ACEC2010 - IPRAC - TWITTERING TO SURVIVE PRACTICUM

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Abstract

This study reports on a project that provided 25 pre-service teachers with iPhones to maintain a strong social network during their practicum placements. As Graduate Diploma students, initial practicum placement can be particularly intense and emotional experiences. Using the twitter micro blogging service and iPhone mobile devices, students were encouraged to share the 'trivia' of their placement experience and through this sharing of seemingly mundane experiences, reduce the isolation and uncertainty of the experience.

Most pre-service education students experience anxiety about teaching practicum (Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, Silins, Banfield & Russel, 2000) and this stress is based on student perceptions of the demands placed on them (expresses concerns) associated with the practicum, and their resources for coping (reported strategies). MacDonald (1993), Cambell-Evans & Maloney (1995), Capel (1997), D'Rosario & Wong (1996), Elkerton (1994), Moreton, Vesco, Williams & Awender (1997) have described teaching practicum as the most stressful component of teacher preparation courses which generally focus "more on methodology and less on preparing pre-service teachers to cope with the inevitable anxieties and stress associated with students' roles, relationships, and responsibilities of teaching" (Murray-Harvey, et al, 2000). The attrition of pre-service, novice, and experienced teachers is a widespread problem (Chaplain, 2008). In England, about 40% of those who embark on a training course (on all routes) never become teachers, and of those who do become teachers, about 40% are not teaching 5 years later (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). In the USA as few as 50% of pre-service teachers enter and remain in the US school system for longer than three years with many leaving to find less-stressful careers (Black-Branch & Lamont, 1998).

Teaching has consistently been ranked as a high stress occupation (Beer & Beer, 1992; Borg, Riding, & Falzon, 1991), stress among pre-service teachers is less well researched, perhaps in part because (Murray-Harvey et al., 2000) it is viewed as a normal part of teacher development and therefore accepted as a natural element of the transition from novice to qualified teacher. Many pre-service student teachers discontinue with their studies due to excessive anxiety (Sanderson, 2003) with the most powerful predictor of retention among pre-service teachers being how much pleasure they anticipate they will get from the job, but the reality of teaching during practicum often results in their optimism being dampened (Veenman, 1984). While it is recognised that the most stressful component of teacher education is the practicum (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; Macdonald, 1993), it is generally expected by teacher preparation courses that the ‘wit and experience’ (Biggs, 1990) of students will ameliorate their concerns. While some universities offer units that touch on how to handle anxiety during the teaching practicum (Campbell & Uusimaki, 2006) it is argued (Black-Branch & Lamont, 1998) that teacher education programs have at least an ethical, if not a legal and professional responsibility, to provide support for pre-service teachers who are under high levels of stress during their teaching practicum.

Pre-service teachers have a range of concerns, balancing practicum and personal commitments, coping with the teaching workload, managing time, and concerns about others' expectations of their competence. Students develop a range of strategies to help cope with practicum stresses, of particular importance is the use of social support networks to develop and maintain coping strategies while on teaching practicum. Such networks may be newly established (in the case of supervising teachers) or existing (such as family and friends). Where a pre-service teacher is isolated from their existing social networks and have difficulty in developing new networks, a significant component of their coping strategy may be unavailable. While it is strongly suggested that pre-service teachers should do their practicum in pairs or clusters rather than isolated from their peers (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998; Tom,
where this is not possible, social networking technologies may be able to assist in reducing practicum stress by sustaining social networks at a distance.

Research Design

In this study, 25 Primary School Graduate Diploma pre-service teachers on their first six week practicum experience were loaned Apple iPhones to enable them to sustain a social network using mobile devices and a private group on the social networking micro-blogging service - Twitter. The 25 students were randomly selected from 49 volunteers drawn from a cohort of approximately 200 primary school pre-service teachers completing a one-year graduate diploma of education. All volunteers were required not to have used social networking software in the last 3 months. From the remaining pool of 24 students, a control group of 20 pre-service teachers was also studied; this group was not provided with a mobile device or used social networking services during the period of the study. In the week following their six-week practicum placement, students were surveyed on their experiences during their practicum placement and their micro-blog conversations analysed.

Students in the mobile social network group were loaned a second-generation Apple iPhone with Twitter applets installed to provide mobile connectivity to a social networked comprising the 25 members of the mobile social network group. Students were provided with prepaid SIM cards with sufficient credit to facilitate use over the 6-week period. Pre-service teachers in the mobile device group were also provided with approximately 30 minutes of instruction on using the devices and the social networking software service Twitter. With the permission of their school principal, supervising teacher, and within their school privacy policy, over the six-week period, students in the mobile social network group used the personal device on a daily basis to record and share their thoughts and experiences during their teaching. No specific expectations or instructions were provided to the mobile social networking group on what to include in their micro-blog posts.

Findings

From analysis of over 400 micro-blog messages during the study, students used the social network for five main purposes. Activity sharing, Achievement sharing, Attitude sharing, Resource sharing, and Event sharing. The following micro-blog postings are representative of the five categories.

Activity sharing - this provided members of the network general information on the types of activities that other members were engaged in during their practicum placement.

"Day of marking and writing reflections"
"Teaching all day. A bunch of projects to mark should be a fun and exciting night of marking"
"about to teach a math lesson based on grilled cheese consumption"
"Lesson planning and rubric making all day."

Achievement sharing - this provided an opportunity for members to publicly express their successes or failures to a supportive community.

"Another successful lesson"
"A teacher of many years thought my artwork was fabulous, ya I'm that good"
"Testing my behavioural management...witnessed a complete melt down.. throwing chairs, hitting, biting, spitting, yelling...wow what a day!"
"Math lesson was awful but grammar made up for it"
"complex sentences you will be the death of me"
"Worst day"
Attitude sharing - this provided members an opportunity to express how they were coping with the practicum experience.

"well getting there, preps can be little rat bags but ya gotta luv em!! tomorrow will be a fun day!! getting hooked on teaching, yay!!"
"what a week...taking a special ed class to gymnastics is more tiring for the teachers then the students i think!"
"Miss XXXXX, you look beautiful today, you look like a princess' awwww i love prep"
Making a difference one lesson at a time."
"One week down, 5 to go. I *heart* prac =)"
"Looking forward to a big taste of home this weekend...."

Resource sharing - this provided a forum for members to directly support each other in lesson preparation.

"Any of your schools still doing outcomes based learning? Help required, back in the dark ages here."
"Have you guys found any really useful interactive websites for maths?"
"Thank you for the websites. Anyone know a good site to find outcomes like the KLAs"
"interactive maths websites: http://resources.oswego.org/ not a bad one?"

Event sharing - in which members could relate their thoughts on a shared event.

"The weekend went by way to fast. Still have so much work this week. The strike will come in handy to get things done"
"needs more sleep.. thank goodness for the strike!!"
"Enjoying the strike!!"
"I love a good strike. A sleep in some relaxing and now working on my technology unit."
"good day off... now mentally preparing for my half day of teaching, and its raining! Not sure how this rain will affect the kids attention spans"
"No power? No problem... Nap time!!!! Stay dry Gold Coast! =)"
"I thought we were in a drought...."

Analysis of the times when micro-blogs were produced revealed that approximately 70% of posts were made during school hours and supports the argument that for use of a mobile device as it allows participants the opportunity to produce micro-blogs at convenient times and close to the event/activity related to the post. This was reinforced in student surveys in which 85% of students reported that the immediate availability of the mobile device was of significant or very significant to their regular use of the micro-blogging service.

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being very significantly and 1 being very insignificantly, students responded to the question of how stressful they found their practicum experience.
Table 1

Practicum Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How stressful did you find you practicum?</th>
<th>Mobile Social Network (n=25)</th>
<th>Control Group (n=20)</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service teachers with access to other social networks</td>
<td>3.46 (n=19)</td>
<td>3.80 (n=16)</td>
<td>+0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service teachers placed in isolated practicum’s</td>
<td>3.68 (n=6)</td>
<td>4.00 (n=4)</td>
<td>+0.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between pre-service teachers using mobile devices and those without access to such devices suggests that access to mobile social networking devices provides some benefit to reducing stress during teaching practicum. Students in isolated practicum placement recorded a similar difference but the sample size was insufficient to demonstrate that a dedicated mobile social network can act as the equivalent to an existing social network in reducing stress during teaching practicum.

Conclusion

Of the 14 students in the mobile social network group that reported significantly stressful events during their practicum, 75% indicated that the ability to share the experience with their online social network was a significant or very significant component of their coping strategy. 10% of the mobile social networking group indicated that they would not have successfully completed the practicum experience without the support of their social networks. Of 12 students in the control group that reported significantly stressful events during their practicum, 70% indicated that the ability to share the experience with their social network was a significant or very significant component of their coping strategy. 15% of the control group indicated that they would not have successfully completed the practicum experience without the support of their social networks. The number of participants in both the mobile social network and control groups did not provide sufficient numbers of isolated practicum experiences in which students were separated from their existing social networks to effectively differentiate between the two groups. Both groups strongly supported the importance of social networks in reducing stress during practicum placements but the effectiveness of mobile devices in providing access to a social network at a distance could not be substantiated, as most participants were able to draw upon existing social networks and were not reliant on the mobile device during stressful events.

This study has indicated that pre-service teachers can use a mobile social network for at least five main purposes during their teaching practicum: Activity sharing, Achievement sharing, Attitude sharing, Resource sharing, and Event sharing. It supports the use of mobile devices to provide the capacity to share experiences as close to the event as possible, and provides support to the importance of social networks in reducing stress in teaching practicum. The sample size was insufficient to clearly demonstrate that mobile social networking is more or less effective than other social networks or that a dedicated mobile social network can act as the equivalent to an existing social network in reducing stress during teaching practicum.

References


