Chapter 7

Supporting Peer-to-Peer E-Mentoring of Novice Teachers Using Social Software

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organizational Context

The Australian Catholic University (ACU National at www.acu.edu.au) is a public university funded by the Australian Government. There are six campuses across the country, located in Brisbane, Queensland; North Sydney, New South Wales; Strathfield, New South Wales; Canberra, Australian Capital Territory (ACT); Ballarat, Victoria; and Melbourne, Victoria. The university serves a total of approximately 27,000 students, including both full- and part-time students, and those enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Through fostering and advancing knowledge in education, health, commerce, the humanities, science and technology, and the creative arts, ACU National seeks to make specific and targeted contributions 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. The university is open to all, irrespective of religious belief or background. ACU National opened its doors 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-17th century when religious orders and institutes became involved in the preparation of teachers for Catholic schools and, later, nurses for Catholic hospitals. As a result of a series of amalgamations, relocations, transfers of responsibilities, and diocesan initiatives, more than twenty historical entities have contributed to the creation of ACU National. Today, ACU National operates within a rapidly changing educational and industrial context. Student numbers are increasing, areas of teaching and learning have changed and expanded,
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e-learning plays an important role, and there is greater emphasis on research. In its 2005–2009 Strategic Plan, the university commits to the adoption of quality teaching, an internationalized curriculum, as well as the cultivation of generic skills in students, to meet the challenges of the dynamic university and information environment (ACU National, 2008).

The Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) Program at ACU Canberra

Situated in Australia’s capital city, the Canberra campus is one of the smallest campuses of ACU National, where there are approximately 800 undergraduate and 200 postgraduate students studying to be primary or secondary school teachers through the School of Education (ACT). Other programs offered at this campus include 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 collaboration between the university and a cohort of experienced secondary school teachers in the ACT and its surrounding region. This partnership was forged to allow 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. In the preparation of novices for the teaching profession, an enduring challenge is to create learning experiences capable of transforming practice, and to instill in the novices an array of professional skills, attributes, and competencies (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Another dimension of the beginning teacher experience is the need to bridge theory and practice, and to apply pedagogical content knowledge in real-life classroom practice. During the one-year Graduate Diploma program, the student teachers undertake two four-week block practicum placements, during which they have the opportunity to observe exemplary lessons, as well as to commence teaching. The goals of the practicum include improving participants’ 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 teacher is paired with a more experienced teacher based at the school where he/she is placed, who serves as a supervisor and mentor. In 2007, a new dimension to the teaching practicum was added to facilitate online peer mentoring among the pre-service teachers at the Canberra campus of ACU National, 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, students used social software in the form of collaborative web logging (blogging) and threaded voice discussion tools that were integrated into the university’s course management system (CMS), to share and reflect on their experiences, identify critical incidents, and invite comment on their responses and reactions from peers.

BACKGROUND

E-Mentoring of Pre-Service and Beginning Teachers

Primary and secondary school teachers have the onerous and daunting task of enabling students to develop the knowledge and skills needed for further education, employment, and life at large. Beginning teachers are particularly vulnerable because they lack experience in instructing and managing large groups of learners, while simultaneously coping with assessment demands, curriculum changes, lesson planning, and being responsible to multiple stakeholder groups (parents, students, the community, school administration, etc.). The
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