Developing an Online Community to Promote Engagement and Professional Learning for Pre-service Teachers Using Social Software Tools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To support students undertaking an initial teacher training program, a communities of practice model (Wenger, 1998) was implemented, supported by a social software-based technology framework, to enable mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Participants formed peer-to-peer mentoring relationships, creating and sharing web log (blog) entries and voice recordings of critical incidents while on their practicum. Data from the students’ discourse was analyzed to explore issues and patterns that were indicators of a learning community. This data, together with data collected from post-practicum focus group discussions in which students reflected on the benefits of these media for peer mentoring and support, attests to the relevance and effectiveness of the adopted approach to developing a socio-professional community to support the development of pre-service teachers. The authors believe that best outcomes are achieved when activities are structured, when students are adequately trained in using the technologies, and when instructors or experts are available to scaffold reflection processes as the need arises.

Keywords: Asynchronous Discussion; Computer-Mediated Communication; Distributed Learning; Online Learning Community; Teacher Education; Technology-Mediated Learning; Web-Based Learning

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

ACU National is the Australian Catholic University, a public university funded by the Australian Government and open to students and staff of all beliefs and backgrounds. There are six campuses in Australia, which offer programs to students throughout the country and overseas. Campuses are located in Brisbane (Queensland), North Sydney and Strathfield (New South Wales), Canberra (Australian Capital Territory), as well as Ballarat and Melbourne (Victoria). Through fostering and advancing knowledge in education, health, commerce, the humanities, the sciences and technologies, and the creative arts, ACU National seeks to make a specific contribution to its local, national, and international communities. The University explicitly engages the social, ethical, and religious dimensions of the questions it faces in teaching,
research, and service. In its endeavors, it is guided by a fundamental concern for social justice, equity, and inclusivity.

ACU National began operations in 1991 following the amalgamation of four Catholic tertiary institutions in eastern Australia. The institutions that merged to form the university had their origins in the mid-1800s when religious orders and institutes became involved in the preparation of teachers for Catholic schools and, later, nurses for Catholic hospitals. All in all, more than twenty historical entities have contributed to the creation of ACU National, through various amalgamations, relocations, transfers of responsibilities, and diocesan initiatives. Today, the university operates within a rapidly changing educational and industrial context. Student numbers are increasing, areas of teaching and learning have changed and expanded, there is a greater emphasis on research, and e-learning plays an integral role (ACU National, 2003).

The Canberra campus is one of the smallest campuses of ACU National, where there are approximately 800 undergraduate and 200 graduate students studying to be primary or secondary school teachers through the School of Education (ACT). (Other programs offered on this campus are nursing, theology, social work, arts, and religious education.) A new model of pre-service secondary teacher education commenced with the introduction of the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) program at this campus in 2005. It marked an innovative collaborative venture between the university and a cohort of experienced secondary school teachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and its surrounding region. This partnership was forged to allow the student teachers undertaking the program to be inducted into the teaching profession with the cooperation of leading practitioners from schools in and around the ACT.

During the one-year Grad.Dip.Ed. program, students undertake two four-week block practicum placements, during which they have the opportunity to observe exemplary lessons, as well as commencing teaching. The goals of the practicum include improving students’ access to innovative pedagogy and educational theory, helping them situate their own prior knowledge regarding pedagogy, and assisting them in reflecting on and evaluating their own practice. Each student is paired with a nominated mentor at the school where they are placed.

In 2007, a new dimension to the teaching practicum was added to facilitate online peer mentoring among the pre-service teachers and provide them with opportunities to reflect on teaching prior to entering full-time employment at a school. The creation of an online community to facilitate this mentorship and professional development process forms the context for the present case study. While on their practicum, student teachers used collaborative Web logging (blogging) and threaded voice discussion tools that were integrated into the university’s learning management system (LMS), to share and reflect on their experiences, identify critical incidents, and invite comment on their responses and reactions from peers.

In planning, evaluating, and analyzing the outcomes of the initiative, the project facilitators sought to find answers to the following questions:

a) *Research Question 1:* How can a communities of practice (CoP) framework, based on Wenger’s (1998) work, be adopted to create an e-learning community and support professional development experiences for pre-service teachers?
b) **Research Question 2:** What elements of a CoP were evident in the peer-to-peer relationships and interactive dialogues that occurred in the online community?

## SETTING THE STAGE

**Theory and Philosophy Underpinning the Case**

The concept of communities, including both communities of learners (CoLs) and of practice, has been gaining currency in recent years. Since the inaugural work by Lave and Wenger (1991) on situated learning and CoPs, these notions have had a profound influence on both theory and practice in the learning sciences, management, and organizational behavior. However, the term “community” is still much debated, and there appears to be little consensus on how it should be defined. Whittaker, Isaacs, and O’Day (1997, p. 137) identified the following core characteristics of online communities, which may also be considered valid in a face-to-face (offline) context:

- Members have a shared goal, interest, need, or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community;
- Members engage in repeated, active participation and there are often intense interactions, strong emotional ties, and shared activities occurring between participants;
- Members have access to shared resources and there are policies for determining access to those resources;
- Reciprocity of information, support, and services between members is important;
- There is a shared context of social conventions, language, and protocols.

As with CoPs and CoLs, the original ideas of situated learning and situated cognition theory (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) represent a major shift in learning theory from traditional psychological views of learning as mechanistic and individualistic, toward perspectives of learning that place greater emphasis on socio-cultural aspects (Salomon, 1996; Greeno, 1998). These theories regard learning as an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world (Lave & Wenger, 1991), stressing the importance of acquiring and refining knowledge and skills *in situ* within real or authentic settings (Collins, 1988). Educators are therefore encouraged to immerse learners in environments that approximate as closely as possible the contexts in which their new ideas and behaviors will be applied. In this project, an eclectic mix of theories was used to provide a strong conceptual framework for the development of social, contextualized, reciprocal relationships among student teachers, in order to develop their professional skills through reflective practice and dialogue.

Learning from peers is not a new phenomenon, and it is often linked to collaborative and cooperative learning as they share a number of common features, and involve active, reciprocal helping behaviours among groups or matched dyads. In this article peer-to-peer learning is defined as “the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (Topping, 2005, p. 633). Research has found that the forms of interactions that occur between peers are qualitatively different from those occurring between an expert and novice, or a teacher and student. More recent studies indicate that peer learning and mentoring relationships in which intellectual capabilities are similar can offer both cognitive challenges and psycho-social support as both parties are more likely to engage in
mutual dialogue and shared activities (see for example, Paulus & Scherff, 2008). Essentially, in a peer-to-peer mentoring relationship there is agreement on communication and feedback protocols, which may involve phone calls, e-mail, and/or other forms of contact in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas and to provide reciprocity and support. For both parties this is a developmental relationship with the purpose of assisting the individuals to achieve a goal, in this case learn more about the teaching profession and develop their skills as teachers.

In recognition of the dearth of peer-to-peer learning arrangements for teachers completing the teaching practicum (field experience), the present project aimed to create a technology-supported learning community among a group of postgraduate students completing a one-year, entry-level teaching qualification. The approach combines the concept of a learning community with various online professional development strategies and processes.

**Novice Teachers’ Need for Professional Development**

Teachers have the onerous and daunting task of enabling students to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to prepare them for further education, employment, and life at large. In the early stages of their professional careers, what teachers desire is a forum for “the voices of teachers themselves, the questions [they] ask, the ways [they] use writing and intentional talk in their work lives” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1996, p. 93). As part of their enculturation into schools, beginning teachers need to communicate and share ideas and to become part of the school learning community. These concerns are even more apparent and pronounced in the field of pre-service teacher training, where, in most initial teacher education programs, student teachers must complete a series of field practicum experiences prior to becoming certified and/or qualified. The practicum typically represents the first time when participants are separated from their university teachers and classmates and are expected to work independently. For many, the sense of isolation experienced while on practicum contrasts sharply with the supportive environment that they have experienced on campus. During this critical time, they are in greatest need of access to avenues for feedback, emotional support, and advice.

In the literature, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is situated in social contexts and is achieved through interaction and practice with others with similar professional interests (communities). The term “legitimate peripheral participation” refers to the process by which newcomers become part of a CoP through apprenticeship, or learning from others with greater expertise. This socially-based theory of professional learning implies that individuals learn by engaging with and contributing to their communities, and that community members learn and refine their practice through engaging in apprenticeship and reciprocity with newcomers.

The most fundamental point, however, is that a “community of practice” is not a synonym for a group, team, or random collection of individuals: Wenger (1998), for example, argues that successful learning and apprenticeship in a CoP “transforms identity;” it is “fundamentally experiential... a realignment of experience and competence” (p. 227) as defined in the community. Furthermore, the key ingredients of mutual engagement and reflection must be present. This happens through dialogue, a common focus, and sustained interaction, which are in turn achievable through a peer mentoring and exchange process whereby members of a dyad communicate, share ideas, support each other, and offer mutual feedback. Thus, the framework of a CoP was deemed to be an appropriate theoretical basis for the analysis of this case study as
it is characterized by a focus on peer collaboration, reflective dialogue, and social support for teacher professional development. Specifically, Wenger (1998, pp. 72–73) describes three core dimensions of the relation by which practice is the source of coherence of a community. These dimensions formed a foundation for the design and evaluation of the online learning community for the student teachers involved in the study:

1. **Mutual engagement**, which arises through the shared goals of the members of the community, and the actions they engage in whose meanings they negotiate with one another;
2. **A joint enterprise**, which involves negotiated ideas, interpretations, and mutual accountability encapsulating members’ collaborative and cooperative endeavors to attain their shared goals, and their responses to the environmental or contextual conditions within which they operate;
3. **A shared repertoire**, which consists of the resources for negotiating meaning (e.g. tools, actions, discourses, artifacts) created or formed as a result of the pursuit of the joint enterprise.

**Building and Supporting Online Learning Communities Through Social Software**

Other perspectives on the development and functioning of CoPs and CoLs provide insights into the processes needed to sustain productive interaction that results in learning outcomes for members, both collectively and individually. Bielaczyc and Collins (1999) identify four characteristics that a learning community must have: (1) diversity of expertise among its members; (2) a shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills of the group; (3) an emphasis on learning how to learn; and (4) mechanisms for sharing what is learned. This is a significant departure from the traditional view of learning, which emphasizes individual knowledge and performance, and the expectation that students will acquire the same concepts, skills, and knowledge at the same pace. There are further links within this research to the field of computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL), in which digital platforms and tools have been developed to support learning communities. One of the foremost of these efforts was the development of Knowledge Forum (formerly Computer Supported Intentional Learning Environments or CSILE—see Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991, 1994), where the model involves students investigating problems and building knowledge in various subject areas over several weeks or months. Software can support students in constructing their ideas through features such as scaffolds in the form of cues, online notebooks, and visualizations. As students collaborate, they contribute to the collective work of the community in many ways, by proposing theories, advancing initial hypotheses, and summarizing what needs to be understood in order to progress on a problem solution.

In order to fully develop the potential of the concept of an online learning community, learners need suitable pedagogical models, as well as tools that fit their needs and the social processes that learning entails. In addition, for professional learning and reflection to occur, there is a need for informal networking and “learning on demand,” while simultaneously, community members must have access to supportive, flexible, and individualized learning tools and options. Within the last few years, “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005a, 2005b) and “social software” have become buzzwords that characterize the transformation of the World Wide Web from a so-called “Read-Only Web” to a “Read/Write Web” (Gillmor, 2006). The term “social software” may be broadly defined as “software that supports group interaction” (Shirky, 2003, para. 2), and although it has recently been linked to the emergence of Web 2.0, it is arguable that the Internet has always
comprised a network of individuals connected through social technologies like e-mail, chat rooms, and discussion boards. The emerging wave of social software, including but not limited to blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, podcasts, and user-generated media sharing applications, offers new affordances that present particular promise for the building and maintenance of online learning communities and CoPs (Downes, 2005; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Brown & Adler, 2008).

Mejias (2005) observes that “social software can positively impact pedagogy by inculcating a desire to reconnect to the world as whole, not just the social part that exists online” (p. 1). Current social software applications on the World Wide Web not only support social interaction, feedback, conversation, and networking (Boyd, 2007; Downes, 2005), but also allow individuals and groups to engage in activities that expand knowledge by allowing them to build connections with others. Many of these tools straddle virtual and real social worlds, as they entail both online and offline interactions and visual/verbal connectivity. For example, Flickr and YouTube facilitate the sharing of photos and videos with both “real world” and “virtual” friends; social networking sites like MySpace, Ning, and Facebook let users build online identities by customizing their personal profiles with a range of multimedia elements, as well as interacting with existing contacts and forming new relationships.

For the purposes of the current discussion, the working definition of social software adopted, to link in with the key notion of online CoLs and CoPs, is that proposed by Anderson (2008): “networked tools that support and encourage individuals to learn together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity, and relationship” (p. 227). Anderson also aptly points out that although a concise and precise definition of social software seems to yet elude us, the new tools do enable rich forms of interaction and offer affordances that may be useful in reducing constraints on the freedom of users, including meeting, building community, reducing communication errors, and supporting complex group functions.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Participants and Tasks
As previously mentioned, the project involved a restricted network of pre-service teachers enrolled in a postgraduate program in teacher education, who used asynchronous Web-based communication and networking tools for purposeful dialogue during their student teaching experience (the practicum). There were 19 student teachers in the cohort, whose ages ranged from 22 to 43 years, and who held Bachelor degree qualifications in disciplines other than education. Some of the participants had already had teaching experience, and in terms of technical skill and comfort levels, all of them possessed at least basic experience in using the Web, with some being very confident in using a variety of telecommunications tools and applications on a daily basis.

During the course of their four-week practicum, each participant was required to reflect and report on a total of three critical incidents that occurred in his/her classroom, in both text and voice formats. Each week, the participants were asked to write a 200 to 300-word report, as well as to produce a 90-second voice recording containing different content to the written report, about a significant incident, issue, or problem that occurred during that week. The report was to
include a description of the context of the incident as well as an account of both the actions of the students in the class and those of the student teacher.

Additionally, the participants had to identify questions or topics on which they needed advice or assistance, inviting their peers to respond. On a weekly basis, each participant was asked to respond to at least one other student teacher in writing as well as orally, commenting constructively on his/her postings and providing helpful comments and support. The author of the original posting in each case was also expected to respond to the feedback received. Two lecturer mentors, including the coordinator of the practicum unit, supplied a limited amount of input into the discussion, particularly during the early stages of the exercise.

At the conclusion of the practicum, the participants completed a capstone task in which they each created a two-minute podcast recording to be shared with the rest of the student teacher cohort, reflecting on the highlights and challenges of the practicum experience.

**Social Software-Based Technology Framework Used to Support the Learning Community**

A social framework for learning is achieved by designing for conversation and participation within a community to ensure that there is mutual accountability, as members attempt to create and negotiate new meanings. To support the social and communicative components of the learning experience, the participants used social software tools embedded within ACU National’s Blackboard (2009) based online learning environment to engage in dialogue and exchange on experiences that occurred while undertaking their teaching practicum in geographically dispersed schools, thus forming a self-contained virtual community mediated and supported by the LMS and the embedded digital tools.

For the text-based components of the learning experience, the participants used a blogging facility within the Blackboard system (Figure 1). Although blogs were originally designed to allow individuals to maintain their own personal journals or diaries and make them available for public viewing, shared or multi-author group blogs have found numerous uses as computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools to support learning. Such blogs can serve as powerful collaborative and shared publishing applications for promoting dialogue and the sharing of ideas (Lee, 2005).

To facilitate voice-based peer-to-peer interaction, the students used the Wimba Voice Board (Wimba, Inc., 2007) tool. This tool allowed the creation of threaded, asynchronous audio discussions that were also integrated into Blackboard (Figure 2). A major advantage of the Wimba Voice Board is that apart from standard voice recording and playback equipment (sound cards, headsets or speakers, and microphones), it requires no specialized hardware or software other than a Java-enabled Web browser. It also simplifies the process for users, by providing an easy-to-use, browser-based recording and playback interface that eliminates the technical overhead of having to use separate applications to record, edit, and upload/download the audio content.
Institutional Support and Staff Involvement in the Project
The project was made possible by an ACU Teaching and Learning Development grant, which provided funding for equipment, training of students in use of the technology, and administrative
support. The project was of particular interest to the university because of its alignment with the overall institutional strategy of technology integration in teaching. It also incorporated one of the underutilized features of Blackboard, namely the Wimba Voice Board.

Immediately prior to the start of the practicum, the students were issued with headsets with built-in microphones, for use with the Wimba Voice Board in their respective schools or at home. A one-hour, face-to-face training session was held to assist them in becoming familiar with how to use the Web-based tools and equipment to participate in the activity. The session was conducted by a university IT support officer, who was also responsible for setting up the tools within Blackboard, as well as overseeing the technical facets of the project in general. At this time, paper-based materials were provided to the students, containing step-by-step instructions on how to use the various functions of the system.

Two academic staff members of the School of Education were present at the training session to provide advice to the students on how to plan and structure their written reports and recordings. The learning processes and tasks that students accomplished, i.e. creation and recording of critical incidents, were integrated into their course, and formed part of the course assessment / grading system. Throughout the project, tutors were available to offer guidance and support and to discuss concerns with students on request. They monitored the blog and voice board, but generally did not intervene directly in the discussion as it progressed.

**Evaluation Method**

A formal evaluation exercise was conducted that incorporated questionnaires and focus group interviews. In addition, a study was undertaken to examine the impact of the sharing of audio-recorded stories of critical incidents on the development of a learning community among the pre-service teachers. This study employed a qualitative research methodology by applying Wenger’s (1998) conceptual framework and conducting content analysis of the student teachers’ blog postings and voice board/podcast recordings, to identify issues and patterns that were indicators of a learning community.

Content analysis is defined as “a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding” (Berelson, 1952, p. 27). It can be a useful method for allowing researchers to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention (Weber, 1990). In recent decades, content analysis techniques have become widely used in the analysis of computer conferencing transcripts, and now combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, which involve not merely counting the occurrences of variables, but also interpreting them through particular theoretical lenses. Hara, Bonk, and Angeli (2000) endorse this dual approach, noting its capacity to “capture the richness of student interaction” (p. 119).

The analysis technique used enabled the project facilitators to sift through the discourse produced by participants in a systematic fashion, using categories and markers to code or assign features to data segments. In content analysis, a fundamental issue is the selection of the unit of analysis, with a choice of, for example, sentences, messages, propositions, or thematic elements. In the case of the present study, evidence was sought in the form of units of meaning or phrases in which the participants expressed a view that contained explicit statements of their experience.
Incidences of these discourse units were categorized according to Wenger’s (1998) three dimensions of *mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire*, identified earlier as the core, defining characteristics of a CoP.

**Case Outcomes and Discussion**

The project yielded a rich corpus of data that was analyzed to address the two research questions stated earlier. Data obtained from the questionnaires and focus group interviews, as well as anecdotal feedback received from students and staff, attest strongly to the relevance and effectiveness of the adopted approach to creating an e-learning community and supporting the pre-service teachers’ professional development experiences, based on a CoP framework (Research Question 1). The use of the university’s LMS (Blackboard) as a platform for the exercise proved successful as it provided participants with both text and voice-based CMC and social software tools embedded within an online environment that was safe and familiar to them.

The results of the content analysis of the student discourse are summarized in Table 1, along with extracts that present a snapshot of the interactions that occurred between participants. A total of 82 relevant message units were found. Overall, student comments focused on the benefits of sharing experiences on their school practicum through the social software tools. The majority of comments were related to aspects of established common ground, engagement with others, and building of rapport. During the project, Web-based resources and communication tools were seen as a way to meet the variety of these beginning teachers’ needs, and proved to be both a catalyst and a support for the development of an online community. More specifically, the provision of the voice board and blog enabled students to communicate while on practicum, to exchange ideas, to reflect on experience, and to develop a sense of professional identity. In conjunction with appropriate pedagogical scaffolding, these tools enabled reflection on professional growth experiences, as well as providing a solution to help alleviate the problem of isolation.

Last but not least, the results of the content analysis contain compelling evidence that the participants’ discourse within the online community exhibited all three components of Wenger’s (1998) CoP framework (Research Question 2). The data shows that the highest number of comments and narratives recorded were related to expressions of mutual engagement and solidarity with others, sharing experiences, establishing common ground, and discovering a new professional identity. Evidence from the student podcasts also demonstrates that the participants understood this transformation of identity, and became increasingly aware of their professional roles as teachers during the course of the practicum. Furthermore, throughout the activity, they engaged in roles in which they mentored and supported one another and took responsibility for furthering the expertise and intellectual capital of the group.

### Table 1. Summary of results of content analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component (based on Wenger, 1998)</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Examples from student teachers’ discourse</th>
<th>No. of discourse units</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutual engagement</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>“On the first posting I feel that if I did have someone who was doing the same thing as me, they would”</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Doing things together**
- Identity formation and maintenance

"understand more in depth"
“It just sort of helped me when I got ... to know that I was not alone"
“Teaching is now something I know about in a real sense. I can finally make the links to theory"

**Joint enterprise**
- Negotiation of ideas
- Mutual accountability
- Rhythms and interpretations

“I agree with T in relation to advance planning of units of work, but there is more than one way to plan ahead”
“I found an example of what J referred to in his earlier blog entry...”

**Shared repertoire**
- Historical events
- Stories and anecdotes
- Knowledge artifacts
- Terminology
- Discourses
- Actions
- Tools

“Just knowing who is teaching what subjects and what levels so you can share things”
“It was nice to have that community support while we were going through that experience of finding out what to do”
“I also see the benefit of having somebody to share ideas”
“... everybody went through the same thing, more than once on some occasions”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Joint enterprise</th>
<th>Shared repertoire</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>17</strong></td>
<td><strong>29</strong></td>
<td><strong>82</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20.73%</strong></td>
<td><strong>35.37%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CURRENT CHALLENGES/PROBLEMS FACING THE ORGANIZATION**

In retrospect, the student teachers who participated in the project found the sharing of voice-recorded episodes of classroom incidents while on teaching practicum to be very motivating, reassuring, and supportive. The critical success factors were the ease of accessing the voice recordings, the sense of immediacy and social presence (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999) conveyed by the recordings, and the opportunities for shared reflection on critical episodes. The students were less excited about the use of the blog, on which they were also required to produce written accounts of the critical incidents. In this sense, they felt there was overlap in the activities, and some did not fully understand that the purpose of the blogging component was to write a 200 to 300-word report, while the voice board was to be used to create a 90-second recording containing different content to the written report, but on a significant incident, issue, or problem that occurred during the relevant week. In future iterations of the project, the facilitators would consider a similar structure for describing the teaching incidents on the audio recordings, but focus on critical reflection on the blogs, together with links to theories that could be applied to classroom management. The main issue of concern here is how to stimulate students to reflect deeply on their own experiences, and comment constructively on the postings and contributions of others.
In addition, students had to identify questions or areas in which they required advice or assistance, inviting their peers to respond. Not all students asked questions of others, but some did so using the blog. Each student was initially paired with another student and asked to provide feedback to this one person, but students often chose to reply to more than one person, according to their level of interest in the matter. This situation was in fact more productive than the paired responses that had originally been planned, and generated a larger volume of postings and comments. The participants appeared to be quite open and ready to respond to one another in this way, particularly when they had had similar experiences. For this reason, the facilitators are likely to consider omitting the set pairing of students in future project iterations. In “real world” CoPs, choices are available to participants in terms of who they relate to; similarly, there may be value in allowing a degree of flexibility and autonomy within an online community designed to support the transition of students from formal learning environments into the workplace and industry.

Last but not least, it was hoped that the students would provide helpful comments and support to one another in ways that connected theory to practice. This posed a major challenge, as it called for them to consider theoretical aspects of classroom management prior to coming up with informed advice. Many students had limited success in achieving this goal. Participants admitted that they were not always able to provide useful practical advice, although most displayed empathy in their postings. In order to ensure better outcomes in this area the next time the project is run, the facilitators may intervene to ensure that the quality of feedback goes beyond expressions of sympathy to critical application of theory to practice. This would require tutors to monitor the discussion more frequently and provide better, perhaps fading levels of scaffolding in the form of hints and prompts. While the difficulty here is finding the “ideal” balance between providing the necessary instructional support and encouraging students to be independent and self-directed learners, the authors believe than an element of control and intervention is necessary when using a CoP pedagogy with a group of novices.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

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