defined and set the task, it is an important area of professional learning.

Discussion

Opportunities for groups to meet regularly to discuss the professional readings built community amongst this cohort of students. The mobile devices enabled the students to meet and record dialogue in places where they felt comfortable. Students reported feeling more supported and less alone as they shared their thoughts, heard ideas that confirmed and challenged their interpretations, and reflected upon subsequent implications for their professional practice. They were actively involved in creating their own materials (Frydenburg, 2006) to represent their learning and provide aids for further reflection.

The iPods offered significant affordances for the task. Having the iPod to record the dialogue to be later uploaded onto the BEST site increased the students’ accountability for the task. Students reported the need to keep up with the reading schedule so they were able to offer their thoughts, comments and reflections as silence was so obvious through the virtual medium. With this accountability came

rigorous and systematic reflection (Rodgers, 2002) as students prepared for, engaged with, and reflected on the task.

The mobility of the devices supported the learning beyond the tutorial workshop because they could access files outside class time and listen to them in a range of locations. This flexibility of time and space allowed students to make deeper connections (Billings, 2005) between theory and practice. The BEST site served as another learning space as the dialogue files were housed in the community repository. This provided convenient access to materials uploaded to the BEST site where students could access materials as needed, revisiting key content, ideas and interpretations. This provides a good example of the potential for mobile technologies to support learning where students direct both space and time (Pownell, 2006).

Concluding comments

The practice of teaching is complex and at times overwhelming for preservice teachers as they endeavour to put into practice their beliefs and understandings about learning. This study provides example of how mobile technologies can be used to record professional dialogue focused on complex issues to support students in making strong links between theory and practice as they operate in collegial networks. Our research has shown the ability to record, store, access and share these materials supported this cohort of students.

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