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Douglas Hearne

University of Wollongong, doug_hearne@uow.edu.au

Lori Lockyer

University of Wollongong, lori.lockyer@gmail.com

Gregg Rowland

University of Wollongong, gregg@uow.edu.au

John Patterson

University of Wollongong, patto@uow.edu.au

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Becoming a beginning teacher: An online mentoring experience for pre-service physical and health educators

Doug Hearne
Lori Lockyer
Gregg Rowland
John Patterson

Faculty of Education
University of Wollongong
NSW, Australia

doug_hearne@uow.edu.au

Abstract: A key feature of any professional education is opportunity for students to engage in meaningful practical learning experiences. In pre-service teacher education, the practicum is a central component. However, due to increasing student numbers and limited resources in university and school sectors, the practicum has undergone challenges in recent years. As a result, innovations to enhance the practical component of this professional degree have been sought.

This paper highlights the findings of one aspect of a larger study that used asynchronous Web-based communication tools to facilitate mentoring and peer support through the practice teaching experience. Analysis of qualitative data including interviews with participants and aspects of online discussion logs provide information as to the nature of the intervention as it contributed to the professional preparation for a group of final year physical and health education pre-service teachers who acted as mentors within the program.

Background

Opportunity for students to engage in meaningful professional learning experiences is viewed as an essential to any professional education. Teacher education institutions regularly explore opportunities to integrate increased practice-based professional experiences. In so doing, students can explore the theory to practice link and further develop their professional knowledge and skills. An important aspect of this endeavour is to find appropriate ways to draw upon the abilities and experiences of like professionals who are able to provide the necessary guidance and direction required.

In recent times there has been a focus on mentoring, as one approach under the broader notion of professional development, to provide authentic learning experiences. Mentoring, and the relationship that is established between the mentor and mentee, allows for the development of the novice professional while recognizing the knowledge, skills and abilities of experienced peers. While much of the literature that focuses on the mentoring relationship highlights its purpose and benefits for the mentee, it is also important to recognize the benefits for the mentor. Such benefits have been identified as enhancement of self-esteem, development of a close relationship with the mentee, opportunity to fulfill their own professional development needs, recognition and the altruistic satisfaction in serving the profession (Lacey, 1999).

The literature that focuses on the use of information and communication technologies to facilitate peer-collaboration, mentoring and practicum experiences highlights the potential of technology to facilitate: consistent contact with others supporting a philosophy of collaborative learning; sharing practical learning experiences towards the development of a collective body of knowledge; discussion of content material and understanding of that content in light of practical learning experiences; engagement in reflective practice that is valued by mentors and peers; development of a support network for ongoing information sharing; and, resistance to the isolation through the development of a networked community that includes access to peers, mentors and resources (Bruffee, 1993; Naidu & Olsen, 1996).

This paper describes the methodology and findings of one aspect of a study that used asynchronous communication tools to facilitate mentoring and peer support through the practice teaching experience.

The findings relate specifically to the outcomes experienced by a group of 10 physical and health education students in their fourth (and final) year who volunteered to act as mentors for 2nd year students enrolled in the same teacher preparation course.¹ The effect of participating in the program for the mentors is outlined. Qualitative data analysis provides an indication of the potential for online mentoring to contribute to the professional preparation of teacher education students. Focus group interviews and aspects of the online discussion logs provide a participant perspective on the intervention and suggestion for future directions for implementing such a program.

Context

The Faculty of Education in the University of Wollongong delivers a specialised, undergraduate pre-service teacher education to prepare secondary school physical and health education teachers. The program involves the development of discipline-based knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy skills and professional ethos. In each year of the four-year program, pre-service teachers engage in school-based practice teaching experiences that are designed to provide students with the opportunity to contextualise theory into authentic practice. Throughout the degree, and particularly within the practicum, emphasis is placed on the role of critical reflection in the development of a teacher.

The changing nature of teacher educator responsibilities within tertiary institutions has caused a gradual shift in the role of liaison teacher educator within practicum implementation. Further, increases in both campus-based commitments and numbers of enrolled students to address current and predicted teacher shortages has led to a reduction in the time teacher educators are able to spend providing advice to individual pre-service teachers while in schools. Additionally, supervision of a pre-service teacher is often “shared” amongst the teaching staff of the school in which the student is undertaking his/her practicum – again reducing time for debriefing and reflection. This can be a frustrating experience leaving the pre-service teacher feeling unsupported and isolated.

To address these limitations, evolving models for the practicum experience have been sought. In the Wollongong context, this has included liaison teacher educators providing online guidance to students engaged in school-based practice teaching and the students themselves providing each other with peer support through computer mediated communications (Lockyer, Patterson, Rowland & Hearne, 2002). More recently the Faculty has explored opportunities for senior students to provide mentoring support to less experienced students enrolled in the same teacher education course.

The Online Mentoring Practicum Study

An invitation to participate in the Online Mentoring Practicum program (OMP) was provided by the coordinating faculty member to all 4th year and 2nd year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Physical and Health Education) degree. Ten 4th year students volunteered to participate as online mentors to 20 volunteer 2nd year students. Each 4th year student mentored two 2nd year students. This triad was termed an *online learning team*.

The program was implemented as the 2nd year students undertook each of their two single weeks of practice teaching. Week one (OMP1) occurred in week 11 of the 13-week Autumn session and the subsequent practicum (OMP2) occurred in week 11 of the 13-week Spring session (five weeks after their mentors had completed their own five-week practicum – the final practice teaching experience before the completion of their degree). Both weeks of the practicum were completed at the same secondary school.

Prior to implementation of OMP1, a face-to-face training session was held with all participants in order to clarify the responsibilities and expectations related to participation in the online discussion. In this session, online learning teams, as designated by the coordinating faculty members, were established and each triad introduced themselves to initiate the mentor/mentee relationship. A presentation was provided to outline the theoretical underpinnings of mentoring as it is related to the context of the teaching profession and professional development with an emphasis on: the importance of discussion and sharing ideas related to

¹ Preliminary findings and future directions related to the experience for 2nd year students who participated in this project as mentees have been reported previously in Hearne, Lockyer, Rowland & Patterson, 2003).

the technical aspects of teaching (e.g., teaching strategies and classroom management ideas); the need for support and guidance about career choice and career development; and, the professionalism of social interactions and exchanges.

This training session also allowed participants to test and become comfortable with the technology used to support the OMP program (a portal of physical and health education teaching resources with private asynchronous discussion space for each learning team at www.activehealth.uow.edu.au). Online learning teams also used this time to negotiate when they might be best able to contribute to their questions and exchange ideas and advice.

Methodology

The focus on the experience of mentors sought to address the research question,

What was the nature of the experience for 4th year students who participated as mentors during the 'Online Mentoring Practicum'?

Qualitative data were collected in the form of logs of online learning team discussions and focus group discussions that were conducted at the completion of each OMP experiences Figure 1 illustrates the timeframe of the OMP implementation and associated data collection as reported in this paper.

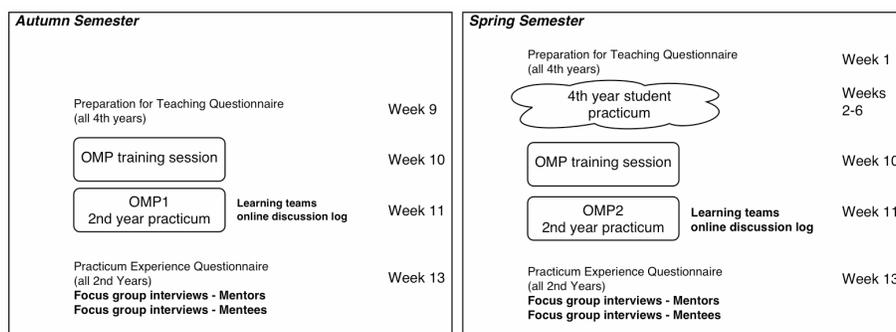


Figure 1: Online Mentoring Practicum program and data collection schedule.

An analysis framework focused on themes of practice of teaching; content of teaching; professionalism and professional development; reflection on practice; mentor availability; mentor confidence; mentor qualities; preparation for teaching; supervising teacher qualities and practices; and, strengths and weaknesses of the OMP was used to code interview transcripts and online discussion logs within the NVivo qualitative data analysis software package.

Findings

The analysis provided interesting and encouraging results related to the experience of being an online mentor supporting students during their practice teaching experiences.

Interactions of Online Learning Teams

The nature of the interactions generally focused on the practical issues of teaching such as classroom management, teaching strategies and lesson content. Mentee requests for advice in relation to these issues predominated – particularly during OMP1. During OMP2, mentees tended to be more reflective in communicating to their mentor and fellow mentee regarding the experiences they had encountered in class rather than request advice on what was to come.

Logs illustrated that there was considerable variation in the frequency of interaction within online learning teams during the OMP. For OMP1, three of the teams engaged in online discussions several times daily. This pattern tended to be possible for those mentees who had online access in their practice teaching school. Five teams tended to interact daily while two of the teams interacted every other day. Coordination of the interaction seemed to be a feature for some of the teams as the ability of mentors to provide timely responses to mentee requests was an issue for several online learning teams. In some

instances the mentee had taught a particular lesson for which they were seeking advice before the mentor had posted a response to the request. This was a greater issue in OMP1. For OMP2 online learning teams made greater effort to coordinate posting requests and supplying a timely response.

Confidence Building of Online Mentors

Mentor focus group interviews provided some interesting insights into the perceived value of participating in the program as an online mentor. Consistently throughout the interviews, mentors described their surprise and delight at how much their knowledge and understanding about teaching had developed through their responses to the mentees' requests for advice.

A big thing was the confidence you get knowing that whatever question they come up with you can confidently and competently answer it. So you can sort of say "look hey I know my stuff" because they ask you a question and you sort of surprise yourself at how good your advice is. (mentor)

Another agreed by noting,

Yeah you don't realise how much you've learnt, its amazing, you sit there and its like a twenty page email and you're thinking "oh my god!" You don't realise you've learnt so much. (mentor)

This was particularly evident during OMP2. At this stage mentors had just completed their final extended practicum experience. The knowledge, skills and abilities developed during this five-week practice teaching experience was of great benefit to them in returning to the role of mentor with heightened confidence during OMP2. As one mentor explained in the focus group interview after OMP2,

Just having that prac as an experience behind you going into that second week (of mentoring), maybe a little bit more confidence, but just knowing that you have experienced it and you can sort of throw it off the top of your head, its so fresh in your mind and you don't sort of have to sit down and think about it, you can come up with replies and responses quickly. (mentor)

The mentors were able to empathise with the mentees in their online learning teams as only two years prior they themselves were dealing with the same issues during their 2nd year practice teaching experience.

...I just wrote a little closing thing which said "take away the good things from your prac and also remember some of the things that you have to improve on for your next prac and don't be downhearted if something didn't work this time because it may work next time." So I just wrote this little advice and thought, "wow, I wish I had that." (mentor)

Another perceived benefit of being a mentor was the manner in which 4th year students had their thinking, about teaching issues challenged by the requests of the mentees during OMP1. The mentors found that having to grapple with requests for advice was helpful preparation for them as they considered their own impending final practicum experience prior to beginning teaching. The OMP enabled the mentors to revisit and reflect upon a broad range of teaching issues that they would experience during their final practicum experience. The mentors felt that this provided them with a valuable opportunity to refocus on teaching that others, not participating as online mentors, were not able to access. As one explained in the focus group interview,

...in a sense it has also been helpful in the fact that here there's going to be a lot of 4th years that are going from just university, going straight into prac, but we've just sort of had a practicum experience prior to going into prac. So it is jogging us and refreshing us so it might give you a bit more confidence going into the school for five weeks. (mentor)

Support for pre-service colleagues

In terms of the reasons why students volunteered to participate as online mentors, many responded that they became involved simply to give something back to their 2nd year colleagues. The mentors noted that they still had many clear recollections of how stressful and anxious an initial secondary school practice teaching experience could be.

Many mentors stated that they wished that they could have had the 'safety net' of an online mentor during their own 2nd year practicum. For many of them supervising teachers are long removed from the realities of undertaking practice teaching in unfamiliar and at times unwelcoming school surroundings where the pre-service teachers to a large degree are powerless and rely on the support of experienced permanent members of staff to guide and support them. They felt that to have the formalized access to an online mentor would have been a very comforting arrangement for the 2nd year students. Further, although they may not have had the need to rely on the mentor constantly for advice and support they knew that their requests would have been welcomed by the mentor should the need arise.

It makes a difference than going to a teacher who has been teaching for many years, cause you feel really uncomfortable. I think that having someone who has recently been through what they're going through, makes a big difference. (mentor)

This view was supported by the mentees. One focus group participant mentioned,

It was good having it as a backup thing and that I always knew that I could go to. (mentee)

Mentors found it comforting and confidence building when mentees clearly articulated, via the online learning teams, that they valued and appreciated the level of support provided by the mentors. This support ranged from individual lesson ideas to career counseling.

Thanks again for all your advice so far. This mentoring thing is awesome. (mentee, online discussion)

Thanks for your email, it did make me feel a lot better. The kids are really great here and my lessons have been going OK, I just still have that element of doubt as to whether or not this is for me. Your email definitely made me feel better. Thanks heaps.

(mentee, online discussion)

Using Information Communication Technologies

The access and use of the technology created some initial frustration for many mentors. This resulted from the access path that was suggested and demonstrated during the mentor training proving to be difficult for most mentors to access off campus. Once individual mentors had overcome this difficulty, access to each of the designated discussion spaces became manageable.

Several mentors, with limited technology skills, noted their appreciation for the opportunity to develop skills in both accessing and engaging with some unfamiliar technology over the course of the project.

It was good for my professional development, like seeing how the research project was conducted and along those lines like getting on the Internet and actually knowing how to use chat sites and actually seeing how the whole organization of it went. (mentor)

The fact that requests were made via a discussion space as opposed to face-to-face seemed to be an aspect of the project that encouraged mentees and mentor to interact.

Email is impersonal, so you don't have to struggle to find the words to say to someone's face. You can type it and they can't see how you're feeling, or you know, you might be typing it and thinking "oh it's trivial" but it's actually a big drama to that person. In that sense I think that's good. (mentor)

Conclusion

While it may seem that an obvious question to evaluate a teacher preparation program that utilises a mentoring approach centres on efficacy for those being mentored, an equally important focus is the outcomes for the mentor. The findings support the notion of the Online Mentoring Practicum and its contribution to the professional preparation of a group of final year pre-service teachers.

The identified benefits for mentors are in line with those highlighted in the mentoring literature (Lacey, 1999). Mentors perceived positive outcomes of the program through the opportunity to develop both their confidence and skills in a range of teachings areas (from teaching strategies to the use of technology). They also highlighted their growing sense of professionalism by identifying the chance to support to their less experienced peers by identifying the challenges they themselves experienced.

Within the context of this teacher education course, the Online Mentoring Practicum could be extended program-wide and include all students. From a broader perspective, the results identify possibilities of enhancing traditional approaches to teacher development. While like mentoring programs have involved practising or experienced teachers as mentors, the outcomes demonstrate the potential to involve all members of the professional community of teachers. Such an approach places value on the developing skills and perspectives of all members of the community of practice from their point entry.

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