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From surviving to thriving: the use of information and communication technology in an induction program for early career teachers in personal development, health and physical education

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From Surviving to Thriving: The Use of Information and Communication Technology in an Induction Program for Early Career Teachers in Personal Development, Health and Physical Education

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Abstract This paper is a discussion of a project with both face-to-face and online components designed to support early career teachers from the key learning area of Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) across three teacher employing authorities in New South Wales, Australia. The project was initiated in 2004 by the Australian Council for Health Physical Education and Recreation, NSW (ACHPER) in conjunction with the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme. Supporting all aspects of the project is the BEST:PDHPE (Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers) website that has been developed to provide resources and communication tools. Research associated with the project will include the identification of the issues affecting early career teachers in physical and health education, the effectiveness of a mixed mode of professional development opportunities and the benefits to experienced teachers as mentors of early career teachers.

Introduction

The professional development program for physical and health education early career teachers, 'From Surviving to Thriving', was initiated in response to recent reports on the high rates of attrition among early career teachers, particularly in the first five years of teaching. Whilst the figures have yet to be studied comprehensively in Australia, particularly in relation to physical and health education teachers, the recent *Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales* highlighted the upward trend in "early career teacher resignation rates in New South Wales (NSW) over the past four years" (Ramsey, 2000, p.197). In the year 2000, the highest numbers of resignations were from teachers aged 25-29 years. Whilst teachers in this age group "make up a very small percentage of the current teaching service, the actual number resigning is far higher than for any other age group" Leete (2001, cited in Williams, 2002, p.4). Such statistics are also reflected internationally where despite increasing attempts to attract quality graduates into teacher education and growing support for induction and mentoring of beginning teachers, it is well "established in countries in the Western world, such as England, that between 25% and 40% of all newly-recruited teachers resign or burnout in their first three to five years of teaching" (Ewing and Smith, 2003, p. 15). Darling-Hammond (1990) states that it is often these early negative experiences that are the most detrimental and without adequate support and assistance, it is these experiences that result in beginning teachers leaving within their first five years in the profession.

A review of the literature specifically identifies the issues of concern related to early career teachers in general that may act alone or in conjunction with others to result in those early negative experiences. From an Australian context, issues that may contribute to the negative experiences of early career teachers are associated with adjusting to the demands of teaching fulltime (combining management, programming and extra curricula activities); negotiating colleague relationships; staff room, school and community cultures; issues of professional identity and lack of rewards for professional growth, and conflicts between the idealism of being a beginning teacher and the reality that awaits (CDEST, 2002; Ramsey 2000; Ewing and Smith, 2003; McCormack, Gore and Thomas, 2004). In addition, physical and health education teachers often face specific challenges. These have been identified as low status for their subject, physical isolation within the school setting, fewer colleagues for support, lack of appropriate resources or specialist teaching spaces, and their expected social identity (Macdonald & Kirk, 1996; Schemp & Graber, 1992; Smyth, 1995; Wright, 1997; cited in McCormack and Thomas, 2003).

Such an array of issues identifies the need for a range of measures to be undertaken to support early career teachers, including system led policies that address issues related to reducing the demands of teaching fulltime. Most importantly however, the range of issues underlines both the need for a range of measures to be implemented for early career teachers over time (Ganser, 2002; McCormack, et al., 2004; Ramsey, 2000; Schuck, 2003a) and, that a range of stakeholders be involved in their provision; teacher employing authorities, individual schools, universities, professional associations and early career teachers themselves (CDEST, 2002; Schuck and Segal, 2002; Ramsey, 2000).

Professional Development for Early Career Teachers

Given the clear link that has been established between the provision of quality induction programs which include mentoring and collegial networks (CDEST, 2002; Carter & Francis 2001; Kane and Russell, 2003; McCormack, et al., 2004), and early career teachers' future performance, one of the most recent major reports into teacher education in NSW has highlighted the inadequate provision of induction programmes and structures in teaching as compared to other professions (Ramsey, 2000). Indeed, others have also agreed in the harshest of terms, referring to education as "the profession that eats its young" Halford (1998, cited in Schuck, 2003a, p. 51).

The Ramsey Review (2000) led to the mandating of supervisors for early career teachers in the state system, along with an expectation from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) that mentors also be provided. However, despite these changes and the development of general induction programs for early career teachers by the major employing authorities in NSW such as the DET and the various Catholic dioceses, recent research by McCormack and Thomas (2003) has indicated that fewer than half of early career teachers have participated in formal induction programs. Ewing & Smith (2003) in their longitudinal study also found that "the majority of early career teachers felt that their introduction into the first year of teaching was neither systematic or well planned and managed" (p.30). They also reported that only 40 per cent of early career teachers had been provided with a mentor and that only half of the respondents were assigned a supervisor. These results reinforce the results of a national study (CDEST, 2002) which found Australia wide, that "early career teachers had a less than 50:50 chance of accessing systemic support in their first year of teaching" (p.14).

Whilst studies have shown there was general satisfaction by early career teachers with induction programs and mentoring within schools when it did occur, mentoring was seen to be of more value if provided by experienced teachers, teacher educators and other early career teachers from outside the school (McCormack et.al, 2004; Schuck and Segal, 2002). The reasons for such a view were related to issues of confidentiality and the desire not to disclose their difficulties to their colleagues and supervisors (Schuck and Segal, 2002).

Given the affordances of ICT, it is now possible to overcome many of the concerns expressed by early career teachers about mentors within the school context. Whilst the provision of mentors at the school site is also of value, Schuck (2003b) found that "electronic support communities are of value to beginning teachers and mentors and that many of the problems experienced by traditional dyadic mentoring relationships … can be overcome through this medium" (p.1909). She is further supported by Bruffee (1993) and Naidu & Olsen (1996) who have highlighted the potential of technology to support early career teachers by having continued and frequent contact with others thus supporting a philosophy of collaborative learning; sharing their practical learning experiences towards the development of a collective body of knowledge; discussing content material and their understanding of that content in light of their practical learning experiences; engaging in reflective practice that is valued by mentors and peers; developing a support network to facilitate ongoing information sharing; and combating isolation through the development of a networked community that includes access to peers, mentors and resources.

The Project – From Surviving to Thriving

This project builds upon other online resources that have been developed for the professional development of early career teachers, for example: the Ontario Teachers' Federation's *Survive and Thrive Virtual Conference for Beginning Teachers* and Indiana University's *The Novice Teacher Support Project*. Unlike these projects, the community at this stage will consist in the main of PDHPE teachers who attend the induction workshop and recent graduates of the University of Wollongong. Given the strong tertiary network of NSW universities who train PDHPE teachers, it is planned that additional groups will be able to access the project in the not to distant future.

Recognising the need for professional development programs to commence early in a teacher's career and to clearly meet the distinct needs of participants (Ramsey, 2000), the project has been developed with the following guidelines in mind:

- Involvement of a variety of high quality professional development opportunities such as, an induction workshop, mentoring opportunities and collegial networks.
- An ICT framework that supports teachers not creates additional time demands
- Ongoing and responsive to negotiated teacher needs
- Encouragement of professional dialogue about teachers' work, and
- Involvement of a range of education stakeholders

ACHPER NSW with funding from the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program has joined with the NSW Department of Education and Training, Catholic Education Commission, Association of Independent Schools, NSW PDHPE Teachers' Association (PDHPETA), NSW Professional Teachers' Council and the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, to implement a professional development program for early career teachers of physical and health education commencing in early 2005. To assist in the organisation of the induction workshop and coordinate the mentoring program, a professional officer has been appointed on a one-day a week basis for the length of the project.

Phase One - The Induction Workshop
A two-day conference for early career teachers of PDHPE has been developed with the content based on suggestions from a reference group consisting of early career teachers, education system consultants, professional organisations and academics. The target group of teachers (120) will be those PDHPE teachers in their first 2 years of teaching across all education systems. Symposiums and workshops will focus on early career teacher induction issues, classroom management, new syllabi in PDHPE, a quality teaching framework, professional teaching standards, and practical activities such as game sense, initiative games, gymnastics and dance.

Phase Two - Online Mentoring
As a result of the induction conference, early career teachers will be invited to be involved in online mentoring over a further two terms. Whilst it is hoped that all who wish to be involved are able to be accommodated, priority will be given to early career teachers who teach in rural or remote NSW, teach in disadvantaged schools in urban NSW, or who have limited PDHPE specific support.

Experienced classroom teachers of PDHPE affiliated with ACHPER and the NSW PDHPETA who are interested in participating as mentors will be asked to submit an expression of interest to the project management committee. These will be judged against set criteria to determine the suitability of each applicant to become a mentor. The online mentoring phase of the project would see pairs of targeted early career PDHPE teachers matched with an experienced PDHPE classroom teacher after an additional one-day workshop where the opportunity will exist for both mentees and mentors to mix both socially and professionally. At the completion of the online mentoring phase a debriefing will be conducted with participants.

Online Collegial Networks

Participants at the induction workshop will also have the option of being involved in collegial networks of early career teachers of between 3-5 teachers, over the further two terms. Such groupings of participants will be suggested at the conference after an examination of the participant's backgrounds however this would be left in the main to the participant's discretion.

A Supportive ICT Framework

The use of ICT to facilitate the implementation of this project builds on previous work as reported in Hearne, Lockyer, Rowland, & Patterson (2004), Lockyer, Patterson, Rowland & Hearne (2002) and Rowland, Lockyer & Patterson (2001). The experiences of developing both an online physical and health education community and the implementation of a mentoring program between 2nd and 4th year physical and health education undergraduates has provided a sound background to the use of ICT in this project. These experiences coupled with the University of Wollongong's recent support of an integrated electronic network to support and enhance the induction of its own undergraduate students (primary, diploma of education, physical and health education) into the teaching workforce, have combined to provide a sound basis for the implementation of this project.

Providing the virtual meeting place for participants in the project is the BEST:PDHPE (Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers) website (Figure 1), developed for education graduates from the University of Wollongong and participants in this project. As discussed by Herrington, Herrington, Lockyer and Brown (2004), significant developments have already been made by the Faculty of Education in the construction of the original site designed for primary students, with BEST:PDHPE utilising a similar framework and principles.

Figure 1: The BEST: PDHPE Website

The site has been specifically designed for PDHPE early career teachers utilising the learning management system, Janison Toolbox, incorporating learning objects from Edna Online. Participants are provided with a user-friendly interface where they have the option of entering the site from hot-spots on the introduction home page or using the side-bar navigation options.

The site consists of a variety of resources that reflects both the issues that have been identified by early career PDHPE teachers; Classroom management, Professional responsibilities, Teaching and learning, Special needs, Assessment, and Casual teaching, as well as providing a range of interactive tools such as Forum and Chat that will support the variety of professional development opportunities to be utilised in this project.

Phase One - Induction Workshop

As participants register for the Induction Workshop, they will directed to the BEST website and provided with directions as to how they may access relevant information that will assist them in the first school term as well provide ongoing support after the two-day workshop. Participants are able to access resources including web resources, lesson plans, online articles and research papers on a range of issues that are grouped together based on the various themes that have been identified. Participants will also be able to access ActiveHealth (www.activehealth.uow.edu.au), (Figure 2) a Web-based physical and health education environment that encompasses:

- on-line access to the Physical and Health Education program at the University of Wollongong;
- physical and health education teaching resources;
- facilitation of professional development activities; and,
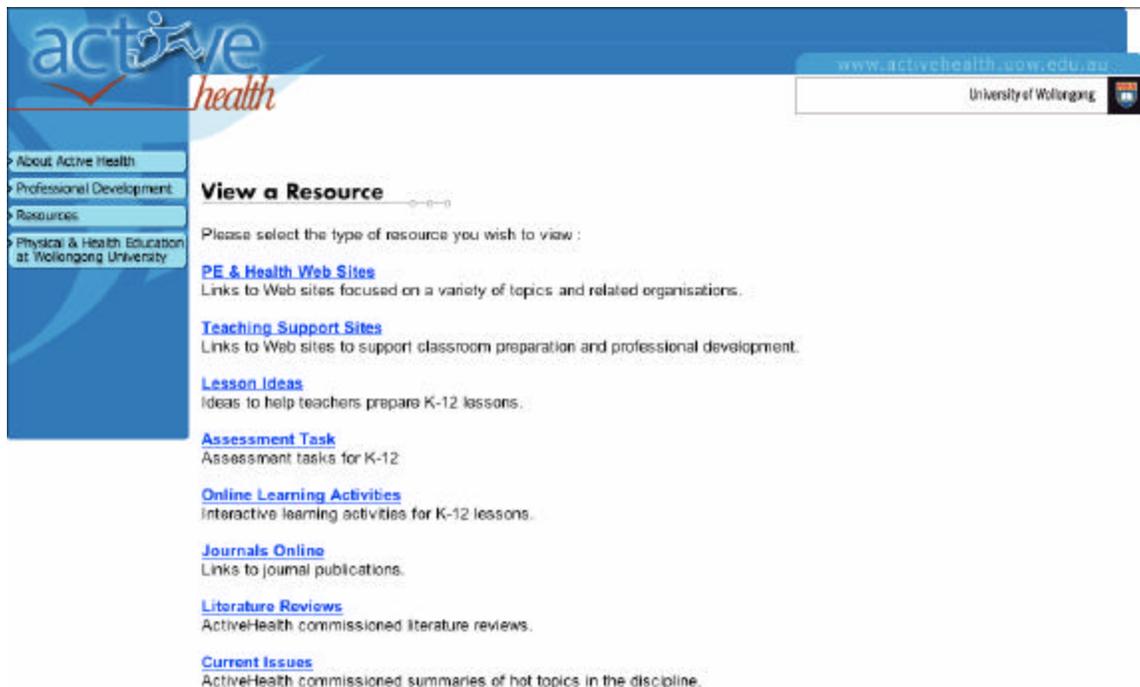- access to physical and health information sources.

Figure 2: ActiveHealth

Intending participants will also be able to access details of the induction workshop and on its conclusion, view the papers presented and proceedings of the workshops.

Phase Two - Online Mentoring

Participants who wish to be mentored by experts from within the physical and health education profession will be provided with a user name and password and will be able to access all areas of the site, in particular, their Online Mentoring Team, Mentor, Chat and ActiveHealth areas. Mentees within BEST will not only be able to interact just in their own personal space, but will also be able to participate in larger organised discussion groups and post messages, describe scenarios and responses used in their teaching and reflect on their experiences, be asked to critique lessons, units of work and exemplary teaching video clips, and develop resources to be shared through the ActiveHealth site.

In the longer term, smaller collegial groups, predominately run by the early career teachers themselves, will also have access to the range of resources within BEST as well as advice and support from the professional officer, an experienced teacher of PDHPE, attached to the project.

Mentors are also provided with an exclusive space (Mentor) where they are able to discuss issues that have arisen as well as be provided with information and advice to assist in the mentoring process. Given that the interactions between mentor and mentee will be based on negotiated outcomes discussed during the induction workshop, mentors will be provided within BEST, with a range of resources to cater for the concerns of early career teachers.

Concluding Remarks

This project represents a significant departure from traditional professional development approaches for early career teachers in NSW. Whilst the combination of induction workshops and mentoring activities when they have occurred have been cross-curriculum, this project is the first of its kind to specifically address issues that are specific to the curriculum area of physical and health education.

Given the innovative nature of this approach a major research initiative will also accompany this project. Research associated with the project will be conducted across the two phases of the project; Phase 1 - the two-day workshop, and, Phase 2 - the longer term online mentoring component. Overall research aims include the identification of the issues affecting early career teachers in physical and health education, early career teachers perceptions of the effectiveness of a mixed mode of professional development opportunities and the benefits to experienced teachers of being mentors of early career teachers. In Phase 1, participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire at the conclusion of the workshop which focuses on the support structures that have been available to them as well as their perceptions of the workshop in meeting their current needs. In Phase 2, participants (approx. 20 mentees) who volunteer to be involved in the online mentoring component will be asked to participate in the study during the Introductory Mentoring Workshop (approximately one month after the two day workshop) and will complete a written questionnaire and interview at the completion of the mentoring. At the conclusion of the mentoring, data (transcripts of discussions between mentoring teams) will also be collated from the online discussion site. Experienced PDHPE teachers who agree to be mentors will also be asked at the Introductory Mentoring Workshop if they wish to be participants in the study and will complete a written questionnaire at the completion of 20 weeks. At the conclusion of the online mentoring, data (transcripts of discussions between the online mentoring teams) will be collated from an online discussion site.

Given this is the first attempt at implementing such a professional development opportunity, it is envisioned that the workshop and online community will evolve to encompass increasing avenues for professional development among the participants. The project is also structured to provide an exciting action research environment for the study of innovations in both initial teacher training where there already exists a mentoring initiative for undergraduate students and ongoing early career teacher professional development in the area of physical and health education. The results of this initiative can then be communicated to inform similar projects which will ultimately lead to the support of new teachers and their continuing role in their chosen profession.

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