An online community designed to support future makers in educational reform

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Australian education is undergoing national reform at many levels. The school sector, where pre-service teachers will be employed, are adjusting to the demands of the National Curriculum and improving teacher quality through the National Professional Standards for Teachers. In addition, the university sector, where pre-service teachers are prepared, is undergoing its own education reform through the introduction of a demand-driven system and ensuring quality for tertiary education interns through the Higher Education Standards Framework. In moving to prepare pre-service teachers for the school system; universities are grappling with the double-barreled approach to teacher quality; quality within the university course and quality within the student teachers being prepared. Through a collaborative partnership including university lecturers, Department of Education central administration staff, school principals, school coordinators, practicum supervisors, mentor teachers and pre-service teachers; the stakeholders have formed an online community of learners engaging in reflective practice who are committed to improving teacher quality. This online community not only links the key stakeholders within the project, it facilitates the nexus between theory and practice often missing in our pre-service teacher placements. This paper reports preliminary data about an initiative to ensure final year pre-service teachers are aspiring to meet the graduate professional standards through the use of an innovative online community.

Keywords: online learning, national teacher professional standards, pre-service teachers

Introduction

There is increasing focus on teacher quality and standards within Australian education practices, including the school and university sector. At the university level, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is Australia's quality agency for higher education. Its primary aim is to "ensure that interns receive a high quality education at any Australian higher education provider" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011).

In terms of schools, the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is charged with providing national leadership on the promotion of excellence in the professional practice of teaching and school leadership. The National Professional Standards for Teachers explicitly state what teachers know and should be able to do at four career stages including: Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead (Education Services Australia, 2011). The purpose of the standards are:

> To contribute to the professionalisation of teaching and raise the status of the profession. They could also be used as the basis for a professional accountability model, helping to ensure that teachers can demonstrate appropriate levels of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement (MCEETYA, 2003, p. 11).

In order to ensure pre-service teachers are entering the workforce with the skills, knowledge and attributes of a Graduate Teacher, current teacher education programs offered by universities must explicitly connect with these standards.

Background

The National Professional Standards for Teachers describe what is required of teachers at four levels - Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead - and support the collective responsibility of the profession to ensure that those who teach possess or will develop crucial knowledge and skills at differing stages of their career. The standards articulate what is required of teachers at each level and in doing so, aims to support improved access to quality teaching for all Australian students. The seven standards are grouped into three main domains including: Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. Professional knowledge includes understanding how students learn, knowing the content and how to teach it. Professional Practice includes planning and implementing teaching, creating safe environments and assessing understanding and providing feedback on student learning. Professional Engagement includes engaging in professional learning throughout each level and engaging professionally with colleagues, parents and the wider education community (Australian Government, 2012).

To support education reform, the Federal government has invested significant funding into the National Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality. This program targets critical points in the teacher 'lifecycle' to attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and leaders in our schools and classrooms (Australian Government, 2011).

In June 2011, the Department of Education in Western Australia called for tenders to address a National Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality: Training Schools Project.

The combined universities training schools project, more regularly known as WACUTS, includes three universities in Western Australia. A conceptual framework of the project is depicted in Figure 1. The project prides itself on a strong professional learning model where induction, formalized mentor training, CMS certification and rural field experience for interns and ongoing portal reflections are key to the quality of the project.
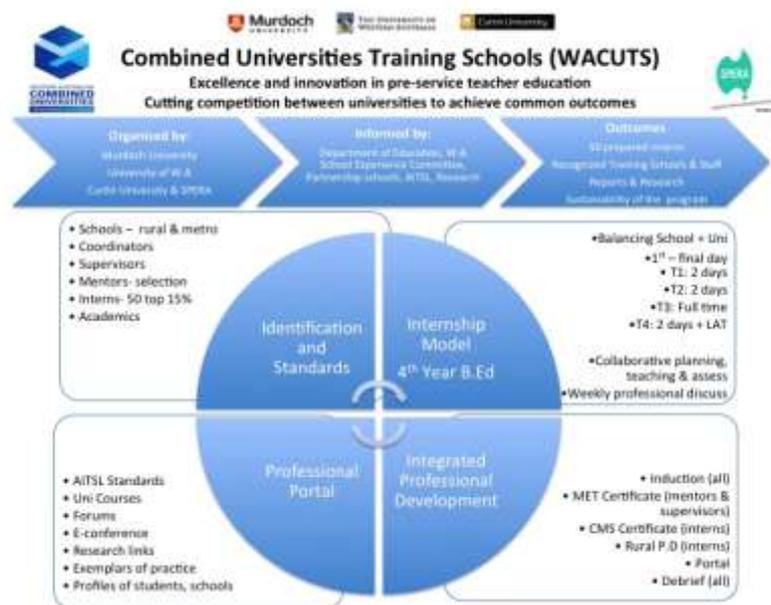

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of WACUTS project.

Increasingly, the literature refers to the notion of a professional learning community within an e-learning environment, where teachers have convenient access to ongoing support, collaborative learning, and meaningful and stimulating discussion (Davies, Ramsay, Lindfield & Couperthwaite, 2005; Henderson, 2006; Herrington & Herrington, 2001; Rablin, 2007). A professional learning community, whether face-to-face or online, is an effective form of professional learning as the focus is on the teachers as members of a wider community of learners (Lloyd and Cochrane, 2005). The ethos of a professional learning community in the education arena is

built around the continuous study of teaching and learning. Teachers who engage in these learning communities are working together to expand their teaching repertoire.

The professional portal, developed using Coursesites, is an imperative platform to enhance the online learning community that has evolved between all stakeholders within this project. This paper will report on the engagement occurring within the portal environment that is changing the discourse of pre-service teachers in a time of educational reform.

Research Context

The WACUTS project is based on an innovative internship program where 50 high achieving (top 15% of cohort) final year Bachelor of Education and Master of Teaching students were selected from within the teacher education programs at the three universities. The interns (n=50) were then placed in training schools, where 50 specifically selected mentor teachers were identified between the three universities and school leaders. Each training school appointed a school coordinator who facilitated the project within the school environment and was considered the conduit between the school and university staff.

The first year of the project started in January 2012. In this inaugural year there were 31 interns placed in metropolitan schools in the Perth area and 19 interns placed in regional schools outside of the Perth area. This project has three university academics from three different universities working closely with a project manager who is also a member of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA). This link has ensured that the complexity of placing pre-service teachers in regional schools was considered in great detail. The importance of travel, accommodation and support for these interns was entirely different to the cohort of interns working in the metropolitan area.

Methodology

An open source Learning Management System (LMS) known as Coursesites, referred to as the portal within this project, was selected to host the online community to be engaged in the project. This system is powered by the latest technology from Blackboard 9.1 and was selected for the suite of collaborative tools available, to ensure synchronous and asynchronous communications were possible. All project participants were emailed an invitation to the portal and self-registration was required at that point.

Data were extracted from the course statistics within the portal to ascertain user statistics, number of discussion board posts and number of blog posts. Further qualitative analysis of this data will be presented in future research as the project progresses.

Results

At the time of this paper, some six months into the inaugural WACUTS project, there were 109 valid users within the portal. The total (n=112) included one test user established by the portal manager, one Blackboard administrator user and one valid user that had registered with two different email addresses, causing one of his logins to be considered invalid. Table 1 depicts the number of users enrolled in the portal and their role in the WACUTS project.

Table 1: Portal users by title and role.

Title	Brief Role Description	Users
Intern	Final year Bachelor of Ed. or Master of Teach student who is placed in one school for final year of studies.	50
Mentor	Classroom teacher who mentors and establishes a co-teaching relationship with intern.	27
School Co-coordinator	Facilitates and co-ordinates the project within the school.	15
Principal	School leader.	10
University Co-coordinator	University placement officer; school experience or practicum coordinator.	2
Project Team	Three academics from three universities; one project manager.	4
Department of Education representative	Training School Project Team employed within the Department of Education central office.	1
TOTAL		109

Reflective practice, blogging and professional standards

This section will provide a context to the reflective blogs and the number of blogs posted to each professional standard within Term 1 and 2, 2012.

Intern reflections are an integral part of the project. Reflections should demonstrate the interns' capacity to think critically about learning and teaching, together with discussion of the interns' growth as a teacher. Interns produce reflective prose, however, are encouraged to attach documents, images etc. as necessary for evidence of working toward the standards.

Each school term, interns are required to post at least one blog within the portal to address the seven National Professional Standards. Throughout the year of internship, this should culminate in a professional learning log or eportfolio of blogs that cover the seven standards. In this first instance of posting reflections, interns were scaffold through a number of direct questions that linked the standard to their university course requirements.

In Term 2, the interns were provided with less structure and asked to reflect on their Term 1 blog entry and provide a connection between the standard, their first blog, one university unit/course and specific classroom/school examples.

Over the two terms, inclusive of 21 teaching weeks, a total of 341 reflective blogs were posted to the portal. These blogs addressed the seven standards.
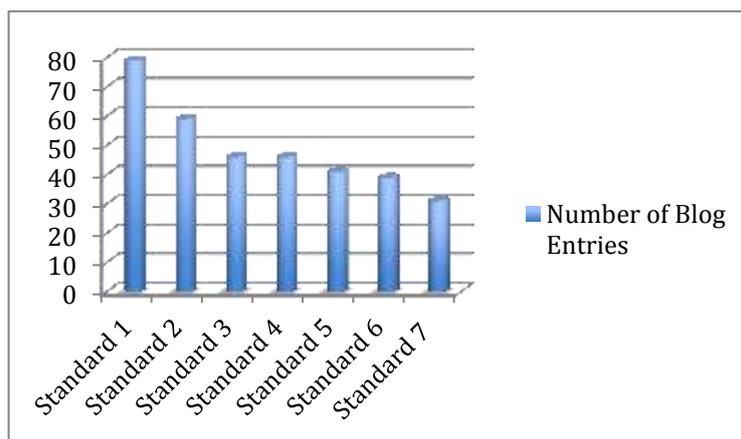
Figure 2: Number of reflective blogs for each Professional Standard in Term 1 & 2.

As reported in Figure 2, 79 blogs were posted to *Standard 1: Know interns and how they learn*; 59 blogs were posted to *Standard 2: Know the content and how to teach it*; 46 blogs posted to *Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning*; 46 blogs posted to *Standard 4: Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments*; 41 blogs were posted to *Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning*; 39 blogs were posted to *Standard 6: Engage in professional learning* and 31 blogs were posted to *Standard 7: Engage professionally with colleagues, carers and the community*.

Strategies for online community building

This section will outline the five additional aspects of the portal that demonstrate the rich community that is being developed within the WACUTS portal. The portal is used to connect all participants in the project at all levels and is the main forum for dissemination of information; to ensure consistency in communication is received by all interns, mentors, school based co-ordinators, university co-ordinators and principals. More importantly, the portal has provided a platform for a community of practice around the combined universities training schools project.

1. The *Announcements* tool is highly utilised by the project team in order to provide important information regarding professional development sessions, university commitments, professional standard blog reminders and general communications.
2. Outside of the *Intern Reflection* blogs and the *Announcements* tool, the most utilised section of the portal are the *Coffee Lounges.* These informal discussion boards are split into the different user roles as mentioned in Table 1, however interns have a personal discussion thread, and all other users have a shared discussion thread. At the time of writing this paper, there were 114 posts in the Intern lounge and 23 posts in the 'other' users lounge.
3. The portal section, *In The News*, has developed a sense of wider community engagement through newspaper articles, school newsletters, community radio shows and digital videos that have showcased the interns, mentors and schools within the project. In the first six months, there were four artefacts loaded into the portal.
4. The course menu entitled *Partnership Schools,* provides the specific school logo and a web link to each school that is engaged within the WACUTS project. Users are able to connect quickly to other schools within the project and view the website of that school.
5. As timely topics for discussion arise, the section *Education Topics for Discussion,* is used to host youtube videos, journal articles, news links and websites. Of importance are the professional dialogue that arises from viewing such material. In order to encourage this dialogue to occur, a discussion board forum is attached to each topic of interest.

Discussion

The number of users enrolled in the portal closely reflected the number of people participating in the project. One challenge faced by the project team, was the issue of timely self-registration by participants. Due to the self-registration process the full number of enrolments was not achieved from the first email invitations, this

meant further portal invitations including reminders were required throughout Term 1. In fact, there is evidence to show that some school-based staff had still not registered. This causes some concern in terms of ensuring regular updates of professional development and communications are being delivered to all school-based staff. Further, due to the total number of mentor teachers enrolled, it would appear they are the group least represented from their total numbers i.e 27/50.

The collections of intern blogs are paramount to documenting the success of interns moving toward the Graduate level of the professional standards. The blog tool within the portal appears to be the most appropriate tool to support the ongoing reflections of interns over one full year. Currently, university staff provide feedback to interns regarding the content of the blogs. This raises the notion of collegiate responses from others in the project and the possibility of mentor teachers or school based co-ordinators contributing to such valuable professional discourse. Consideration would need to be given to the impact on the demands already placed on teachers and workload issues associated. Currently, there are some cases of interns providing peer review of intern blogs and this could be further encouraged and developed in Term 3 and 4.

It is noticeable within the chart depicting number of blogs posted that a decline in posts has occurred since Standard 1. This could be due to many interns preparing and undertaking university exams during Term 2, which appears to have impacted on the number of interns posting their reflective blogs. Although there is a relative degree of flexibility in the due date of reflections, the due dates for Standards 5, 6 and 7 had not fallen at the time of writing this paper. These two reasons could provide a better understanding of the gradual decline in blog posts evident in the graphical representation.

The five initiatives within the portal to develop the online community have proven to be highly successful to this point. It is clear from the *Coffee Lounges* that interns use informal connections more than mentors. Anecdotally, a small number of mentor teachers within the program have been attempting to drive a more networked collegiate approach to mentoring, however have been less than successful to this point. In the future, the use of synchronous technologies, such as the virtual classroom, will aim to provide a better connection point for mentor teachers.

Conclusion

In a time of education reform where the National Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Government, 2012) are driving the school experience and pre-service teacher university programs; this paper has delivered an innovative method of supporting pre-service teachers (known in this project as Interns) through an online community. The standards provide a statement of what constitutes teacher quality at all levels including graduates and as such can provide a keystone for the field experience model.

The very nature of the online community described in this paper, which resonates with Davies et.al. (2005), allows for collegiate networking and support across all key stakeholders including university lecturers, Department of Education central administration staff, school principals, school co-ordinators, practicum supervisors, mentor teachers and pre-service teachers.

Through the richness of the portal environment, a community of practice has evolved around the central notion of building a mentoring internship program. This online community not only links the key stakeholders within the project, it facilitates the nexus between theory and practice often missing in our pre-service teacher placements.

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