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Facebook and the Final Practicum: The Impact of Online Peer Support in the Assistant Teacher Program

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Abstract: Australian pre-service teachers (PST) frequently report feeling isolated and vulnerable during the high stakes Assistant Teacher Program (ATP) final practicum. Mentoring and online learning communities have been shown to offer effective support during periods in which pre-service and beginning teachers feel challenged. As social media progressively infiltrates all aspects of contemporary life, individuals and organisations are opting to use technology in highly adaptive ways; as a result, they have to navigate both the positive aspects and pitfalls of the medium. In this paper we examine whether university Facebook© support groups, coupled with professional standards training and moderator involvement by university staff, enhanced ATP outcomes for pre-service teachers in art and science.

Introduction

In this paper we present the findings of a 2014 inquiry into the use of Facebook© by peer-based online learning communities during the final Assistant Teacher Program (ATP) practicum for the Bachelor of Education (secondary) students at a Western Australian university. The rationale for establishing the online learning communities within the Facebook© platform specifically was that the participants were already actively using Facebook© to communicate with university peers/others during their initial teacher education program. The two Facebook© ATP online learning communities (1 art; 1 science) operated both before and during the period of the final practicum and were intended to counter the impact of isolation, vulnerability and anxiety (maladies frequently reported in the literature for students on practicum) by facilitating professional online discourse/support in 'real time'.

We begin by presenting an overview of the changing communication landscape in which PSTs and other members of the university find themselves. Next we identify the well-known challenges that afflict PSTs during their high stakes ATP practicum and consider the ways in which the Facebook© platform might be used to deliver support. We then describe the pitfalls of using social media in an ill-considered/unprofessional manner, and indicate the potential for Facebook© groups to be used in a positive capacity. Next we describe arrangements and results of our pilot study of Facebook© online learning communities for PSTs in art and science in the ATP in 2014. Finally, we propose an expansion of the Facebook© ATP online learning communities trial to other subjects to investigate whether the positive outcomes art/science participants experienced in this pilot study might be transferable to other disciplines.

A Changing Western Australian Communication Landscape

Western Australian universities increasingly employ social media, including Facebook©, to advertise their teacher education courses to prospective students (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2012). Universities' use of social media reflects a changing communication landscape, in which Facebook© is now a commonly used social media platform for many Australians. The authors of this paper all work in initial teacher education at the same Western Australian university and over time we have observed an increase in the number of students and colleagues who report having a Facebook© page, which they use informally to connect with peers. This propensity to use Facebook© was noticeable in the case of PSTs during their practicum placements in schools, which gave rise to discussions between the authors about the affordances and pitfalls of Facebook© as a component of professional life. Notwithstanding universities' use of the medium to promote courses to future students, and seemingly to position their institution as progressive and technology-focussed, the universities in Western Australia have not formulated professional standards for behaviour within the online environment (although tentative policy documents have now been developed); accordingly, student (and staff) participation in social media settings occurred on an ad hoc basis.

In early October 2013 Facebook© announced that all privacy settings for users aged 13-17 would be 'opened' as a default setting, thus relaxing its strict policy of quarantining children from interaction with adults (Kalyani, 2013). The new policy setting effectively placed all Facebook© communication in the public domain, consequently allowing adults and children to interact freely in this social media setting. The 2013 change to Facebook© privacy settings magnified adult users' exposure to risk regarding materials appearing on their Facebook© page. In light of these factors (Facebook©'s change of policy, the university's own 'participation-endorsement', and the risk exposure of PSTs in the absence of formal training in standards), we perceived there was a need to investigate student-user patterns in the Facebook© platform and implement professional standards training. We were convinced that early intervention would better prepare PSTs for their transition to the profession and life beyond university. Moreover, we presumed that our involvement as active research participants (staff moderators) in the online learning communities would allow us to provide 'real time' support to our students individually and the groups generally at critical points in the ATP.

Our literature review encompasses past studies that have looked at practicum challenges confronting PSTs, professional standards for teachers, mentoring strategies for beginning/PSTs, and the emerging role of social media/ Facebook© as a communication channel within professional life. The review of literature provides a context for our contention that, with appropriate preparation, Facebook© could make a positive contribution to PST training, practicum outcomes and transition experience.

Challenges Encountered by Pre-service and Beginning Teachers

Researchers have identified several challenges encountered by PSTs during the ATP, such as: difficulties in effectively communicating their needs, variable relationships with their mentor teachers, isolation/disconnection from university and peer support network, confusion about how to respond to challenging/unexpected student behaviour in the practicum setting, reluctance to ask for help for fear of being perceived as incompetent or inadequate, lack of timely advice/guidance from their mentor in response to practicum difficulties, and a lack of time to process, understand and appropriately respond to professional challenges

(McLoughlin & Lee, 2010; Patrick, 2013; Richardson & Knight, 2011; Stenberg, 2007). George (2007) found that many PSTs felt their mentor teacher did not give them enough help to acquire fundamental classroom-management skills.   He continued that PSTs may miss opportunities for meaningful learning if they have difficulty negotiating the power relationship between their mentor and themselves. Patrick (2013) noted "mentors' stories, while caring and supportive, tended to position the mentoring as a one-way teaching process that barely acknowledged the power relationship or collegial ways of working with pre-service teachers" (p. 208). The power differential may make some PSTs reluctant to be open with their mentor and ask for help when they most need it. Accordingly, conversations with peers or other critical friends that feel 'safe' are invaluable.

For some PSTs these experiences may sharply contrast with their supportive learning environments when at university, creating discomfort and confusion in the practicum setting. These experiences may negatively impact practicum outcomes or even cause some students to leave/fail their placements altogether (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010; Patrick, 2013; Richardson & Knight, 2011). Certainly, there are high attrition rates for PSTs and beginning teachers, both in Australia and internationally, often reaching 45% within the first 5 years (Fetherston & Lummis, 2009; Trinidad, Broadley, Emmy, Boyd, Lock, Byrne … Ledger, 2012). Researchers have attributed the attrition to the lack of support and few opportunities for ongoing professional development (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Fetherston & Lummis, 2009). Online learning communities have been found to reduce attrition rates when used as part of a well-designed induction to teaching program (George, 2007). These findings echo those of McDonald (2012) in her work with communities of practice in higher education. Accordingly, we hypothesised that the establishment of online learning communities during the final phase of university training could offer support to PSTs during the ATP and may continue to exert a positive influence across the early years of their teaching.

Online Learning Communities and their Benefits for Pre-service and Beginning Teachers

Gray and Smyth (2012) found that online learning communities offered benefits for pre-service and beginning teachers, including greater flexibility to engage in communication with peers and mentors at times that were convenient. As information/comments posted to online learning communities generally remain visible to members for an indefinite period, participants can engage in the online learning community conversation when their study or work schedules allow (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Gray & Smyth, 2012; McDonald, 2012). New technologies, such as those employed in Facebook[©], create possibilities for 'real time' posting of information/comments or requesting assistance via mobile phone app technology. As soon as a request/comment is posted to the online learning community, other members may receive an SMS to their mobile phone alerting them to it. Respondents can then reply from their phone or log in via computer and respond later when time/teaching allows. There are obvious efficiencies associated with real time technology for student groups needing intensive support in off-campus educational settings such as the practicum/ATP, compared with on-campus equivalents (such as Blackboard discussion sites), which are asynchronous and often unmonitored for extensive periods. We take the position that the emergence of new technology-based groups (such as Facebook[©]) allows PSTs a greater sense of support and belonging through timely encouragement, advice, solutions to problems, and professional conversations. Conversely, however, the immediacy of the medium also places comments that fall below professional standards (personal venting, negative criticism of schools or mentors, disparaging comments about students etc.) in the public domain in real time too.

Recently reported consequences (dismissal from employment, litigation for defamation etc.) arising from poor quality posts uploaded in haste to Facebook© by people in all walks of life underscore the importance for all participants to understand the public and enduring nature of the medium. Accordingly, education about quality discourse conventions becomes a pressing matter for pre-service training providers.

In Western Australia (WA), government and non-government schools are increasingly engaged in debates about professional standards for staff participating in the social media. These discussions are in response to past high-profile litigation in Australian and international settings in respect of social media behaviours; and also as a pre-emptive 'duty of care' response for their educational communities for the future. For WA government schools, staff responsibilities in relation to teaching-student interaction are described in various policy documents, such as the Staff Conduct Policy, Child Protection Policy, Student Online Policy, and Public Sector Policy. In 2010 the Department of Education in WA (DoE) released *Social media in schools: Guidelines for school staff using social media and other technologies.* Although not an official policy, this document clarifies social media boundaries and outlines the potential risks associated with new communication technologies. The document offers examples of legitimate and non-legitimate uses of online communication technologies, clearly identifying that staff use of online communication must have a valid teaching and learning purpose. According to the guidelines, legitimate uses include: emails to parents re student progress, and creating applications such as blogs and web pages for a teaching program. Non-legitimate examples include: entering chat rooms with students, exchanging personal phone numbers, corresponding using personal email addresses, and taking photos/videos of students without parental consent. The prevalence of such behaviours in Facebook© illustrates the potential for inadvertent (or intentional) misuse of Facebook© in the school setting.

Critical Reflection and Quality Discourse

The intention of practicum experiences in teacher education is to provide PSTs with an opportunity to observe and learn from an experienced mentor in an authentic classroom setting. PSTs will themselves teach and reflect on their experience through direct discussion with the mentor and other critical friends (including peers). The process of reflection when undertaken in a supportive manner includes analysis, identification of strengths and weaknesses, and forward planning for improvement (Barton & Ryan, 2014). McLoughlin and Lee (2010) noted interactions between PST peers were very different from the interactions that occurred between PSTs and mentor teachers. In an online learning community, PSTs have an opportunity to learn from their peers and enhance their own teaching practice (Duncan-Howell, 2010; George, 2007). Online learning communities can be used by PSTs for professional discussion, and to establish a sense of belonging and camaraderie between peers (King, 2011; Lee & McLoughlin, 2010). In effective learning communities PSTs can access emotional support at crucial times, such as when challenging situations occur on ATP, and when achievements are celebrated (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Herrington, Herrington, Omari, & Oliver, 2001; Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Tseng & Kuo, 2010). Accessing support helps PSTs to develop critical reflection skills, which in turn support success in the practicum.

PSTs need to begin to develop critical reflection of their own practice, which is one of the professional teaching competencies mandated in the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) regulatory framework (2011). Patrick (2013) asserted "it was clear from pre-service teacher discussions that conversations with peers about teaching and

learning were considered invaluable" (p. 222). Therefore, conversations with peers can assist PSTs to reflect on their experiences (Holmes, 2013; Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Mansvelder-Longayroux, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2007; Scott et al., 2011). Holdan & Hansen (2009) noted the potential for online technologies to enhance PSTs critical reflection and decision making. They observed the user can choose to respond immediately or wait before they respond to online posts; it is the style and timing of the 'responding' that enables them to display critical reflective practice in both process and content. Online learning communities established during their initial teacher education may foster PSTs confidence in their use of emerging technologies for professional dialogue over an extended period of time; as a result there may be continuing benefits after course completion and into the early years of teaching (Gray & Smyth, 2012).

Notwithstanding the obvious potential for professional support afforded by online learning communities, there is increasing evidence of negative impacts arising from poor quality discourse in the online setting. The (2011) AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers is a statement of teacher quality mapped over a teaching career. While publicly defining the professional competencies of teachers, these teaching standards also represent an opportunity to inform the professional development of PSTs in respect of quality discourse conventions. The AITSL Standards also serve as a useful self-reflective tool before, during, and after practicum placements, enabling PSTs to identify developmental gaps. Teachers in Australia commence their professional life with a provisional registration, which they need to convert to full registration after three years. One of the domains in the AITSL Standards is professional engagement (AITSL, 2011). Professional engagement encompasses two standards: engage in professional learning (Standard 6), and engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community (Standard 7) (AITSL, 2011). To meet these standards, teachers need to engage critically with their own practice, and communicate with colleagues, parents/carers and the community to improve student learning (AITSL, 2011). It is through professional learning communities (online or otherwise), that pre-service and beginning teachers can engage in critical and reflective practice and interact professionally with their peers (Holdan & Hansen, 2009; Tseng & Kuo, 2010). Online professional discourse (e.g. via Facebook© groups established for the explicit purpose of connecting teachers in a particular discipline) may contribute to collegial discussion and offer a support network to assist in navigating the daily challenges of the profession.

Background to the research

Our research into Facebook© ATP online learning communities had its origins in reciprocal mentoring trials and research jointly undertaken between our university and the Art Education Association WA (art teachers' professional association) between 2007 and 2010 (Paris 2010). In each year since 2007 approximately 20 PSTs from the Graduate Diploma Education cohort at our university have been placed as 'Artists in Residence' (AiR) in WA schools during their final semester of pre-service training. These Graduate Diploma students had acquired high end discipline skills/industry experience prior to their entry to teacher education and accordingly they were deemed to be very valuable to schools who did not have an art specialist on staff (particularly primary schools). The AiR program was intended to be of mutual benefit to the artists and schools/staff/students. For the AiR it established a 'transition bridge' between university and the profession; for placement hosts and students in schools it offered access to a gifted artist with specialist skills for a significant art project. In recent years Facebook© has been increasingly employed as a means of maintaining contact between the AiR and the placement hosts both during and after the AiR residencies. The

concept of using Facebook© as a mentoring tool and communication vehicle for professional contexts emanated from this informal experience. Informal trials of Facebook© online learning communities had been conducted for final year pre-service art teachers during the ATP in 2011, 2012 and 2013. In 2012 and 2013 School of Education art staff also participated in the online learning community groups and assumed the informal role of moderators. The positive anecdotal feedback provided by pre-service art teachers and moderators prompted the current 2014 inquiry.

The 2014 research encompassed three intersecting contexts in contemporary teacher education: the final high stakes practicum in Perth secondary schools, the discipline-cluster peer-based online learning communities (art and science), and the Facebook© platform. A professional standards training seminar was provided for our pre-service and moderator participants prior to the ATP and activation of the Facebook© groups. The seminar (intervention) was delivered as part of the ATP preparation unit and focused on the implications of social media/ Facebook© behaviours for professional life, protocols for use of social media/ Facebook© within the ATP practicum, employer trends in using social media/ Facebook© in staff screening and selection, processes for terminating past Facebook© profiles and establishing new appropriate versions, and principles for crafting enduring professional online identities that are authentic, deliberate, distinctive and professionally appropriate. Attendees at the seminar were issued with a certificate of participation to add to their employment CV and professional development training log. As a result of positive feedback the seminar is now an ongoing part of our university ATP preparation for all Bachelor of Education 4th year students and their Graduate Diploma Education counterparts.

Methods

In this inquiry a mixed methods approach was adopted in order to *quantify* social media usage patterns of participants before and after the intervention (seminar and online learning communities), as well as to measure the impact of the intervention on the PSTs' ATP experience. The *qualitative* data collected through online interactions (posts and file sharing) within the Facebook© online learning communities captured examples of the emotional support and connectedness experienced within the groups. The project occurred in five phases (see Figure 1, below), with two groups of PSTs within the Bachelor of Education (secondary) course: science and art participants. These participants were in the final year of their course, and were selected from a convenience sample; two of the researchers were Academic Coordinators within these subject areas. The researchers obtained ethics clearance from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the inquiry.
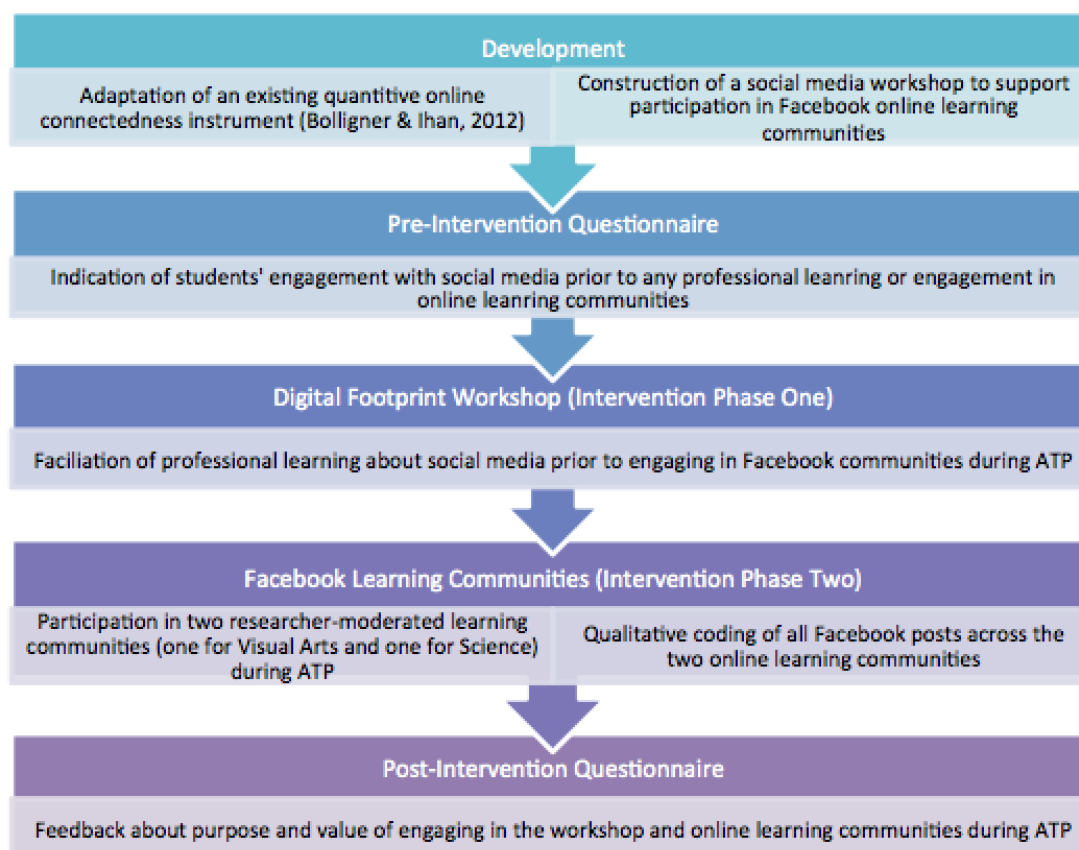
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Figure 1: Five phases of the research conducted into Facebook© online learning communities during the ATP

The researchers oversaw the organisation, design and delivery of the professional learning seminar (phase one of the intervention) and the moderation of the online learning communities (phase two). The coding and analysis of the findings were also influenced by the researchers' experience and perceptions arising from their moderation role in managing the groups during the ATP. Initially, the researchers adapted and used an online connectedness instrument (Bolliger & Inan, 2012) to measure participants' participation in the online learning communities. Three of the four original scales were reliable in this study, returning Cronbach's alpha greater than >.7 (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The remaining scale – comfort – is not reported in this paper due to its unreliability. After clearance was obtained from the university's Human Research and Ethics Committee, the researchers administered a pre-intervention questionnaire to both the science and art PSTs. The pre-intervention questionnaire measured the PSTs' existing use of social media/ Facebook©, and their awareness of social media protocols prior to the professional standards training seminar previously described.

The intervention included two phases: firstly, participation in the professional standards training seminar, and secondly, participation in the Facebook© online learning communities. The Facebook© online learning communities were organised as closed membership groups through the Facebook© application, which were set up by the PSTs in each subject area (one group for science and one for art), affording ownership of the groups to the respective participants. The three researchers, who acted as moderators, were then invited to join both groups by one of the PSTs within the group. The art PSTs already had an existing closed membership group, so the researchers were added to this group in March, approximately two months prior to the beginning of the ATP practicum May-June. The science group was created specifically for the research. Because two of the

researchers/moderators were Academic Coordinators within science and art, they periodically made posts to the group in their capacity as Coordinators; for example, advising PSTs about assessment marks release or practicum insurance queries. The PSTs' posts from March to June were downloaded for both Facebook[©] learning communities. The downloaded material was then coded to determine the significant themes emerging from the PSTs' and moderators' interactions. At the conclusion of the intervention, a second questionnaire was administered to the science and art PSTs to evaluate the connectedness provided by their participation in the online learning community. Additionally, the questionnaire evaluated the impact of the professional standards training seminar in highlighting the importance of professional discourse both within the Facebook[©] groups and in the online environment generally.

Sample

The intervention program was conducted with all of the ATP B Ed participants from two discipline groups, science ($n = 7$) and art ($n = 9$). It is not unusual for small cohorts to occur in secondary specialisation and this combined group of 16 participants reflects this reality. All, except for one science student, participated in a pre-intervention questionnaire to determine their prior experiences using social media, and more specifically, using Facebook[©]. In this questionnaire, demographic information was collected from the participants, revealing that all the participants were Australian citizens, and none identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Both groups included predominantly females (two males in science and one in art), aged between 17 and 25 years.

Pre-intervention Questionnaire

Prior to the professional standards training seminar, a pre-intervention questionnaire was administered to determine the participants' social media use and awareness prior to the ATP. Table 1 lists the social media platforms and the frequency of use by participants prior to this research. All participants used Facebook[©]; however, the art participants generally used more social media platforms than science participants. Two art participants engaged with social media beyond the choices offered, listing Tumbler and Soundcloud as other platforms they used.

	Science	Art
Facebook[©]	100.0	100.0
Instagram [©]	16.7	66.7
LinkedIn [©]	0.0	11.1
Pintrest [©]	33.3	66.7
Twitter [©]	16.7	33.3

Table 1: Percentage of participants engaging in social media platforms.

Since Facebook[©] was used as the platform for the ATP online learning communities, the participants indicated that their main purposes for engaging in Facebook[©] use prior to the intervention were to contact friends and family, and to share photographs. Over 80% of each group also added posts to Facebook[©] walls and engaged in private conversations through Facebook[©] messenger. It is important to note that the art participants had a pre-existing closed group for collegial discussion, which may have contributed to their higher usage of Facebook[©] for professional conversations. Both groups predominantly used Facebook[©] for

contacting current family and friends, and for sharing photographs. A higher percentage of science participants used Facebook[©] to look at other people's pages; whereas art participants had a significantly higher percentage of liking Facebook[©] pages (for example, community pages) compared to the science group. Both groups also engaged in private conversations.

Participants also rated their main use of Facebook[©] on a scale of one (only personal use) to five (only professional use). Science participants rated their use as predominantly personal, with a maximum ranking of two; as did art participants, with one student selecting three —indicating a balance of personal and professional use — but a mode value of two (equal to the science group). Participants were also asked directly if they used Facebook[©] as a tool to support their university activities, which was true for 66.7% of science participants and 77.8% of art participants. Examples of such use by art participants were using, *"uni groups (friend/colleague support), [sharing] pages relevant to teaching/education/art/world news"* to assist their study; whereas science participants did something similar, *"we made a private group for science and maths education students, which is still being used"* and also contacted other knowledgeable friends: *"I use this to contact old friends currently employed with the DoE [Department of Education] for help with relevant issues"*. Because Facebook[©] was chosen for its 'real time' communication potential in this research, participants indicated their login frequency prior to the intervention. It was assumed that for the groups to function in their intended capacity, participants would need to login frequently to offer timely support and assistance to each other as part of the online community intervention. Overall, the frequency of Facebook[©] use was similar between groups, with a mean value of 6.0 ($SD =$ 1.3) for science and a mean of 5.9 ($SD = 1.5$) for art, indicating participants logged into Facebook[©] once a day.

Post-intervention Questionnaire

The post-intervention findings suggest the information presented at the professional standards training seminar, and the connectedness experienced by PSTs within the ATP online learning communities, were positive outcomes of the research. However, due to the low response rate on the post-intervention questionnaire (31%), the science and art participants' responses have been combined for this section, which the researchers acknowledge had potential to skew the data.

Professional Standards Training Seminar

The training seminar focussed on creating and maintaining a professional online presence, as well as some information about social media policies in schools. After attending the seminar, 80% of participants strongly agreed they were aware of schools' social media protocols. They also recognised the potential role of social media/ Facebook[©] as a platform for professional engagement, with 40% agreeing to the item and 60% strongly agreeing that social media/ Facebook[©] was a tool for professional learning. The majority of respondents (80%) strongly agreed that they needed to be aware of professional engagement within the AITSL Standards; however, 20% of participants indicated a neutral response, which suggests they may have needed additional information on this topic. In terms of their own online presence, all of the participants felt they had become more aware of the importance of maintaining a professional online presence after attending the training seminar. All of the participants also strongly agreed with the statement: *I am aware of how my digital footprint impacts on employability*. Additionally, 40% of participants agreed that they should actively

take measures to ensure their online presence is professional, whereas 60% of participants strongly agreed to actively monitor their online professionalism.

Connectedness within Online Learning Communities During the ATP Intervention

Bolliger and Inan's (2012) *Online Student Connectedness Survey* was adapted to measure the affective support provided by the Facebook© online learning communities (science and art) in this research. The questionnaire comprised four scales related to connectedness: comfort, community, facilitation and interaction. Only three of the scales were reliable within this small sample: community (see Figure 2), facilitation (see Figure 3), and interaction (see Figure 4). Subsequently, only the findings for these three scales are included in this paper.
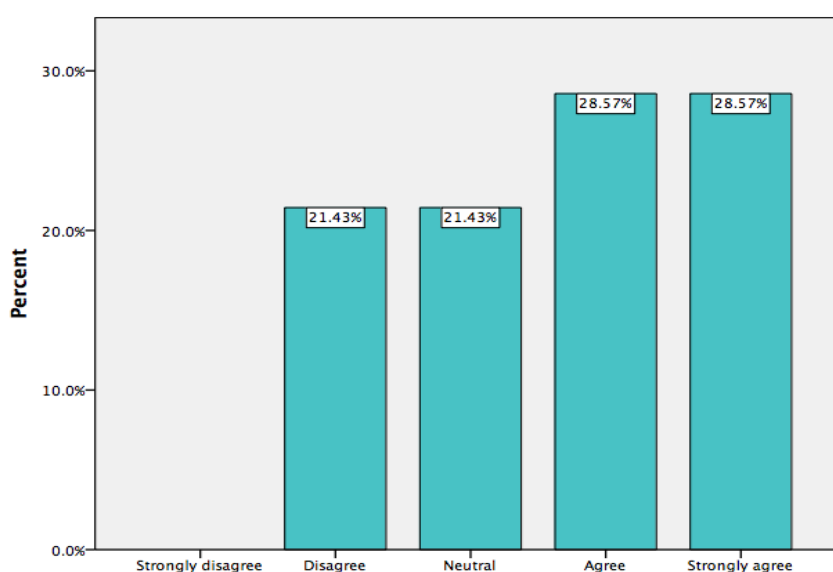
Figure 2: Combined responses (percentage) for community scale.
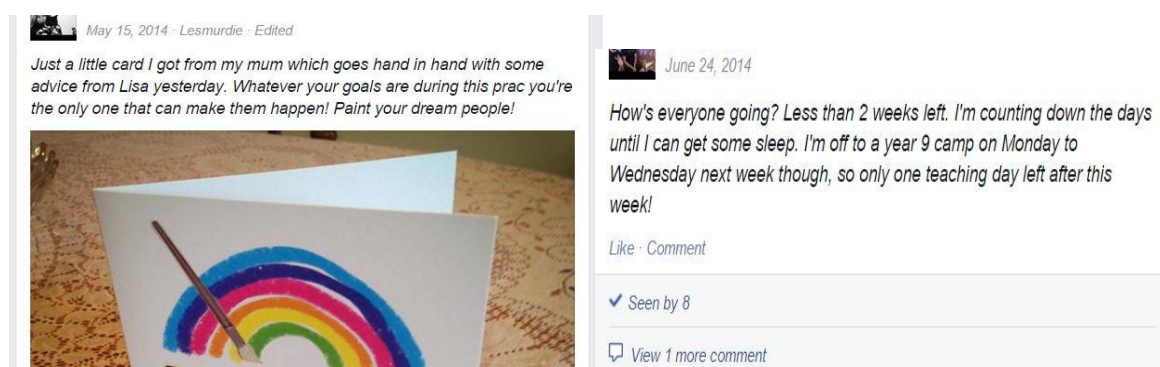
Exemplar posts: PSTs

Figure 2 shows the disparity of participants' responses to the community scale. The exemplar posts illustrate the fluid and changing nature of the community identity, from optimistic and inspirational (at the beginning of the practicum), to 'counting the days' and 'simply getting

through' (as the end of practicum approached). The disparity was reflected in the quantitative data. Only 57.1% of participants responded positively to the sense of community items, which was the lowest of the four connectedness scales. Community was defined as a group of people who have shared membership to a space in which everyone equally facilitates shared emotional connections and fulfils each other's learning needs (Bollinger & Inan, 2012). Some of the responses to this scale could have been negatively skewed due to the nature of this intervention: for example, one item was, *community members have learnt more about me through the experience of the online learning community*; however, these participants had completed specialist units together on-campus during their teacher education course and may have felt that the online participation did not change their pre-established relationships. The most positive response to an item within this scale was for: *I felt other community members would help me if/when I needed support*, with which 20% agreed and 80% strongly agreed. Interestingly, despite the existing relationships between the participants, 40% of participants indicated a neutral response for the item: *I felt emotionally attached to the other community members*, which suggested they might not be as closely connected as previously conjectured. Positively, 80% of the participants reported agreement to feeling like a valued member of the online community, reflecting their level of inclusivity and safety.
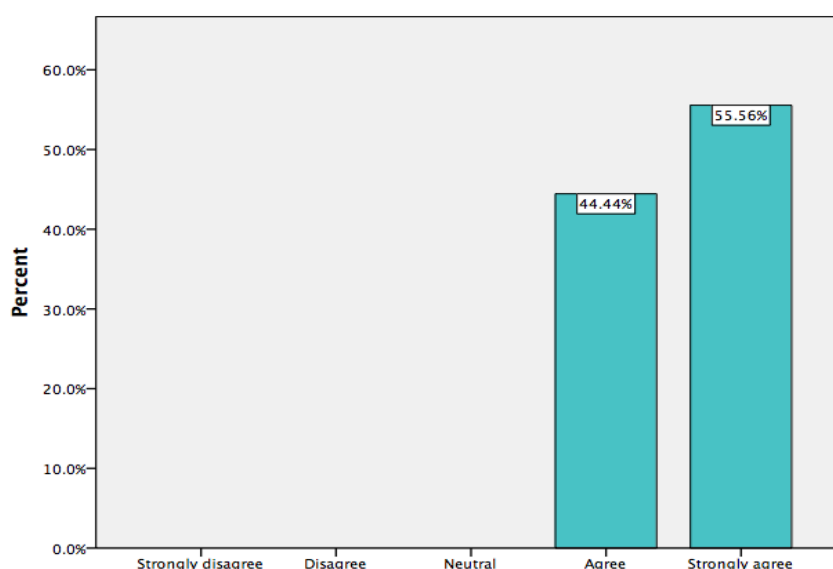

Figure 3: Combined responses (percentage) for facilitation scale.

Exemplar posts: PST

May 19, 2014 · Perth

Hi everyone! I am looking for ways to deal with no handing in of homework... there are two possibilities that i can think of at the moment... is that each day its not handed in it slowly costs them in marks? or they they have to do an investigation task (this is what my mentor does)... but i don't really want to give them an investigation task as i don't want investigations to get a bad rep... are there any other ideas?

Like · Comment

✔ Seen by everyone

💬 View 21 more comments

June 4, 2014 · Middle Swan

So my mentor is now expecting me to take 2 year 10 classes, a year 9 class, a year 8 class and a year 8 maths.
I'm struggling so hard mentally right now and running off no sleep because I'm stressing every day.
I'm not really sure what to do, I have told her we're only expected to take 80% of a full time teacher but she says that because the year 10s are the same then it doesn't really matter...

Like · Comment

✔ Seen by 8

💬 View 4 more comments

The facilitation scale recorded the most positive level of connectedness (Figure 3), with 100% of the participants indicating positive responses to all items. Facilitation items were about the role of the moderators in communicating and collaborating within the online learning community, and additionally, encouraging the participants to be active in the online space (Bollinger & Inan, 2012). The most positive response was recorded for the item: *I felt the moderator provided feedback when necessary.* Both moderators were specifically asked for their advice/expertise regarding issues arising during participants' ATP and, therefore, the moderator's authoritative manner in resolving these issues could have contributed to participants' positive response to this item. The lowest response to an item in this scale was for the democratic organisation of the group (60% agree and 40% strongly agree). The relatively lower response for this item is interesting, given that the participants set up/'owned' both learning communities (and the art participants had an existing community in operation) to which the moderators were invited. It is possible that the active role of the moderators in supporting the participants during their ATP lowered the sense of PST ownership within the community, or that selective participants saturated the online learning communities, thereby decreasing the democratic organisation of the communities overall
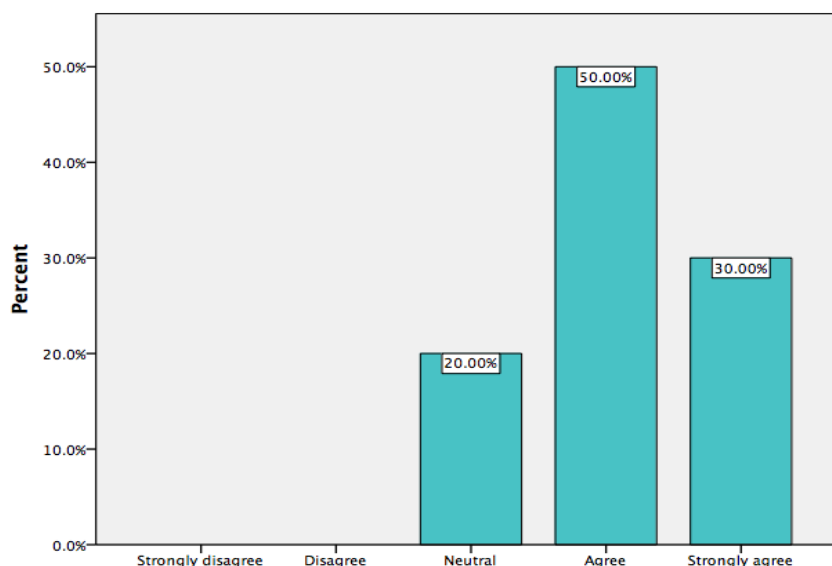

Figure 4: Combined responses (percentage) for interaction scale

Exemplar posts: Moderators

The final scale also recorded some disparate responses (Figure 4). The interaction scale measured the collaborative nature of the online learning group (Bollinger & Inan, 2012). The highest agreement within this scale was related to sharing information with other community members (40% strongly agree and 60% agree), although support from other community members was also very high (60% strongly agreed and 20% agreed). All of the participants felt they could empathise with other participants' situations through the online community (100% agree), and felt they could discuss ideas related to their ATP within the Facebook© groups (80% agree and 20% strongly agreed). The lowest response to an item was for: *I collaborate with other group members*. This could reflect the individualised nature of the ATP experience, during which the participants were working in separate schools and responding to the individualised needs of mentor teachers and participants. Whereas participants were not often actively collaborating, there was a high perception they were sharing with each other to minimise feelings of isolation during the ATP.

Exemplar posts: PSTs

June 23, 2014 · Perth

Hey.. if you haven't you must check out Google Art Project.
It's fantastic. They are taking satellite images of famous works.. which gives you insane detail. You can zoom right in on them and look at the paint brush strokes and all.
Fantastic to show students doing painting so they can really get a feel for texture!

Like · Comment

May 9, 2014 · Middle Swan

So today I am taking my usual year 9 class, my two year 10 classes and throwing in a year 11 integrated for fun (the actual reason is because another teacher asked me to run a better activity about the reproductive cycles in the ocean).
So today I am doing 4 lessons, without a mentor!
Not even sure we're supposed to do this, but I thought it was awesome that another teacher thinks I'm capable of handling this 🙂
That's my essay for the morning!
Let's hope it doesn't take me an hour and a half to get to school today as well......

Like · Comment

Discussion

Several *key themes* that align with the broader teacher education literature emerged from this pilot study, including: the value of online learning communities in teacher education; the value of peer support groups in high stakes practicum settings; the value of reflexive opportunities for university staff leading to expanded role identities. The potential to use Facebook©/social media in ways that are professionally appropriate/affirming (rather than simply personal), however, emerged as a significant contribution to the discourse on interactive technologies and PST education. The research pilot suggested:

1. *Emerging interactive technologies situated in social media can be used for professional purposes with few impediments (especially during ATP).*
   The existing infrastructure and user agreements provided by Facebook support new professional applications. Our research demonstrated the ease with which existing Facebook© profiles could be clustered into peer-to-peer support groups of relevance to the ATP setting. Ellison (2013) noted the characteristics of social media networks as encompassing:

   > ...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." ... "A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that

can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/ or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site (p.3).

Since its launch in February 2004 Facebook© has refined the interactive technology needed for users to communicate freely with like-minded others/friends. This research demonstrated that the platform also allows the delivery of strategic, targeted support for pre-service teachers on practicum. The capacity to respond *in real time* when help is most needed extends the array of support mechanisms at the disposal of pre-service training providers. When compared with the university 'Blackboard' discussion infrastructure, which may appear a 'safer' option when viewed from the perspective of information security, Facebook© nonetheless appears to have distinct advantages associated with 'post-upload' phone-notification technology. If phone-notification has been enabled by individual users (a choice each participant would make according to their availability/preferences), Facebook© messaging can notify participants that one of the group is seeking urgent assistance. The phone-notification technology will (depending on their own time constraints) prompt group members to access the online discussion and provide an immediate/timely response. This contrasts markedly with Blackboard discussion threads, which are often unattended for long periods (especially during ATP), limiting the capacity for peers/university staff to respond in a timely manner. Similarly email is often unattended for long periods and does not support shared-discipline peer-to-peer *interactive real time discussion* as issues arise on practicum. In this respect Facebook© is currently superior to Blackboard and email; however, moving the group discussion into the public domain (irrespective of Facebook© privacy settings) heightens the need for moderated behaviours and professional standards training.

2. *Professional standards training is a critical component of the duty of care owed by the university to participants involved in (ATP or other) online learning communities situated in social media.*

Our research demonstrated that, with appropriate professional standards training and moderator support, social media platforms such as Facebook© can make a positive contribution to PST education. Given the ubiquitous nature of social media and especially Facebook in daily life, engaging proactively with the medium in professionally appropriate ways may deliver critical knowledge, skills and understandings needed for professional life. When acquired during the pre-service period, such knowledge should exert enduring positive impacts over the early years of teaching and beyond. The material our participants posted to the Facebook© groups in this research suggested the intervention seminar we provided enhanced their understanding of quality discourse and professional standards. Through the presentation of case studies and policy documents, the seminar highlighted potential affordances/pitfalls of the medium. Ellison (2013), as part of the UK Government's Foresight project, similarly noted:

> In everyday situations, we are enacting performances for specific audiences … It should be noted that engaging in impression management is not manipulative or deceptive, but rather a natural aspect of human relationships that in many ways can make interactions flow more smoothly and enable individuals to meet their personal and professional goals. …social media offer new opportunities for sharing self-presentational content, or "branding" oneself online (p.4)

The importance of crafting online profiles/behaviours that are professional, authentic, purposeful, deliberate and positive throughout the teacher lifecycle cannot be overestimated. Professional on-line profiles and interactions have a twofold effect: 1. they contribute to positive standing within the professional context, and 2. they contribute to self-efficacy and one's sense of the 'professional' self. Ellison (2013) noted:

> The ability to emphasize positive presentation can have implications for self-concept (how we see ourselves) and self-esteem (how we feel about ourselves). In an experiment assessing the impact of viewing one's own Facebook profile vs. looking at oneself in a mirror on self-esteem, Gonzales and Hancock (2011) found that viewing and editing one's profile resulted in increases in self-esteem among college undergraduates. They speculate about the increased control over presentation, presumably enabling the production of more positive self-presentational messages, and write, "By allowing people to present preferred or positive information about the self, Facebook is a unique source of self-awareness stimuli in that it enhances awareness of the optimal self (p.7)

In response to this self-efficacy/professional knowledge imperative, the 'Digital Footprint' seminar developed in this research is now an annual feature of ATP preparation for all students (Bachelor of Education and Graduate Diploma Education). Accordingly, this inquiry has made an important 'evidence-based' contribution to PST education at our university.

3. *Online learning community participants situated in social media can experience beneficial 'connectedness' which enhances ATP experience.*
   The sense of belonging and sharing with peers/mentor-moderators in this research manifested as a culture of reflective practice: participants 'spoke' about their ATP experience through the medium of online posts and file sharing. The dialogue that ensued encompassed problem solving, sharing of resources, encouragement, and affirmations – all of which would be atypical in the standard practicum setting where PST peers are absent. As a result the research intervention (seminar and groups) made an important contribution to the sense of safety and connectedness the participants experienced. We consider it unlikely that the participants would have 'spoken' or 'reflected' so openly/honestly about their ATP had it not been for the 'safe' experience of talking with peers as events unfolded.

4. *Facebook© supported online learning communities support new relationships and roles for participants which are dynamic and reflexive.*
   As moderator/mentor participants in the Facebook© online learning communities, the authors recognise that our experience is part of the story of this research. While this was not an ethnographic study per se, we nonetheless learned more from being inside the research experience than is likely to have arisen from observation and analysis of others' experience alone. Whereas the research participants reported positive outcomes from the online learning communities in their ATP, we recognise that we too experienced positive impacts in our professional lives, including enhanced understanding of the operation of online learning communities and their relevance for the ATP, developed understanding of the potential of social media as an environment in which professional and other kinds of discourse occur, improved ability to monitor the professional conversations/experience of our students in high stakes practicum

assessment settings, and strategic capacity to intervene in real time in the online interactions when necessary to better support our students' questions, issues, concerns, anxiety and stress.

Guba and Lincoln (2000) noted that by engaging in qualitative inquiry the researcher can learn as much about themselves and their professional practice as their participants, often termed 'reflexivity'. In this period of our involvement in the initial teacher education program at our university, we are delighted that there was not a single student who failed their ATP. In previous years this has not always been the case and we consider the online learning communities and our ability to track our students' experiences in 'real time' and respond with assistance made a significant difference. In short, we knew how they were going based on the posts they made. We were able to respond with advice if we considered they needed help or were in some trouble. We were able to do more if that was required (e.g. posting resources or document templates to the site). Our interactions were reflexive and became increasingly nuanced across the period of the ATP. This experience is reminiscent of 'Communities of Practice' where participants engage in knowledge-sharing for the benefit of individuals and the group. McDonald (2012) noted that Communities of Practice (CoP) are reflexive environments situated in the authentic context:

> Communities of Practice (CoPs) provide an opportunity to create a learning community around an area of interest or practice, to share and develop practice and build personal and professional knowledge and expertise. A CoP creates a defined 'space' to share knowledge about a specific area of interest or practice, which enables members to address the practical problems encountered in that practice. Other activities include: negotiating what it means to be part of that community; developing resources that emerge from member contribution; and building a unique community identity (http://www.usq.edu.au/cops)

As researchers we are aware that our 'compliance' identity (aligned to being teacher educators with assessment obligations) shifted in this setting to a more nuanced role of mentor and critical friend (devoid of assessment obligations). Our conversations with our research participants were personal-professional and increasingly similar in style to those occurring between peer-participants. We were 'learning partners' collaboratively exploring how social media might support our desire to improve practicum experience.

Limitations of the Research

The researchers acknowledge that the small sample size in this research limits the reliability and generalisability of the findings, particularly as the two online learning communities' data were combined in the post test survey findings. However, as a first inquiry, this study shows the potential benefits of using Facebook© online learning communities during initial teacher education courses, and more specifically, the final teaching practicum. Additionally, the small sample size may have affected the reliability of the questionnaire's comfort scale. Therefore, repeating the study with a larger sample of students could improve the reliability of the four scales, aligned with Bolliger and Inan's (2012) research. As the research was conducted with two subject groups (secondary science and art), it is possible that participants in other subject areas or teacher education courses may have somewhat different experiences. The influence of course coordinators as moderators

may also influence the interactions occurring in online learning communities. Furthermore, the demographic and *a priori* experiences of students at one university may be quite unique, and this could also limit the generalisablity of the findings across universities.

Conclusion

Our research showed that Facebook© has potential as a dynamic interaction context that can be used for professional, as well as personal, purposes. The relationships that exist within Facebook© can be a source of encouragement, camaraderie, advice, emotional support, resource sharing, brainstorming, critiquing and problem solving by critical friends sharing similar experiences. Our participants found the Facebook©/social media online learning community to be a positive, useful, relevant part of their ATP practicum experience and the majority would recommend its inclusion for all students who are embarking on ATPs. The interactions occurred in real time and offered ATP support when it was needed. Importantly, there were no discernible negative impacts arising from the three-month inquiry and this successful first foray in art and science suggests online learning communities set in the social media environment (with attendant preparation, education and moderator support) may afford similar positive outcomes for PSTs of other disciplines.

Our recommendations based on our research findings include: undertake further trials of online learning communities situated in Facebook© for PSTs completing their ATP; expand the range of pre-service disciplines represented in future trials to include all subjects; include university staff in the capacity of both mentor and moderator in all online learning communities; and provide adequate training to support moderators in this pivotal role.

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