Building online communities of practice for teachers

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BUILDING ONLINE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
FOR TEACHERS

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Abstract
Numerous online communities of practice have emerged, in both formal and informal settings, to meet the professional needs of diverse groups throughout the world. While some of these communities fail, many become self-sustaining in their ability to meet the needs of their members. Using current research and theory relating to the creation of online communities, this paper describes the development of a generic model to guide the design and development of sustained, engaging, supportive and collaborative communities. The paper illustrates the way a website built for the professional development and support of beginning primary teachers can be used as a model to meet the professional needs of different cohorts of beginning and experienced practitioners. The paper describes the theoretical foundations of the approach, the features of the site in detail, and example applications of the model.

Keywords
online communities of practice, beginning teachers, professional development

Loss of Community

Newly qualified teachers, exiting university to commence their first teaching positions, are often armed with a range of skills and techniques that will serve them well if they find employment in supportive and accommodating schools. However, for many new teachers this is not the case. Many feel isolated, both professionally and personally, when they accept employment in remote locations, but even those who accept positions close to home find they have lost the supportive community they had at university. The support of colleagues and teachers at university may be greatly missed, as teachers find themselves in a new culture and a new role that is often difficult and challenging in the first months. The pedagogies espoused at university may be quite foreign or rejected in their new schools, for practical or other reasons, and new teachers may frequently find themselves questioning whether they have been adequately prepared for the realities of the classroom. Many also question their own beliefs about effective teaching.

Few of the universities who prepare teachers for their professional role take a great deal of interest in the induction of graduates, once they have finished their official pre-service training period. Beginning teacher induction and mentoring is problematic, dependent on the professionalism of individual school staff (DEST, 2002). In the past, teacher education courses ostensibly produced teachers competent in knowledge, skills and performance necessary for an extended teaching career. However, with the current reconceptualisation of teacher and student education, it is now recognised that teachers' professional learning spans a continuum, from initial undergraduate education, through school practicum, internship and induction to ongoing lifelong learning (DEST, 2003; Ramsey, 2000). An online community of practice is viewed as one approach that can retain the sense of community established during preservice training and use it to provide an extended
community for teachers as they are inducted and mentored into the professional community of teachers.

This paper describes the expansion of online communities of practice that have resulted from an initial site developed for early childhood and primary teachers exiting the University of Wollongong. The site, entitled *Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers* (BEST), was designed to reflect a theoretical model of authentic learning and was developed using the Janison learning management system (http://www.janison.com.au). This is in contrast to many similar sites that have been developed in atheoretical ways focussing simply on the implementation of new technologies and tools (Herrington, Herrington & Kervin, 2005). The original site was established in 2005 and includes innovative approaches to engage and develop a sense of community between beginning teachers. The features of the original site are described below in relation to nine characteristics of authentic learning (Herrington & Oliver, 2000). Following this a description of new sites based on the original BEST site are described and their features explained in terms of the subject domain and teacher cohort.

**The BEST Site**

*Theoretical Foundations of the Approach*

The site has been developed based on characteristics derived from situated learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). The theory provides a useful foundation for the construct of ‘authentic learning’, and its focus on authentic contexts helps to satisfy the variety of needs and expectations from the various members of the community and their stages of expertise. Herrington and Oliver (2000) identified nine characteristics of authentic learning environments from an in-depth literature review, specifically: *authentic contexts* that reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real-life (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989); *authentic activities* which are ill-defined and allow sustained thinking (e.g., Brown et al., 1989); *access to expert performances* and the modelling of processes (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991); *multiple roles and perspectives* (e.g., Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson, & Coulson, 1991); *collaborative construction of knowledge* (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989); *opportunities for reflection* (e.g., Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985); *opportunities for articulation* to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991); *coaching and scaffolding* by the teacher at critical times (e.g., Greenfield, 1984) and *authentic assessment* of learning (e.g., Reeves & Okey, 1996). Features of the site will be described and justified in relation to these characteristics.

*Application of the framework*

**Metaphorical interface (authentic context):** The interface metaphor of an internet cafe (Figure 1) effectively provides a visual representation of the authentic context for the online community. The metaphor is used to situate beginning teachers in a friendly, supportive relationship with a mentor. Here they can share thoughts on issues that are relevant to their practice. Clickable resources that can be called upon to promote deeper understandings of relevant issues surround the mentor, and mentee engaging with the resource. Alternatively, mentees can use the side bar to access these resources.
In 2004, preservice graduating teachers were surveyed to determine their views on the issues and problems they saw as being critical in their beginning years of teaching. They identified the following major issues: classroom management, teaching and learning, professional responsibilities, special needs, assessment and casual teaching. These issues formed the framework for authentic activity found in communications with mentors and resource information.

Discussion forums and FAQs (authentic activity): Building a community through communication is an essential feature of the site. Beginning teachers can actively engage with their peers and mentors through the use of chat, discussion forums and FAQs. They can seek advice, offer advice or simply observe the interactions of others centred around the authentic activities of preservice, beginning and experienced teachers.

Mentoring by exemplary teachers (coaching and scaffolding): A mentor has been assigned to each of the major issues featured on the site (identified through a survey with exiting preservice teachers) (Figure 2). Each mentor is a practising teacher recognised by the Australian College of Educators (ACE) (www.austcolled.com.au) as a highly accomplished teacher. They have volunteered their time freely to assist the novice teachers. A private section of the website has also been developed to enable communication between mentors and to provide current resources in the area of mentoring.
Newsletters (multiple perspectives): EdNA online (www.edna.edu.au), an online education clearinghouse developed and initiated by Australian State and Federal Governments (Figure 3) provides RSS feeds directly to the website. These feeds are dynamically updated and as such new resources are continually and automatically being added to the site. Newsletters for early childhood and primary teachers are accessed in this way.

Multiple perspectives: Multiple perspectives are provided not only through the newsletters, but through a range of human and media sources to gain different views and perspectives on the same issue, such as from beginning teachers, mentors, highly accomplished teachers, university lecturers, and preservice teachers.

Lesson ideas and resources (expert performance): In New South Wales, the K-12 curriculum is organised around Key Learning Areas (KLAs). We have organised the site to accept RSS feeds from EdNA online for each of the KLAs. When a hot link is clicked, the external website opens within the BEST site rather than as a separate window (Figure 4). Side menu bars enable teachers to navigate back within the site. Links to state and federal government bodies and professional associations provided exemplary activities for beginning teachers, under each of the identified issues. For example, clicking on the Classroom management link offers resources on student discipline, motivating students and dealing with bullying.
Wikis (collaboration and articulation): For each of the major issues the website has a wiki section that enables beginning teachers to articulate their understandings and applications of teaching and learning ideas. A wiki format enables other users to modify the input creating a space where collaborative solutions to problems can be published.

Weblogs (reflection): Weblogs provides a space where beginning teachers can post and reflect on their classroom experiences. The logs appear in chronological order with the most recent one at the top of the page. Other beginning teachers can read the logs and post comments on them. The weblogs provide an interesting and often amusing insight into the development of a new teacher. Figure 5 shows a sample weblog provided on the site.

![Figure 5: The sample weblog provided on the site](image)

Evaluation (authentic assessment): Evaluating the success of the design is currently taking place and involves a number of broad questions. Does the site help beginning teachers overcome problems? If so, how? What aspects of the site are most helpful? Do teachers feel that they belong to a supportive community? Reeves and Hedberg (2003) argue that evaluation is a critical component of each stage of development of an interactive system. If and how teachers use the site to solve authentic classroom based problems will also provide evidence of authentic assessment of teachers' learning in this online community of practice. The use and perceptions of beginning teachers in regard to the functionality, usability and impact of the site will also be assessed.

Other Sites that have built on the BEST Model

The facility of the Janison Learning Management System enables ready adaptation of the features of the BEST site to suit specific needs of other communities of practice. For example, many facets of the nine characteristics of authentic learning environments, as well as elements of the interface design, have also been incorporated in other support sites at the University of Wollongong.

BEST: Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE)

Personal development, health and physical education (PDHPE) staff in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong are employing the BEST design to provide resources and mentoring for beginning teachers of PDHPE (Hearne, Rowland, & Webb, 2005). A comprehensive program of induction workshops and online mentoring will target 120 teachers in their first two years of teaching. The program is being developed in conjunction with the Australian Council for Health Physical Education and Recreation, NSW (ACHPER); NSW PDHPE Teachers' Association and the NSW major school system and will focus on providing resources on induction issues, classroom management, syllabus changes, quality teaching, standards and other authentic activities. The community will be scaffolded and coached through online mentoring and will
target beginning teachers in rural and remote regions of NSW, those teaching in disadvantaged schools in metropolitan NSW and those with limited school support. Mentors will be chosen from experienced teachers (expert performance) who submit an expression of interest to the program organisers. It is planned to conduct a one-day workshop where mentors and mentees can meet both socially and professionally. It is anticipated that smaller collegial groups will be formed and have their own space for collaborative construction of knowledge through resources and interaction.

**SCIT: School Counsellors in Training**

The University is delivering a program to support the retraining of teachers to help fulfil the shortage of counsellors in our schools. This retraining is a joint effort between the Faculty of Education and the Department of Psychology and is delivered using the components of residents’ ‘in school’ experience and online learning. This SCIT (School Counsellors in Training) program brings together many professionals and students into a community of which their online site plays a major part.

The website sidebar shown in Figure 6 allows all members of the community to access general course materials as well as the interactive components. This course has elements of ‘on campus’ delivery and its transposition to partial online has made it imperative that students can utilise the site in an effective manner (authentic context). The site was established as a follow on from an orientation residential of three days where the face to face contact was then enhanced, online, with ‘orientation group pics’. These photographs and the subsequent active announcements helped in the formation of the community with a common focus.

*Figure 6: The SCIT sidebar*

The site has a series of ePods that allow the students to communicate with their online mentors (coaching and scaffolding), who are practicing school counsellors.

*Figure 7: An example of an ePod (pictures of participants removed)*

Within their ePod the students are exposed to both forums and chat rooms (authentic activity), which allow them to share course issues as well as the ‘day to day’ experiences of a school counsellor. They also have the opportunity, as a whole group, to communicate in these ways using General Course Forum and Chat (Figure 7)
Using the Links, Readings and Glossary sections of the Learning Management System, the students are able to gain multiple perspectives—these resources being contributed by both lecturers and students—which facilitate the components of collaboration and articulation.

Figure 8: Whole group shared resources and communication tools

This site has evolved throughout the course with the community driving the use of some of the tools and suggesting the need for improvement and development of others.

Conclusion

This paper describes the design and development of online communities of practice that are designed to capture the sense of community and belonging that develops during preservice training at university, and to nurture its existence through the beginning years of teaching. The aim is for teachers, regardless of their physical location, to maintain contact with their community of practice that was well established in the university years. Rather than abandon this support and scaffolding structure, the aim is to continue to provide it for as long as necessary to induct neophytes into fully professional roles.

The use of a courseware management system that encompasses resources and tools for communication appears to be an effective way to establish an online community of practice. The BEST site and its approach is readily adaptable to other contexts, purposes and professions seeking to establish a facility to enable the development of a web-based community of practice for a dispersed, professionally isolated group.

References


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