Chapter 14
Developing an Online Community to Promote Engagement and Professional Learning for Pre-Service Teachers Using Social Software Tools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While references to the concept of “learning community” abound in the literature, a common ingredient is the belief that learning is enhanced when there is a commitment to sharing ideas and knowledge within a collaborative group or network of individuals. To support student teachers completing their practicum placements as part of a one-year Graduate Diploma of Secondary Education at the Australian Catholic University (ACU National), 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. At the outset, all participants were given hands-on training in the use of the text and audio tools.

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that comprised the technology framework. They then formed peer-to-peer mentoring relationships, creating and sharing web log (blog) entries and voice recordings of critical incidents while on their teaching practicum. The data from the students’ discourse was transcribed, coded, and categorized by evaluating each message unit based upon the type of communication it displayed. The main focus was to identify the discourse elements based on Wenger’s (1998) conceptual framework. The coded scripts were used to explore issues and patterns that were indicators of a learning community. This data, together with post-practicum focus group discussions in which students reflected on the benefits of these media for peer mentoring and support, attests strongly to the relevance and effectiveness of the adopted approach to developing a socio-professional community to support the development of pre-service teachers. It is hoped that this case study will contribute to best practice in the use of social software technologies for online community building and support in professional learning contexts, in ways that transcend organizational and disciplinary boundaries. The authors believe that the 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.

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 amalgama-
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