

Research Note

Using Online Technology in a Programme for Registering Teachers

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Abstract

This paper reports on an initial phase of research into the Eastern Institute of Technology's support and guidance programme for provisionally registered early childhood teachers. The programme was designed to provide a co-operative, collaborative space where teachers would engage in dialogue with each other and their supervising/tutor teacher. Some of this dialogue is online. This article focuses on the efficacy of using online technology for learning collaboratively and identifies factors that engaged the participants and contributed to their learning.

Key Words: Online learning; teacher registration; support and guidance programmes

Introduction

In New Zealand newly qualified early childhood teachers are provisionally registered by the New Zealand Teachers Council and they undertake a supervised support and guidance programme for 24 months with a registered teacher. Within the Hawke's Bay region it was a challenge for new teachers to find a registered teacher available to provide this support. The Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) sought to assist by providing a support and guidance programme, using online technology as a teaching tool and to engage provisionally registered teachers in dialogue thereby fostering a mutually supportive community of learning approach.

The intention behind initiating an online forum for these new teachers was to create a community of practice that would promote collegiality and collaborative enquiry. Wenger, McDermont and Synder (2002) suggest that a community of practice helps practitioners to deepen their knowledge and expertise through regular interactions, over time. Wenger (1998) goes further to argue that the most personally transformative learning involves membership in communities of practice. In promoting an online community of practice, opportunities exist for teachers to share practice - its struggles, issues and successes. This concept of a community of practice in an educational setting is reflective of both social learning theory and situated learning theory (Hendricks, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Owens & Smith, 2000; Rogoff, 1990; Wenger, 1998; Wolfson & Willinsky, 1998).

Proponents of collaborative learning perceive collegiality as a powerful way to enhance the learning of all the participants, to encourage multiple perspectives and expose teachers to a range of contexts and philosophies (Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Goodnough, 2005). In addition, collaborative inquiry promotes learning where authentic experiences situated in teachers' practice are used to make meaningful links between theory and practice (McDrury

& Alterio, 2002; McGrath, 2001). Zellermyer and Tabak's (2006) research demonstrated that systematic collaborative inquiry about practice, alongside educational research and the experience of others, fosters teachers' knowledge creation. Participation in a community of practice encourages teachers to view situations through alternative lenses (Brookfield, 1995; Rogoff, 1990) and to communicate and negotiate meaning. It creates a space for teachers to present the teaching and learning complexities of their particular contexts (Jonassen, 1991, cited in Murphy, 2002, p. 1). While Hargreaves (1992, cited in Owens, 2005, p. 2) warns against contrived collegiality and collaboration, Fisher (2003) argues that collaborative reflection promotes a more critically reflective stance compared to individual self reflection. Hartnell-Young and Morriss (2007) suggest teachers' self-knowledge deepens by time spent on articulating beliefs, values and achievements situated in specific contexts. Self-knowledge is the ability of a teacher to understand how their history, personality, culture and life experiences impact on their behaviour as a teacher (Feeney, Moravcik & Christiansen, 2006).

McDermott (2001) argues that on-line communities thrive on trust, but Lai, Pratt, Anderson and Stigter (2006) question the degree to which relationships and trust can be built totally online. They recommend that teachers initially meet face-to-face with some supplementary meetings. Collis (1998) also supports this idea. According to Coomey and Stephenson (2001) the factors that make online learning successful can be attributed to four features:

1. Dialogue, which may occur in various forms such as emails, discussion forums and chat rooms, but must be structured carefully into the design of the programme.
2. Involvement through participant engagement.
3. Support through periodic face-to-face contact, online feedback, peer support and technical support, and the tutor acting as a facilitator of the students' learning.
4. Control by the learner over such things as timing, assessment and goals.

The four module (one per semester) programme commenced at EIT in July 2004 with the full cycle completed in June 2006. This research project commenced in early 2006. The project aimed to investigate teachers' experiences and perceptions of the programme. In particular, e-technology as the online community was a new teaching tool for the researchers. As practitioner researchers, we wondered if our perceptions, the related literature and the registering teachers' experiences would align. In addition, we wanted to explore how e-technology could assist learning for face-to-face students on the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) Diploma of Teaching, Early Childhood Education programme. For more details about the programme itself, refer to McConnell (2006).

Methodology

Research Question

The question that guided the research was "What are provisionally registered teachers experiences and perceptions of the EIT support and guidance programme?"

Sample

Eleven of 28 teachers enrolled in the programme participated in this study. Of the participants, seven were European/Pakeha, one Māori/European, one European/Māori/Chinese, one Māori and one English. All respondents were female of whom four were aged between 20 – 29 years, six between 30 – 49 years, and one 50 years or older.

Six had completed their teaching qualification at EIT, three at Massey University, one at Waikato University and one participant did not state the tertiary provider. The 11 teachers were working at a range of different early childhood service types; with five at mixed-aged childcare centres, two at childcare centres for infants/toddlers, one at an over-twos childcare centre, one at a private kindergarten, one at a state kindergarten, and one at a Rudolf Steiner centre. This group were representative of the 28 participants.

Method

In Semester 1 2006 all teachers enrolled in EIT's support and guidance programme were sent a questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised of a mixture of open-ended questions for their views and experiences, as well as closed questions asking for demographic information. Of the 28 questionnaires sent out, 11 were returned.

Analysis

The researchers used thematic analysis and data to generate categories, a methodology defined by Mutch (2005, cited in Prince, 2006, p. 84). While the literature defined some theoretical themes, identity, standards and demand emerged from the responses. Responses to non-demographic questions were categorised according to the following themes using the definitions as guidelines.

- *Community of practice*: "...groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in their area by interaction on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermont & Synder, 2002, p. 4).
- *Identity*: "Self-perceptions which define one's uniqueness and individuality (Gibbs, 2006, p. 13).
- *Collegial Sharing*: opportunities to enhance the learning of all the participants, to encourage a richness of diverse opinions and expose teachers to a variety of contexts and philosophies (Englert & Tarrant 1995; Goodnough 2005).
- *Reflection*: Brookfield (1995) suggests that reflection is not simply an individual process but requires active sharing by teachers to create and communicate meaning.
- *Collaborative Inquiry*: inquiry that promotes learning where rich and relevant experiences situated in real life are used to make meaningful links between theory and practice (McDrury & Alterio 2002; McGrath 2001).
- *Standards*: reference to high expectations and experience of EIT's programmes delivered.
- *Demand*: the challenge for new teachers to find a registered teacher available to provide this support.
- *Skills*: "specific teaching techniques they (teachers) can use to support children's learning" (MacNaughton & Williams, 2004, p. 1).
- *Peer Evaluation*: the critique, support and feedback offered by the participants to each other.
- *Trust*: the reliability and integrity of the community of practice where the participants adopt "strategies of reciprocity based on interpersonal trust" (Mannarini & Lavanco, 2005, p. 258).

Ethical Considerations

The researchers, as tutors within the programme, were not involved in the distribution or collation of the data. This was performed by a secretary who signed a privacy contract. We needed to maintain the anonymity of the participants in recognition that an unequal power relationship existed.

Findings

Community of Practice

Nine teachers commented positively and one negatively on belonging to this online community of practice. The range of comments included support, a forum for exchanging ideas, maintaining professional links, facilitating professional dialogue for teachers, and regular contact with my peers.

It is great to network and to have support, guidance and feedback on real and relevant issues.

It has maintained a link with fellow professionals and provided a forum for exchanging ideas.

The one negative comment was:

I personally feel that natural and genuine discussions are more valuable than online ones. They just do not feel the same nor do they foster real relationships.

Collegial Sharing

Six teachers commented positively on how the forum provided opportunities to experience a range of multiple perspectives. In particular, how it facilitated professional dialogue between teachers. Teachers also used the forum to share professional development opportunities in the region.

Online discussions allow me to have regular contact with my peers and give me the opportunity to start discussions and contribute to others.

The importance of social learning was highlighted by six teachers. For example, one teacher wrote:

I have found it exceptionally great because I get to network with other teachers, share ideas, have professional discussions with other like-minded people and we can learn with and from each other as a group. Very motivating!

One teacher was negative about the online forum.

I do not enjoy and it has not been useful. I do not like sharing online.

Collaborative Inquiry

Six teachers made positive comments about collaborative inquiry where the online forum provided them with opportunities to discuss relevant and authentic topics of interest and experiences located in their practice.

Yes, it has helped me to see situations in a different way and also what other peoples' opinions are as well as getting other teachers views and help.

Teacher Identity

Nine teachers made positive comments on their developing perceptions and increasing self awareness of their teacher identity. Examples included increasing awareness and articulation of practice, taking on more leadership roles and becoming more involved in the life of the centre, affirmation as a professional, and openness to other ways of thinking.

It makes me think about my teaching more because I have to put into words what I do everyday while teaching. This means reflecting and challenging yourself and your practice.

Reflection

Nine teachers made positive comments about how the programme had contributed towards their reflective practice. The teachers commented on their journal and portfolio as being the key tools that enhanced their reflection. The range of comments covered a variety of aspects on reflective practice such as personal philosophy, reading the literature, currency, thinking more about their teaching, reflection in action, and ongoing learning. One teacher stated:

...even after study, to realise that you constantly have to review practice and take onboard new developments in the profession.

This showed an increasing awareness of the importance of being a reflective lifelong learner. This image captured the experience:

It [participating in this process] has defined teaching as a 'journey' not a 'destination'.

Trust

One teacher made a negative comment about the development of trust within the online community. This teacher was uncomfortable and felt unable to contribute 'safely' to the discussion preferring face-to-face personal communication.

I do not enjoy the online discussion. I do not find it useful. I do not like and will not openly discuss online things about my centre or other teachers or complain about something. To me a lot of things are private and I do not want my opinions about teaching put [on] the internet.

In contrast, one teacher commented

Great to put across own experiences and advice in a non-threatening forum.

Standards

Seven teachers referred to why they had selected this particular support and guidance programme. This included previous experience with EIT as a provider of teacher education, reputation, specific course guidelines and structure, and professionalism. One teacher stated:

My portfolio has been shared around other teachers at work and shared with other professionals in the community.

Demand

Six teachers commented on the challenge of finding a registered teacher to provide a support and guidance programme.

Personally, I have found it really hard to find fully registered teachers who are willing to mentor teachers towards full registration.

The flexibility of the programme was also highlighted:

I also wanted a programme which I could transfer easily if I changed employer or centre.

Skills

Five teachers commented about skills related to gaining confidence with technological capability, and teaching practice specifically leadership. They reported taking on and recognising their leadership roles within their early childhood setting as a result of completing the leadership category.

Peer Evaluation

Nine of the teachers commented on the peer evaluation process. These included the benefits of discussing practice with a colleague, and sharing their documentation which includes the online dialogue.

Peer evaluation has been AWESOME as we spend a few hours sharing and learning from each others teaching experiences – valuable discussions always occur.

However, one teacher questioned the timing of the peer observation process as it occurs at the end of the semester.

Peer evaluation (for me) is not terribly useful. It happens at the end of the process and seems more of a signing off than genuine useful feedback.

Discussion

Creating a community of practice online, using computer mediated communications, is a new flexible alternative way of delivering professional development for teachers. Lai et al., (2006) argue that the level of collaboration and engagement distinguishes them from other online communities. Feedback from the teachers indicates that a community of practice is evolving as a result of the support and guidance programme and that the online forum is a pivotal aspect of this. The online forum provides opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas through regular ongoing dialogue (Wenger, McDermont & Synder, 2002).

The online community enables the sharing of multiple perspectives (Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Goodnough, 2005) based on the teachers' experiences through the demographics of the group. The teachers are situated in a variety of early childhood contexts reflecting a range of philosophies and practice, beliefs, values and interests. The forum has created a co-operative and collaborative space where teachers problematise practice, share knowledge, support each other and network. Participating in mutual inquiry engages the teachers in the tensions, issues and sharing of possible solutions (McDrury & Alterio, 2002; McGrath, 2001). Teachers' comments confirmed the usefulness of having the opportunity to engage in collaborative inquiry online. The teachers maintained control over the direction of the

discussions. The programme structure, in particular the online component, enabled flexibility of access, timing, and involvement. All are success factors identified by Coomey and Stephenson (2001).

In addition, the online space for teachers to present authentic examples of their experience and dilemmas provided the platform for expressing their identity as teachers (Gibbs, 2006). The teachers' articulated their self-awareness in relationship to their developing professionalism within this community of practice. While the teachers specified the reflective process that occurred through their journal writing and portfolio, it was evident from their comments that reflections were occurring in the online forum as well. Collaborative reflection is supported by Fisher (2003), Brookfield (1995), and Rogoff (1990) who emphasise that a more critical reflective approach occurs through social learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

McDermott (2001), Mannarini and Lavanco (2005) highlighted the importance for trust within the community. As only two comments addressed trust, this did not emerge as significant. The teachers appeared to have an open and caring online relationship, facilitated by meeting face-to-face at the beginning of each term. One teacher was openly negative preferring face to face communication. It is difficult to know if this response is related to a dislike of technology, a lack of trust, or a personal learning style preference. The other found the forum non-threatening. While Wenger (1998) suggests that the most personally transformative learning occurs in communities of practice, it is difficult to measure how transformative the community of practice actually is.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The findings suggest that a community of practice is evolving as a result of the programme and that the online forum is a pivotal aspect. The forum has created a collaborative space where teachers debate, question, critique, inform each other, reflect and network. The forum has exposed the teachers to multiple perspectives through the demographics of the group and the variety of discussions that reflect a range of philosophies, pedagogies and interests. It benefits both teachers and children, as teachers deepen their knowledge, expertise and critical reflection.

Due to the low return of questionnaires (39%) we wondered if only the enthusiastic and motivated chose to participate. This would give a biased, more positive view of the programme. However, this problem is not uncommon with questionnaires. The next phase of this project will look in more detail at the themes that have unfolded. Teacher identity formation emerged as a key theme in our analysis of the questionnaires and is worthy of further investigation.

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