
Online mentoring for the induction of beginning teachers

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Abstract

Solutions to the enduring problem of teacher retention increasingly focus on the need for quality induction programs for beginning teachers. One response of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training is to nominate school mentors for all beginning teachers. This article reports on research that investigates the extent to which e-learning networks can support school mentoring to enhance induction programs. Beginning teachers from five NSW schools were monitored as they accessed a mentoring online program provided by the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) over a three-month period.

Introduction

The high rate of attrition for newly appointed teachers is a constant and worldwide concern for all employing bodies. It has been documented in Australia as a serious problem by Ramsey (2000) and the Senate Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession (1998). Ingersoll (2001) identifies a shift in international research from recruitment to retention as a means of resolving the problem, and quality induction has emerged as the staple ingredient in such a resolution.

Carter's (1999) review of the literature reveals that effective induction and support of beginning teachers is essential in ensuring the transition from neophyte to competent practising professional. It is these early years that determine whether or not the neophyte will pursue a career in teaching. It is therefore a considerable concern that the quality of induction in Australian schools is variable (see McRae et al 2000).

To improve the quality of induction in NSW schools, the Department of Education and Training (DET) implemented the policy that all beginning teachers have both a mentor and a supervisor. Collaborative research conducted by UTS and the DET has found that beginning teachers prefer support from experienced

practitioners outside their own school (Schuck, Segal, Anderson & Balding 2000). This has implications for broader expressions of professional development and induction. While the authors contend that e-learning (accessing expertise beyond the school) is not a viable substitute, they do support it as a valuable supplement.

However, the research indicates that e-learning support networks are not widely used by teachers in Australian schools, and that the benefits are limited, given the rudimentary nature of their use (Schuck et al 2000; Selwyn 2000). The study reported here investigated the use of innovative online strategies to enhance the quality of professional learning for beginning teachers. It seeks to answer the question: what are the characteristics of the online environment that promote a mentoring support network for the induction of early career teachers?

The literature

The role of mentoring in the induction of teachers has become a strong focus of support initiatives developed in recent years by the NSW DET. It has taken the place of the more traditional in-service model of teacher professional development involving release and formal presentation.

Carter (1999, p 32), in his review of the literature on beginning teacher development and mentoring, concludes that 'initial professional learning experiences are critical to the subsequent professional development of beginning teachers'. This literature focuses on detailing the role of mentors or the mentoring relationship (Ballantyne, Hansford & Parker 1995; Carter 1999; Dowding 1998; Feiman-Nemser and Parker 1992; Ganser 1995; Hawkey 1997; Wildman, Nagliaro, Niles & Niles 1992); reports case studies (Carter 1999; McNally & Martin 1998); identifies and discusses issues (Ballantyne, Hansford & Parker 1995; Carter 1999; Gray & Gray 1985); and outlines effective training for mentors of beginning teachers (Sandlin & Riggs 1999).

The power of e-learning to provide support for mentoring newly appointed and early career teachers is yet to be fully investigated. Information and communication technologies are becoming core tools in commercial, personal and educational spheres. Their potential to offer new kinds of opportunities for educational networking appears to be vast (Gordin, Gomez, Pea & Fishman 1996; Papert 2000). In professions other than teaching, the use of ICTs to support and enhance induction and early career professional development is expanding. Examples include NetMentors in the USA supporting scientists and engineers (Malchow 2001) and an Australian initiative by the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia called Mentors Online (APESMA 2003), which supports professionals operating and managing small businesses. There are also a number of online mentoring programs operating under the auspices of the Australian Small Business Enterprise Cultural Program (2001). All of these are examples of online mentoring networks.

However in the educational context such online mentoring networks appear to be limited to discipline-based offering of resources, and are not used in any

systematic or rigorous way for mentoring and induction of newly appointed teachers. It is this gap in the mentoring and online research that the reported study endeavours to fill.

The study

The study, which was funded by a UTS grant, adopted a qualitative paradigm acknowledging the social nature of learning and the importance of learning communities. There were three main phases, initially identified by the method of data collection.

Phase 1: initial interview

Teacher participants were interviewed both to establish a relationship and to ascertain their experience with and commitment to online communication as a mentoring tool. These interviews were conducted at the respective school sites, and focused on obtaining information about the mentoring arrangements within the school and their impact on induction; the teachers' feelings both about using online communication and establishing a mentoring community online; and information on how to establish the online community for optimum value. It was anticipated that the sample of participating teachers would comprise a range of experiences, including those who had no online experience at all.

Phase 2: online participation and process evaluation

Several online forums were established early in 2004 using a DET online forum website, and beginning teachers participated for a three-month period. UTS online forums were established in the areas 'Welcome' (an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves); 'Your support network' (an opportunity to share information about the desired structure of the online network); 'Possible forum topics' (an opportunity to foster dialogue on a given topic); and 'Current concerns' (an opportunity to raise issues and respond to those of others).

Participants in the forums could access a number of volunteer mentors from within the sample schools, and even from outside the schools. The two authors, both experienced teacher educators, were active participants in the forums. Technical assistance was available for those experiencing difficulties accessing the online forums.

As two research assistants were involved in the interviews and establishing the network, their respective perceptions of the process were also sought.

Phase 3: final interviews

Teacher participants were interviewed at the end of the three-month period. The questions focused on how online forums provided support in comparison to face-to-face mentoring; the appealing characteristics of online forums for mentoring; the

description of how and how often they were used; the constraints on their use; and the negative features that online mentoring might have, in hindsight. Anticipating that some teachers may have been minimally engaged in the online forums, supplementary questions focused on how assistance could be provided in the future.

The sample comprised thirteen teachers from two secondary and three primary schools in NSW. The schools were nominated by DET according to two criteria. First, they would need to have relatively large numbers of newly appointed teachers, and only DET had access to this information; and second, they could not be involved in the Mentor Teacher Program Evaluation, a study operating under the aegis of the Strategic Research Directorate of the NSW DET.

Data were analysed by translating them to a form in which they can be displayed (Miles & Huberman 1984). Such a display involves the development of themes from teacher narratives, that is, their personal and professional constructions of their own experience (Clandinin & Connolly 2000). This involves what Seidman (1998) calls 'crafting profiles or themes'.

Findings

The findings of the study are reported according to the three identified phases.

Initial interviews

While there was a range of responses regarding the value of mentors in schools, the responses were generally positive: 'it does help if you have somewhere to go'. There were several expressions of unequivocal praise for some mentors in both primary and secondary schools. The following are typical:

There's a lot of things I wouldn't have got through this year. He was able to come in and helped because he's been through that and said 'I tried it this way. Why don't you do that?' Or he would say 'Let's try it a different way' or 'You're doing the right thing. Just persevere.' Without that support it would have been a very hard year.

Sue was wonderful – she gave me a lot of guidance and help. Just the general introduction into the school, making me feel at ease, letting me know where the resources were, what was expected of me generally the guidance regarding reports, feedback, giving me ideas, offering her services to proofread. And it's been wonderful.

One expression of 'not much' support may be explained by the fact that the teacher, while knowing his supervisor, did not know if he had a mentor.

There were a number of instances, particularly in secondary schools, where the teacher had a self-selected mentor, that is, someone not officially appointed as such. In secondary schools, the mentor, whether officially designated or not, was often the head teacher:

I go to my head teacher if I have a problem about policy, procedures, particular students, or things I want chased up. So alternatively, I would speak to other faculty members about this particular class or lesson ... bounce ideas off them to see what they are doing ... I didn't rely on a particular teacher.

This teacher's notion of not relying on one mentor was thematic. It is typified by the comment 'I have a supervisor but I consider all the teachers here as my mentor', and is further elucidated by the remark:

I find I access different people for different things. Different people have different strengths in different areas. I did have a mentor given to me but he didn't meet all those needs in being able to give me all the information I wanted in the way I wanted, so you did have to seek out other sources.

So, despite affirmation of the value of mentors, there are implications for a broader base of school support. Having a single mentor was often perceived as problematic. The solution, at least for several teachers, was the creation of learning teams which support not just beginning teachers but all teachers:

That is the way we have tried to set up the school – as a learning community. They have professional learning teams. It is not just about beginning teachers learning. It is about older and more experienced teachers learning and the executive learn as a team as well. They lead the learning and go on a learning journey.

This implicit argument for a greater equality in the mentor–mentee relationship was reflected in one teacher's plan to 'demystify the teaching experience' by having experienced teachers 'show they are not super teachers' by sharing the challenges and problems that they are experiencing.

While not all students had used online forums, they had at least used email. When the nature of online support as a tool for mentoring beginning teachers was explained, there was generally strong support:

Especially if you are in a school without any other beginning teachers and isolated. Like I have a friend who is doing a block in Leeton and she just rings me up and we chat. It is just the little things, but if there is no other beginning teacher ... like she had to break up a fight physically ... the whole physical thing was she had to get those kids separated and you are not meant to touch them.

Quite often you are in a situation where you might not have time to be able to sit down and have a chat about things. You may not feel comfortable talking face-to-face. It would be very nice to email someone and say 'this is what I'm worried about' ... the uses for technology are endless and I don't think they have even been touched yet.

While there was some unreserved praise for the value of online ('it is such a fantastic opportunity to do some learning – a learning organisation – that is the future'), others perceived its value more realistically ('I know that it definitely has some use but there are some things that can only be done by a mentor at the school because you need to know the particular child'). Reservations were expressed by some teachers about time in school hours to use online communication, and the difficulty of access to computers.

These findings were valuable in justifying the need for research. First, they established that the quality of mentoring programs for beginning teachers in schools is variable whatever their strength, and could be enhanced by supplementary professional development. Second, they revealed a strong perception that teachers desire a broad base of mentoring experiences beyond that which might be provided by a single teacher in the same school. Third, they confirmed that teachers are receptive to online communication as a mentoring tool.

Online participation and program evaluation

After the forums were established and the process of accessing them was explained, teachers began to post messages. The two most common forums were the 'Welcome' and 'Current concerns' forums. In the former, teachers typically introduced themselves, discussed the class they were teaching, and foreshadowed their desire to communicate with others. In the latter, they asked for advice about concerns like assessment, streaming and classroom organisation. The researchers responded to most of the questions.

The frequency of the use of the online forums was more modest than the researchers had anticipated, and a series of encouraging emails and phone calls inviting participation did not significantly increase the response. It became apparent that some of the teachers had not contributed at all.

The evaluations of the process by the project's two research assistants (one responsible for data collection and the other for technical support), provide a partial explanation. First, they commented on the fact that schools are so very busy that teachers did not often return phone calls. The timing of the project to correspond with the first three months of the school year may have produced additional constraints as newly appointed teachers struggled to establish themselves, and as packaged information received from the university was not considered a priority.

Second, they established that teachers only occasionally looked at emails sent to the school. This discovery resulted in the practice of faxing a copy of every email sent to the school, and faxing information that had been agreed upon in phone calls.

There were other findings that informed the research process. They include the desirability of conducting individual interviews, even though focus groups may be more viable in distant schools. It was found for instance that the teachers interviewed in pairs were less forthcoming than the teachers interviewed individually. While investigating the DET mentoring site and establishing the UTS forums were straightforward, there were some technical problems relating to the online registration of teachers.

Final interviews

While the great majority of teachers agreed that there were no problems logging on, several claimed to have read the forum messages without posting any. Only two

teachers claimed to have had problems logging on. (One admitted to limited computer literacy.)

There were useful data in ascertaining the benefits of face-to-face as opposed to online mentoring. For some, the more personal dimension in mentoring will always triumph:

I think that face-to-face, the human element, you can express yourself more. It's more vibrant ... I would always prefer the human element to electronic communication.

Others perceived the two forms of mentoring as satisfying different purposes. The following extract for instance makes a distinction between the individual or situated experience, and the big picture:

Face-to-face is more personal to you and what your situation is. I think with the online you are getting an overall view of what everyone is experiencing and things that that you may not have realised could be an issue or are not the norm. I found it was good to have a read and see if the experiences I was having at school were similar or different ... and how they were being coped with.

Some teachers believed that online communication worked well for those who were not in close contact with a mentor, and one teacher perceived a strength as a potentially simultaneous weakness: specific advice from a mentor is valuable when that person knows the children in the class, but often that knowledge may be ill-informed and produce hasty judgments. Therefore, the teacher argued, 'it is also good to have ideas from people who do not know the particular kids'.

One less conventional response was that face-to-face mentoring could assume the guise of a necessary evil, or 'the devil you know':

Sometimes face-to-face mentoring, if it's there, you sort of have to use it – like a baby having to take his medicine. They don't like to take their medicine, even though it's good for them.

When discussing the benefits of online communication for mentoring, and not necessarily in comparison with other expressions of mentoring, the greatest perceived benefit was diversity. The following teacher comments are typical:

With the online you get to experience a lot of other teacher's opinions and thoughts, successes and problems. It is not just one on one. You get to witness a lot of variety of other people as well.

The diversity certainly. A couple of the girls who were chatting on there had such different experiences. I have had a pretty standard class these two years, but others have had things like three or four grades in one classroom. Having contact with people from all different areas [locations] as well.

There was no one thematic response to the question of what might be asked online, but not face-to-face. One teacher, who had posted her query online about difficulties with ESL students, reported the need to get supplementary opinions to those of her mentor. Another teacher, acknowledging her ambition and desire for

promotion, indicated that online forums might be a helpful way to ask questions that might be perceived as 'a bit pushy' in the school. Similarly, online forums might be a source for sharing dissatisfactions not easily expressed within the school:

If you were having any of those days that you are thinking 'I really don't want to do this anymore' you couldn't ask anyone at school – they might get the wrong idea. I had issues the first year out and I hated it and I went for another job and I got the other job ... I just worked through it and decided to stick it.

Teachers were equally divided as to whether it would be a good idea to meet other teachers with whom they might be interacting prior to beginning the online forums. Those who endorsed the value of meeting, argued the importance of 'the human element' and 'putting a face to a name'. Those who did not support the idea argued that it did not matter, and simply was not helpful. One teacher, though, argued that it was better not to meet the other online teachers 'because then you don't get any preconceived ideas about what that person might be like'.

There were two views on the issue of when to introduce online mentoring support. One supported beginning early or 'a couple of weeks' into the school term. The other advocated beginning before the commencement of the school year, either in the summer holidays before appointment, or even in the last couple of weeks of term 4. This latter view of course presupposes that the teachers involved will have already taught for a year, rather than being first appointments.

When prompted as to the additional features online mentoring networks might possess, there was little support for photographs, but moderate support for chat-rooms. The strongest argument against photographs implicitly applauded the anonymity and therefore equity of online communication:

It might be a new mature age teacher going out that is 45 or 50 against a young 21-year-old. They can be chatting along fine and they are equals. But if they see each other, that young 21-year-old might feel intimidated. It's stupid. And even though it shouldn't be the case, it can happen.

In terms of constraints on the operation of online communication, the overwhelming response related to time. The teachers who were relative non-participants provided a litany of tasks the school demanded which eroded all available time. Yet it was one of these teachers who, when asked how we might have assisted, conceded that 'everything was there for us'.

Discussion and conclusion

Beginning teachers apparently have a preference for a broad range of mentoring experiences. The initial interviews indicated that teachers sought mentoring relationships beyond those that were formally appointed. Apart from the benefits derived from experienced and excellent practitioners, a number of teachers expressed a need to share information with other comparably inexperienced teachers. The perception of a beginning teacher that the trials and tribulations of teaching are not unique, but shared by others, may be quite reassuring.

While the authors contend that online mentoring may be a supplement to conventional face-to-face mentoring, they acknowledge that it is not a substitute. The research revealed that the two expressions of mentoring have different purposes. Face-to-face mentoring has the advantage of being personal, by providing the human touch and by being situated. The argument that a mentor within the school understands both the distinctive culture of that school, and the needs of the students, is irrefutable.

Online mentoring, however, has the advantage of presenting ‘a bigger picture’. While school-based advice is invaluable for the mentee in solving a classroom problem, because it is situated, it might also be limited simply because it is context-bound. A telling example is that of the beginning teacher who, having consulted with her mentor about problems with ESL students, proceeded to ask the same questions in the online forum, and was delighted by the answers she received. Such an action is not an implied criticism of her mentor. It is the expression of a desire to consider a variety of possible solutions.

Teaching is never static. It requires teachers to moderate their teaching according to different contexts and the ever-changing needs of students. Teachers at all levels are encouraged to promote a view of knowledge as problematic, as something that may be contested and does not yield simple answers.

The creation of learning teams in schools that provide ongoing professional development for beginning and experienced teachers alike offers a partial solution to the possible problem of limited vision. But even they cannot provide the diversity that online mentoring affords.

While the study yielded suggestions for extending the online mentoring support to chat-rooms, and provided valuable input for the technical implementation of online forums, it underlined the need for systemic and school support to provide teachers with time to engage in meaningful professional development. The litany of school tasks provided by the relative non-participants in the study is not a fabrication. It is very real.

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