Taking iPods into the field to capture and share teacher wisdom stories

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Mobile technologies offer significant possibilities for educators. This paper explores the use of iPods as a tool to bring together the teaching field and the tertiary classroom. We have designed a learning experience to engage our students in collecting and reflecting upon knowledge shared by practitioners in the field. It builds upon the premise that educators need to consistently gather and evaluate evidence to inform their professional practice. The task encourages students to consider the 'teacher wisdom' (Labbo, Leu, Kinzer, Teale, Cammack, Kara-Soteriou, & Sanny, 2003) that can be gathered and disseminated through 'new literacies' (such as podcasts) as they plan, record and edit an oral text to share with their student colleagues through their subject website.

Keywords: iPods, mobile technology, pedagogy, field experience, early career teachers

Professional context

The period of transition from preservice to inservice teacher is identified as crucial for the construction of professional knowledge (Griffin, 2003; Peters & LeCornu, 2006). McCormack (2004) identifies that the development of professional identity and beliefs about teaching and learning is enhanced by teachers' relationships with other professionals through opportunities for informal and formal interaction. The sharing of stories (or 'wisdom') between teachers is recognised in the literature as valuable in building relationships between colleagues, providing opportunities for reflection on practice and shaping deeper pedagogical understanding (Dettori, 2007; Labbo, Leu, Kinzer, Teale, Cammack, Kara-Soteriou, & Sanny, 2003; McCormack, 2004). Labbo et al. (2003) observe that although this sharing of wisdom often occurs spontaneously and somewhat randomly, it has 'the power to enrich the fortunate listeners with rare insights that may inform or even transform their pedagogy' (p. 300).

Learning a profession means learning about the culture of the occupation (Lacey, 1995). Blackledge (2002) argues that each profession has its own disposition and learnt behaviour. A teacher needs specific knowledge and skills related to curriculum, pedagogical understandings and awareness of how children learn and their impact upon each of these. Allen (2005) details that aspects of teacher professional identities are not taught; rather they are shaped through critical incidents within the workplace and one's professional and social networks. Moving from a preservice to an early career teacher requires significant adjustments be made to one's professional identity with specific emphasis on the way people behave and how this defines them as professionals (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992; Stets & Burke, 2000). These perspectives need to be explored and examined to consider how individual experiences can come together to create shared meanings and understandings.

Billings (2005) argues that quality learning is achieved when students have opportunities to make connections between their study and work contexts. Through interaction with members of the professional setting, one is able to learn the norms, values and beliefs of the communities within which they operate (Kervin, Mantei and Herrington, in press). It is through this process that individuals come to know who they are, what they are, how they should behave and what they still need to know. Herrington, Oliver and Reeves (2003) describe the experiences that provide opportunities for such connections as *authentic* because they are a realistic representation of the types of activities that the learner would engage in throughout their regular daily work or leisure activities, providing opportunities for the learner to reflect on their new understandings within this authentic context. As teacher educators, we believe our primary goal is to support the entry of our students into the teaching profession.

iPods as a tool to navigate between the field and university

Mobile technologies such as iPods have the potential to support this learning more systematically and for a wider audience (Dettori, 2007). There has been a significant amount of research conducted using iPods within tertiary settings. For example, Belanger (2005) presented five categories for academic use of iPods, including: course content dissemination tool, classroom recording tool, field recording tool, study support tool and file storage and transfer. Miller and Piller (2005) present the use of iPods in their tertiary setting as a solution to the challenge of providing course content in dual modes, audio and visual. Saunders and Moore (2003) present the use of iPods in their tertiary institution from a technical standpoint, as a file storage and transfer mechanism. We believe iPods, and other similar mobile devices, have another powerful use in acting as a tool to bring together the teaching field and the tertiary classroom in authentic ways.

The process of gathering 'wisdom'

The 42 student participants are fourth year, Bachelor of Education early career teachers at one university. They are studying a compulsory subject entitled 'Reflective Practice'. The students are employed in full time, part time and casual teaching positions in local primary schools.

In collaborative groups of two to three over a five week period, students were provided with an iPod and microphone and were asked to identify a focus for a 'teacher wisdom story'. Once a focus was determined, they then planned, recorded and edited an oral 'wisdom' story to be shared. Drawing upon their own emerging professional networks (mostly from previous professional experience opportunities) , and our more established ones, groups identified and made contact with practitioner/s who could share their 'wisdom' in response to the focus. Informed consent was obtained prior to any recording. Groups devised a series of questions to guide their discussion with practitioners and recorded the interview using the iPods. These recordings were then edited with either GarageBand or Audacity to include the practitioner/s wisdom and the group's synthesis of this. A 15 minute audio file was then uploaded to the subject website with an accompanying 100 word abstract summarising the focus of the 'wisdom story'. Topics for wisdom stories focused on a range of issues including classroom management, employment opportunities, literacy education and advice specific to a particular grade (for example, Kindergarten teaching). A sample is represented in Figure 1; this depicts the files and abstract on the subject website.
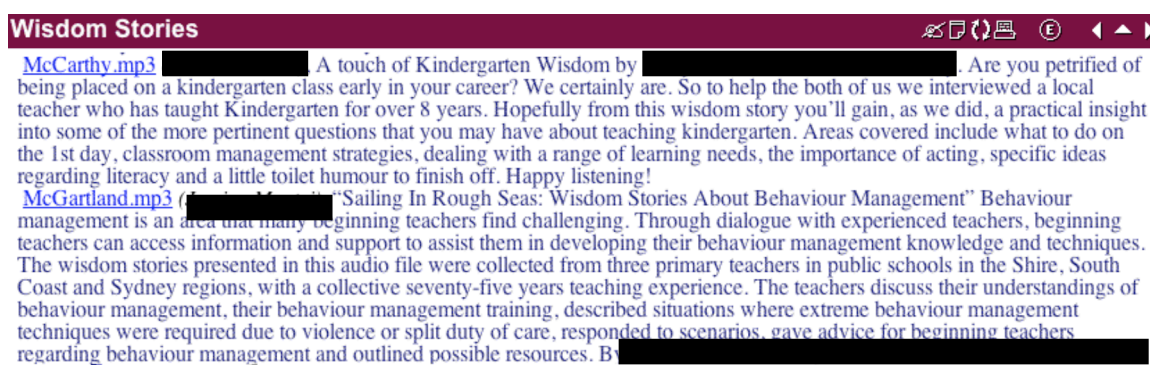

Figure 1: Teacher wisdom stories

Sharing and reflecting upon 'wisdom' stories

Students were encouraged to access the range of stories uploaded to the site and prepare a written 500 word summative reflection of the experience in response to three guiding questions: 1) the process of identifying an appropriate focus; 2) the experience of using the technology and its contribution to learning; 3) how the wisdom sought may have contributed to professional relationships, understanding of the literature, reflective practices and teaching philosophy.

Overwhelmingly the students reported that the use of the mobile technologies supported their collection and sharing of the wisdom stories; only 3 from the cohort of 42 identified that their experience in using the technology for the purposes of the task was negative. The portability of the iPod and ease with which they could record and download they audio interviews supported the wisdom gathering process. Interestingly, 36 students described a sense of anxiety about using the iPods at the beginning of the task.

In the initial instance students described feeling: 'threatened', 'nervous', 'daunted', 'overwhelmed', 'little experience', 'forced', yet also 'curious' 'motivated' and 'challenged' with the possibilities. One student explained 'at first glance I almost had a panic attack', and went on to talk about the experience being 'a roller coaster ride'. Of the 36 students who expressed initial negative feeling, only one reported that they felt the same way at the end. Our own observational data revealed that the majority of the students had little to no exposure to iPod technology before the project. They did need significant support through demonstration, encouragement and feedback during the process.

Student reflection coupled with our preliminary analysis of their 'wisdom stories' revealed the power of the task. The learners (with the informed consent of the sharing teacher) were able to capture the story 'in the field', reflect on the connections they made to their own understanding and share it for the benefit of fellow learners through their online and physical communities. The opportunity to identify a topic of interest appeared to support their professional identities with sustained time and focus on something that was connected to their context. Students justified their selection of topic based on 'interest', 'appropriate to our situation' 'a particular teacher that we knew', 'what had been happening in my class', and 'a focus that directly impacted and informed our current practices'. The authentic nature of the task made for a powerful learning experience.

Students identified a range of learning gains from the task; some were related to professional knowledge, others to technological knowledge. From a professional perspective 15 students made some comment about professional relationships that either emerged or were consolidated through the process. One student wrote about 'the kudos' he felt the task afforded them as emerging professionals. Another participant described her perceived value in being able to engage someone she respected in a sustained professional conversation. Another student described the 'confidence' she now felt in talking about her focus to other teachers and parents. From our perspective these professional relationships became more valuable than the technological expertise as many early career teachers often feel uncomfortable and inferior in teaching communities with more experienced teachers. The technology appears to have provided a medium to support communication and sharing of knowledge.

From the cohort, 38 students reported some kind of learning gain with the technology. Some students identified that using the software to edit the audio text presented a steep learning curve. One student described as 'extensive' the text they had collected in an 'elaborate and lengthy' 45 minute interview which needed to be edited into 10 minutes. While not directly related to the iPod, this example provides evidence of the complex decision making the students engaged with as they made professional decisions about what to keep and what to disregard to enable them to provide 'wisdom' about their topic. Another student described 'I was forced to experiment and through trial and error discover the best way to use this piece of technology to assist me'. One student described, 'I also feel I can approach my colleagues at school … without feeling embarrassed … I now know I don't have to figure everything out on my own'. Many students looked to their own experiences and highlighted classroom implications for their own use of the technology with their own students.

Concluding comments

Gathering 'wisdom' from the field, we believe, provides opportunities for our students to develop their own understandings of the teaching profession as they reshape and modify their understandings of the professional role. The task of selecting a focus, designing an approach and creating a product incorporates the elements of authentic tasks (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003), allowing students to explore the norms, values and beliefs of the teaching community (Kervin, et al., in press). Drawing upon the experiences of classroom teachers, the experiences of those in the 'know' of the culture of schools, and opportunity for interactions with other teachers and key stakeholders all contribute to ongoing development of professional identity.

The portability of the iPod affords opportunities for making the connections between study and work that Billings (2005) identified as essential for quality learning. The iPod supports this process as the students were able to capture and transfer the wisdom they sought back to the tertiary setting. Sharing the wisdom with fellow students for download to their iPod similarly enabled the students to gather the stories from others to consider within their own professional contexts (McCormack, 2004) and to reach a wider audience in a more systematic way (Dettori, 2007). This learning experience provides example of a way that educators may use a mobile device to facilitate authentic learning. We aim to continue to explore this innovative pedagogy as we consider possibilities availed through the continued development and dissemination of an archive for future students.

Acknowledgement

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