

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE AND SUPPORTIVE TEACHING PRACTICUM IN RURAL AND REGIONAL LOCATIONS

Josephine Ryan & Melitta Jones

Australian Catholic University

Caroline Walta

La Trobe University

ABSTRACT

The study described in this paper Creating an effective practicum model for rural and regional preservice teachers is designed to address the ongoing difficulties experienced by schools and universities as they seek to provide high quality preservice teacher education for individuals in rural areas. Lecturers from the regional campuses of two Australian universities have jointly undertaken a study of various initiatives designed to improve the way they manage the rural teaching practicum. The study also investigates the perspectives of rural and regional teachers about how they can best be supported by universities in their supervision of preservice teachers. The findings reveal the potential of two under-utilised approaches to the rural and regional practicum: the use of inter-university partnerships and technology to improve support and learning for preservice teachers in rural and regional locations.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a project designed to create more supportive and sustainable approaches to the teaching practicum in rural and regional locations. The study, *Preservice Teacher Education Partnerships: Creating an effective practicum model for rural and regional preservice teachers*, funded by the Australian Learning Teaching Council (ALTC), involves collaboration between two Australian regional universities to trial various initiatives for supporting the practicum in rural areas to make the task more effective and sustainable. In particular the project aims to develop protocols which will allow universities to share supervision of preservice teachers in rural and regional areas and to create inter-university regional clusters of preservice teachers to engage in peer support and reflection, both face to face and through technology. The study also investigates the perspectives of rural and regional school personnel about how they could best be supported by universities in their supervision of preservice teachers. The findings reported here are important because they reveal the under-utilised potential of two approaches to the rural and regional practicum:

the use of inter-university partnerships and technology to improve support and learning for preservice teachers in rural and regional locations.

ISSUES IN RURAL AND REGIONAL EDUCATION

There are a number of issues facing rural and regional education in Australia, ones which are echoed in other parts of the world (Hardré, 2009; Lyons, Choi & McPhan, 2009). Rural and regional schools often face difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff, providing sufficient professional learning, and accessing adequate teaching and learning resources; and schools in 'remote' rural areas have more significant problems in these areas than those which are not so far from population centres (Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell & Pegg, 2006). Furthermore, individuals who live away from metropolitan areas are seriously underrepresented in higher education (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). Cost makes it unrealistic for universities to have a widespread presence in country towns, yet issues of equity mean that rural students cannot be expected to travel long distances to undertake higher education. The policy conundrum posed by the need to increase enrolment at university by individuals from rural areas put against higher education institutions' financial difficulties with offering courses in less populated areas has been documented (DEEW, 2008; DEEW, 2010). This situation has its impact on teacher education in that many prospective teachers from rural areas must move or undertake purely online course (Halsey, 2009; Parliament of Victoria, 2005). Moreover, if rural schools do not attract preservice teachers they are further isolated in terms of new ideas (Hardré, 2009; House of Representatives, 2007). Some authors have seen these inequities as compounded by urban-centred higher education institutions and approaches dominating the discourse about teacher education, giving insufficient attention to the particular needs of rural schools, teachers and preservice teachers (Green & Reid, 2004; Lyons, et al., 2006; White, 2008).) There are reports of similar difficulties in staffing, training, and in providing ongoing professional development in rural areas of the US as well as in Canada, Korea and Europe (Hardré, 2009; Lyons, Choi & McPhan, 2009).

The teaching practicum (variously called professional experience, teaching practice/placement, student teaching), the period of time when individuals who enrolled in teacher preparation courses are placed in a school to practise the skills of the profession under the supervision of a qualified teacher (called the teacher supervisor in this paper), is seen as critical to successful teacher education (Grundy, 2007; House of Representatives, 2007; McBurney-Fry, 2002; Parliament of Victoria, 2005; Ramsey, 2000; Ure, 2009; Zeichner, 2002). Yet the practicum in rural contexts manifests many of the difficulties besetting rural education. In Australia decades of government reports both state and federal suggest that teacher preparation for the rural practicum and for teaching in rural areas requires a different approach (Halsey, 2009). The geographic isolation of rural and regional practicum locations presents challenges for universities as they struggle to provide a supportive, effective practicum experience. Cost constraints mean that it is difficult for university faculties of education to provide practicum supervision through school visits, despite the

evidence that the key stakeholders agree that optimum practicum experience involves extensive contact between lecturers, supervising teachers and preservice teachers (Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, 2005). This conflict has left many principals and teachers, including those in rural and regional areas, feeling that universities no longer provide sufficient support to the practicum component of their courses so that any notion of a practicum *partnership* between schools and universities is undermined (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, 2005; Ure, 2009).

PARTNERSHIPS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL EDUCATION

Lack of effective partnerships between universities and schools has been a theme in critiques of teacher education in Australia (House of Representatives, 2007; Ure, 2009). Internationally too, teacher education partnerships have been seen as complex undertakings often not successfully realised (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Open communication between the parties is seen as a key factor and Australian analyses have argued that lecturers and teacher supervisors do not communicate well and that preservice teachers are victims of these inadequate links (House of Representatives, 2007; Ure, 2009). By way of explanation for this, it has been pointed out that a true or successful partnership needs mutual benefit and too often teachers see themselves as insufficiently rewarded or recognised for supervision work (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Parliament of Victoria, 2005). Lecturers too have competing priorities that limit their attention to the practicum component (House of Representatives, 2007). Successful teacher preparation for rural and regional teaching requires attention to particular areas needed in rural contexts: multi-age pedagogies; broad, and often, early-career administrative responsibilities; the challenges of accessing resources, and understanding the place and influence of the wider community in rural and regional contexts (Halsey, 2009; Lyons et al., 2006). Further, physical distance between the 'partners' means that collaborative action to support preservice teacher learning is often compromised (House of Representatives, 2007). These challenges heighten the need for effective communication, and make the notion of partnerships even more critical.

The notion of the practicum as a partnership is a key concept in this study because the research is interested in how the practicum can best be supported in situations where the practicum partnership may be diminished because it is difficult for universities to provide face to face support. In particular, there would appear to be benefits for universities to share scarce practicum resources and thereby perhaps providing preservice teachers and teacher supervisors with more consistent, and greater, support.

While in the Australian higher education context the idea of inter-university collaboration has received attention in various disciplines and settings (Tynan, Dunne, & Smyth, 2007; Willis & Reid, 2006), its potentiality in the teaching practicum has not yet been sufficiently explored. The current practicum model in the

Australian context means that each university manages its own practicum and does its own supervision with the attendant travel costs. For preservice teachers placed at a distance from the campus this sometimes means that very limited supervision is undertaken (House of Representatives, 2007). Schools must manage the variety of requirements of each institution and there is evidence that they see the differences in requirements as confusing (Ure, 2009). In an effort to address these concerns, this study explores the value of inter-university partnership to assist provision of supportive, effective and cost-efficient practicum.

INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

The second strategy explored in this study is the use of information communication technology (ICT) to support university partnerships with rural and regional schools. In the contemporary Australian and global context, discussions of education for isolated individuals and groups inevitably bring up the potential of ICT in addressing the needs of institutions and their students by facilitating communication and learning 'at a distance' (Ryan, Jones, Buchanan, Morris, Nuttall & Smith, 2011). While rural and remote students are only one of many student groups for whom the benefits of online or 'flexible' learning are potentially significant (Saba, 2005), there has been much attention to the role of ICT in the rural context (Willis & Reid, 2006; Tynan, Dunne & Smyth, 2007). There is an ever-changing ICT environment which is directed towards students' learning in a range of disciplines. The potentialities of social software such as Wikis, blogs and Facebook (Fitzgerald & Steele, 2008) and mobile technology (Herrington, Herrington, Mantei, Olney & Ferry, 2009) for supporting students' learning are current preoccupations. In Australia within the higher education sector there is a view that universities can augment a limited presence in rural areas with affordable ICT options (DEEW, 2008). Educational critiques of such a perspective note that ICT does not itself create learning and that using technology to facilitate learning needs to be guided by principles of appropriate pedagogy (Bangert, 2005; Greener, 2008; Otero et al., 2005). In terms of the teaching practicum in a web 2.0 society, technology can also be explored to enhance communication between universities and schools. Supervision meetings through online chat, Skype or through software applications such as Elluminate (Elluminate, 2011) or Adobe software may decrease the need for expensive and time-costly face-to-face visits. Shared websites could provide preservice and supervising teachers with resources needed to support the practicum experience.

On-line discussions, because of their potential to encourage a reflective approach to professional action, have been explored as a highly appropriate pedagogy in an educational context such as the teaching practicum. They are particularly attractive in the rural and regional context because they enable continual, asynchronous communication with preservice teachers throughout the practicum experience. Teacher education programs have often been criticised for providing overly theoretical courses and for failing to assist preservice teachers to bridge the theory/practice divide (Darling-Hammond, 2006; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Parliament of

Victoria, Education and Training Committee, 2005). The use of online discussion during the practicum helps address this issue. Parsons and Stephenson (2005) report reflection is crucial because the teaching round is usually so pressured and time hungry that students spend most of their time thinking about 'what should I do next?' rather than on 'why am I doing it?' (p. 103). Online discussions as well as being significant in facilitating this social construction of knowledge, are valued and enjoyed by students for the "interaction that could not otherwise take place easily due to distance" (Hammond, 2005, p.15). The research outlined here will also seek to investigate the possibilities of the online discussion medium with regard to the preservice teachers as they undertake the practicum.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The study focussed on investigating the success of initiatives undertaken during a teaching practicum in 2010. Participants in the study were lecturers, preservice teachers and supervising teachers from two teacher education courses based in the regional campuses of two Australian universities in the state of Victoria. The course at University A was designed to prepare secondary teachers and that at University B, middle school teachers. Both courses included a block practicum which, during the semester under review, occurred concurrently for four of the five weeks, allowing the inter-university initiatives to be trialled. Participants included three lecturers, eleven teacher supervisors and nine preservice teachers.

As outlined above, the potential of inter-university cooperation in the rural practicum was investigated by documenting the success or otherwise of shared supervision, inter-university regional clusters of preservice teachers, a shared practicum website and the use of technology such as email and Skype to facilitate communication and support during the practicum. Preservice teachers from both universities were linked into two clusters from different rural areas of the state, one near university A (Western cluster) and the other near university B (Central Cluster). The universities shared the costs of supervision: lecturers from University A took on the supervision of both their own students and those from University B who were in the Western Cluster, and a lecturer from University B did the supervision in the Central Cluster. The supervision involved two visits to the schools where preservice teachers were placed, one at the beginning of the block round and one at the end. At the first meeting supervisors were informed about the project initiatives of the clusters and the shared website. They were also asked whether they would like to participate in a mid round review of the preservice teachers' progress via Skype and whether they would participate in an interview to discuss their views of the practicum and of the project initiatives.

The geographical clusters of preservice teachers were also made into online discussion groups on the shared practicum website set up in the learning management system Blackboard (Blackboard Inc., 1997-2011) of University A. During their practicum preservice teachers were expected to communicate and support each other in this online environment. Two kinds of online communication

were offered: a blog in which individuals could talk about their daily experiences in an unstructured way and receive responses from lecturers and fellow preservice teachers; and a 'threaded discussion' of professional issues in which preservice teachers were asked to discuss with each other questions, concerns and other reflections about *Classroom Management* and *Teaching Strategies*. Instructions to preservice teachers were to contribute to the blog three times per week and to add to the professional discussion board throughout the practicum with no specific number of contributions requested. Two lecturers from University A and one from University B participated in both the blogs and discussion boards. The purpose of these forums was to provide a peer support structure for students to share ideas and issues, and to promote reflection on the theoretical underpinnings of their observations and practice throughout the practicum period.

In seeking to analyse the success of a range of project activities designed to improve rural practicum the research project took a mixed-method approach. Given that increasing the support experienced by rural preservice teachers and their supervisors during practicum is central to the project, qualitative evidence of these participant cohorts' perceptions of the project activities were collected, using face to face semi-structured interviews. Transcripts were made and analysed in terms of "recurrent and distinctive features" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 150) related to the project goals. The project team who were engaged in inter-university collaboration collected data on their own experience of this process in the form of project notes, meeting minutes and electronic communications. Analytical induction (Bernard and Ryan, 2010) was used to analyse the interview and lecturer data. Analytical induction is a powerful, qualitative method of data analysis that Richards (2009) describes as "considering the meanings (of data) in context, and creating categories that express new ideas about the data, coding to gather and reflect on all the data related to them" (pp. 102-103). Collectively, the data collection offered insight into sustainable ways to support the rural practicum.

Findings

Shared Supervision in Rural and Regional Contexts

Preservice teachers from both universities when interviewed, indicated that being visited by a professional staff member from another university with whom they were not immediately familiar was a helpful, positive experience. The preservice teachers could see the advantage of having lecturers from a different university from the one at which they were studying come to observe and interact with them. Comments supporting this included:

(It's) someone with experience...coming from either [University A or B]...I don't find it threatening.

I just saw it as...someone with experience and knowledge just gave me some advice and some guidance.

I expected someone to come out so it's great to share the resources with the staff and to do it cooperatively between the unis... so that's fine.

The preservice teachers felt it was much better to have a lecturer come out to the school to observe them and provide feedback, than have no one come at all. They felt that it did not matter which university the staff member represented, it was more important that someone came to work with them who was qualified and experienced. *"We learn something new...the more people you can connect with, especially in this environment I think is really good."* All preservice teachers indicated that the visiting academic was familiar with the documentation and expectations associated with their placements and was able to offer supportive advice. Preservice teachers appreciated the early and later visits from the university lecturer. One said in the interview which took place during the second visit to her, *"I found your visits... with [lecturer's] little pearl of wisdom has been really fantastic. So to have you onsite for that information was really good."*

Teacher supervisors when asked to comment on the universities' sharing of support for rural and regional preservice teachers agreed that inter-university visits benefit the schools and the preservice teachers if they increased opportunities to discuss the preservice teachers' practicum and progress. Too often, one said, *"you might get a phone call but you don't get a lot apart from the paperwork."* The absence of visits from the university side of the partnership was likened by one teacher supervisor to *"giving something to my students and never looking at it."* As with the preservice teachers, for the supervisors having a qualified and experienced person visit was considered to be more important than which university the lecturer represented.

The documentation provided by each of the universities was not an issue with the supervising staff or preservice teachers. Some of the supervisors felt they had a good understanding of what was required of them as they had supervised a number of preservice teachers throughout their career and felt they were familiar with general expectations which they believed did not differ markedly from one university to another. However, there was recognition that the communication between the partners was not always optimal, as is outlined by the feedback provided by one teacher supervisor below.

The longer you've been doing the particular job in the schools, you tend to give it (the documentation) a cursory glance and where you get caught out is if someone changes the documentation on you. I made sure that whenever I get a new university I read the requirements very thoroughly, but if I've been dealing with (a university) for years and years I tend to say, 'Oh yeah, I know what they're on about.'

The difficulty of practicum documentation finding its way to the right people is one highlighted by other practicum research (Ure, 2009) and the inter-university collaboration did not mean this problem was avoided. In this study too, supervisors stated that sometimes the universities did not send out the documentation far enough in advance of the arrival of the preservice teacher. Supervisors felt it would be better to have more time to prepare for the practicum and their input as required by the relevant university. *“Well, I got your email and from that I’d downloaded the documentation, but prior to that I hadn’t seen anything.”* The clarity and adequacy of the documentation were acceptable to the supervisors, although one suggested, *“There’s a lot... it could be slimmed down...the forms are usually all right (but) a simplified step-by-step...tick off the boxes (form) could make things easier.”*

Lecturers too found the experience of supervising preservice teachers from another university expanded their professional horizons in satisfying ways. One said:

I also found it interesting that in preparing myself, I was so concerned about getting the information right about the University B course that I ended up more familiar with their documentation than with our own.

In a similar viewpoint to that of preservice teachers and supervisors, lecturers found that, *“It was the person that makes the difference. Unis are pretty much all the same.”*

ICT Options

Preservice teachers were positive about the value of participation in the cross university blogs based on the regional cluster groups which had been set up. The concept of the blog as a resource sharing opportunity had been already in place at University B and the preservice teachers from University A expressed appreciation for joining it and the exposure to new ideas it provided. They, as the smaller cohort, were now part of a more extensive learning community.

One of the girls talked about power teaching and I’d never heard of that before so I went from there...and if I wasn’t on that blog I would never have heard of it.”

There’s a lot of resources on there. Hopefully, they’ll keep continuing to grow.”

A supervising teacher also recognised the value of finding teaching ideas via blogs:

If for example you had to teach something but you weren’t really given many resources from your supervisor, you might post out on the blog on Blackboard, ‘Help, I need to teach this. Does anyone have any ideas or any resources I could use?’

Overall the use of technology to extend the students' opportunities to communicate with one another was generally appreciated and well-used. In both of the regional clusters there were students from the two universities placed in the same school and they came to know each other first on the inter-university blog.

This is the first time I've seen [fellow preservice teacher] but we've chatted on Blackboard quite a few times and [another preservice teacher at her school] and I only met the other day and again we've had more contact by our Blackboard than we would have all being in the same location.

The use of Blackboard allowed the students from both the universities to build relationships. The preservice teachers were quickly aware of how busy a school day is and how limited the opportunities for lengthy discussion are, so recognised the value of a different channel of communication to support them outside school hours, especially with no direct and immediate access to the university lecturers or library. *"I know how busy we are and sometimes [fellow preservice teacher] and I will try to talk and it's like ships in the night at school."* The use of Blackboard meant the preservice teachers were able to log on at a convenient time to have their discussions and share their learning in detail rather than superficially in the corridor or staffroom. *"The Blackboard system [is] just as valuable as if I didn't have the physical presence of [the other student teacher] in the school with me."* One supervising teacher could also see how the use of the communication technology could help overcome the time-poor school situation he described as *"the lack of time to sit down and chat or talk."*

Preservice teachers in different locations were also aware of the benefits of using technology to support and extend their options for communication about their practicum experiences. *"I have agreed to catch up with someone who is working at a nearby school and go through some research stuff we've got coming up...Blackboard, the online tool enabled us to do that."* The ability to use this forum for moral support was also acknowledged. One pre-service teacher found that, *"especially the first week... I was reading an input and it actually set me up to feel more confident in that there were other people going through what I was doing... I found that very supportive."* Another observation was, *"The blog was a positive tool to encourage collegiality."* For some preservice teachers it was beneficial to just be able to read others' postings even if they did not actively contribute themselves all the time. *"I think it's great because the more people you have a connection with, the more things we were finding out."*

In summary, sharing information, resources and experiences were accepted as important reasons to use the communication tool. *"To me, teaching is a collaborative effort...so if someone else has got something and vice versa, I'm happy to put up and share."* The preservice teachers did not feel isolated and abandoned to their fate. *"I feel connected which is good."* It was interesting to note that with more than double the number of posts, the unstructured blog was favoured by preservice teachers over the threaded discussion forum. This suggests that preservice teachers preferred the ability to 'purge' their daily experiences in the unstructured blog forum, compared to the directed theory-focus presented through the threaded discussion. However,

the instructions for the blogs had specified that preservice teachers contribute three times per week and for the issue-based discussion “throughout” the practicum rather than a specified minimum number which may have impacted this result.

The supervising teachers were also aware of the many benefits of good access to communication for the preservice teachers in their care. *“It has to be a good thing...thinking back to my own student teacher days...the more support you had, basically, the better.”* It should be noted, however, that teacher supervisors were not given access to student blogs for reasons of potential conflict of interest given that they are required to assess student practicum performance. Moreover, when asked whether they thought a practicum website as medium for communication during the practicum was a useful initiative, teacher supervisors’ response was that while they saw such a site as significant for preservice teachers, they did not see such a site as essential for themselves.

Despite teacher supervisors’ limited support for their involvement in online communication, one of the successful initiatives used in the study was establishing an email distribution list between university and teacher supervisors through which the university lecturers regularly sent messages and attachments about expectations for the preservice teachers. This enabled the teacher supervisors to have ready access to an email address at the university to clarify issues which arose rather than relying on the traditional paper-based communication. The seemingly minor initiative was itself an outcome of the inter-university collaboration in that it had been the practice at University B and was adopted by the research team. It proved surprisingly useful from supervisors’ point of view as some commented on how effective this was in informing them of important matters regarding the preservice teachers which were imminent. In fact some maintained that it was the first information they had received about the expectations of the program. As argued by Ure (2009), supervisors are often critical of the value of practicum documentation provided by universities. It seemed that the more direct email contact was appreciated.

In terms of the value of other technological methods of addressing communication during the practicum, teacher supervisors in the sample were unanimously more supportive of the face to face encounter, although they were potentially interested in augmenting the face to face with link ups through technology. One said that he would be more likely to try online communication such as Skype if he had already met the university staff member. To do it instead of a face to face meeting did not appeal. While some teachers indicated a willingness to link up later in the practicum round through Skype none actually did this, commenting later that they had every ‘good’ intention but did not manage to try it.

Lecturers found that the inter-university online communication on the website was most useful as a means of keeping abreast of, and responding to, the concerns of preservice teachers during the practicum and the fact that they were often engaged with preservice teachers from another university was rarely a barrier. As lecturers wanting to support their students it was gratifying to observe how quickly the

preservice teachers from the two universities established relationships with each other and used the site to give moral and practical support.

Ideas for Further Supporting Teacher Supervisors

Whilst the email communication appeared to offer an effective means of support for teacher supervisors, other ideas along the lines of professional development support were also discussed with supervisors. A small number of the teacher supervisors interviewed indicated that they would value and utilise opportunities for professional development about their supervision role but the findings did not indicate how this would be best accessed and at what time during the year. In this study those interested in learning more about effective supervision strategies were the younger or less experienced supervisors. Universally, teachers indicated that they are time-poor and looked for ways to ensure that they can manage the extra load of preservice teachers with the minimum of distraction. As noted above, they wanted well timed and clear delivery of documentation. Provision of an accreditation scheme for supervisors was seen by one teacher as, *“all of a sudden you do lose that flexibility and autonomy and ability for what we do to work as a team, to a certain extent”*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study was affirming of some of the initiatives undertaken to provide a supportive and more sustainable practicum. Both the inter-university partnership and the ICT initiatives were well accepted by participants as shown by the positive feedback to the shared supervision; the use of direct email contact with supervising teachers; and the use of the joint online blog in which university staff also contributed. This demonstrated that there were no negative repercussions for the key stakeholders, and in fact it appeared to matter very little who or how the support and communication were provided, as long as they were actually present. Where the inter-university partnership was important, however, was for the universities themselves in the way they managed their teaching work. The structure and administration of the successful initiatives trialled came from the universities sharing ideas and resources. The success of preservice teacher clusters was partly due to the increased size of groupings, particularly important for preservice teachers when it came to the sharing of resources for teaching in areas of specialisation that otherwise tended to be low in numbers (e.g. mathematics, science) due to the relatively smaller course sizes of the regional universities involved. The participation of university lecturers in the online cluster forums enabled a teaching and learning relationship to be established between preservice teachers and lecturers from the different universities which possibly assisted the success of the shared supervision when the school visits were conducted. Finally, the shared school visits provided a more cost-effective opportunity for university supervision of the practicum.

The implications of the findings associated with inter-university co-operation are significant for future work between universities and schools hosting students in locations which may be beyond the capacity of the universities to visit. It can help universities provide the contact between lecturers, supervising teachers and preservice teachers which is integral to the optimal practicum experience (Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, 2005), going some way to addressing the concerns of stakeholders who suggest universities do not provide adequate support to the practicum components of their courses (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, 2005; Ure, 2009). With on-going contact a key to partnerships the inter-university initiatives could improve school-university partnerships.

The use of ICT also appeared to be a successful initiative. The email communication with teacher supervisors was well received, and boosted the level of clear communication available between school and universities. The use of asynchronous, online blogs were supportive for preservice teachers' learning as they sought and provided resources, ideas and general encouragement for one another during their practicum experience. This was particularly useful for students placed in a rural or regional location without other preservice teachers in the same school. The asynchronous nature also appeared to be valuable as some preservice teachers acknowledged that due to time constraints during the school day, they were better able to communicate through this tool even if there were other preservice teachers placed in the same school. This is consistent with others' findings of the flexible nature of online opportunities (Saba, 2005); and as Hammond (2005) has indicated, it helps to facilitate interaction that may not have otherwise be possible due to distance.

There appeared to be a spoken willingness to utilise technology for further communication between the universities and school-based personnel but this did not manifest itself in any actual incidents of this being used. An initiative to be explored in the next phase of the project will be to set up Skype or some similar communication tool through preservice teachers working in the project who have the hardware to do this in schools. This could be an iPhone, a 3G enabled iPad2 or a laptop connected to the school wireless system. If preservice teachers can actually set up a contact and 'hand it over' to supervisors for pre-determined link ups (say 10 minutes at lunch time) it might overcome the barrier of time and expertise needed to make the connections with supervisors in schools. Although reasons for the Skype set up not coming to fruition in this iteration of the project were not fully explored, it is possible that teachers were reluctant to admit that they do not know how to go about setting up such a connection. It is possible that with ongoing innovation in wireless handheld technology, smart phones and iPads as examples, the ease with which we can link up with programs like Skype might make this more attractive.

A question to be explored in the future is whether it realistic to expect school personnel to engage with university staff for professional development regarding the practicum. Currently supervisors seem to value communication with the university partner for two main reasons: to receive clear instructions on university expectations and to communicate problems associated with some student placements. They do not appear to seek opportunities for self-education on supervision and mentoring such as is recommended in the National Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and Leadership, 2011). However, the next iteration of the study intends to offer further support to mentors with a series of short articles and podcasts which can be accessed from the joint website associated with the project. It is hoped that this will help to increase the mutual benefits of having preservice teachers on practicum and thus enhance the sense of partnership. An opportunity to explore this initiative will be sought through data obtained in the next phase of the project.

REFERENCES

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2011). *National professional standards for teachers*. Downloaded from, <http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/DomainOfTeaching/ProfessionalEngagement>
- Bangert, A. (2004). The seven principles of good practice: A framework for evaluating on-line teaching, *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(3), 217-232.
- Bernard, H., & Ryan, G. (2010). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Blackboard Inc., (1997-2011). *Blackboard*. Downloaded from, <http://www.blackboard.com/>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (Ed.). (2005). *Professional development schools. Schools for developing a profession*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 300-314.
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEW), (2010). *Regional participation: The role of socioeconomic status and access*. [Electronic version] accessed May 26, 2010, from, http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Programs/Equity/Documents/RegionalParticipation_report.pdf.
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education*. [Electronic version] accessed January 16, 2009 from, <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/ReviewofAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx>.
- Illuminate (2011). *Elearning and collaborative technologies*. Downloaded from, <http://www.illuminate.com/>
- Fitzgerald, R., & Steele, J. (2008). *Digital learning communities (DLC): Investigating the application of social software to support networked learning*. ALTC project. Electronic version downloaded from, <http://www.mashedlc.edu.au/>
- Green, B., & Reid, J. (2004). Teacher education for rural-regional sustainability: Changing agendas, challenging futures, chasing chimeras? *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(3), 255-273.
- Greener, S. (2008). Self-aware and self-directed: Student conceptions of blended learning. *Journal of online learning and teaching*, 2(4). Electronic version downloaded from, <http://jolt.merlot.org/vol4no2/greener0608.html>.
- Grundy, S. (2007). Solving the practicum conundrum. *iteach*. April, 2007 (1), 3.
- Halsey, R. J. (2009). "Teaching in the country would not be so bad" How much does it cost to find out?. In T. Lyons, J. Choi., & G. McPhan (Eds.). *Innovation for equity in rural education: Symposium proceedings international symposium for innovation in rural education*, 11-14 February, UNE: Armidale, 137-145. Electronic version retrieved January, 2010 from www.une.edu.au/simerr.

- Hammond, M. (2005). A review of recent papers on online discussion in teaching and learning in higher education. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 9(3), 9-23.
- Hardré, P. (2009) Nurturing the rural teaching experience. Lessons from the United States. In T. Lyons, J. Choi & G. McPhan, (Eds.) (2009). *Innovation for equity in rural education: Symposium proceedings international symposium for innovation in rural education*, 11-14 February, UNE: Armidale, 137-145. Electronic version retrieved January, 2010 from, http://www.une.edu.au/simerr/ISFIRE/pages/ISFIRE_proceedings.pdf
- Herrington, J., Herrington, A., Mantei, J., Olney, I., & Ferry, B. (2009). (Eds.), *New technologies, new pedagogies: Mobile learning in higher education*. Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong.
- House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training (2007). *Top of the class. Report on the inquiry into teacher education*. [Electronic version]. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training. Accessed June 7, 2007: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/evt/teachereduc/report/front.pdf>
- King, N., & Horrocks, C. (2010). *Interviews in quantitative research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Lyons, T., Choi, J., & McPhan, G. (Eds.). (2009). *Innovation for equity in rural education: Symposium proceedings international symposium for innovation in rural education*, 11-14 February, UNE: Armidale, 137-145. Electronic version retrieved January, 2010 from, www.une.edu.au/simerr.
- Lyons, T., Cooksey, R., Panizzon, D., Parnell, A., & Pegg, J. (2006). *Science, ICT and mathematics education in rural and regional Australia the SiMERR national survey: A research report prepared for the Department of Education, Science and Training, National Centre of Science, ICT and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia, University of New England*.
- McBurney-Fry, G. (2002). *Improving your practicum: A guide to better teaching practice* (2nd ed.). Katoomba: Social Science Press.
- Otero, V., Peressini, D., Anderson Meymaris, K., Ford, P., Garvin, T. Harlow, D. (2005). Integrating technology into teacher education. A Critical framework for implementing reform. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(1), 8-23.
- Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Committee, (2005). *Step up, step in, step out. Report on the suitability of pre-service teacher training in Victoria*. Melbourne: Victorian Government Printer.
- Parsons, M., & Stephenson, M. (2005). Developing reflective practice in student teachers: collaboration and critical partnerships. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 11(1), 95-116.
- Ramsey, G. (2000). *Quality matters. Revitalising teaching: critical times, critical choices*. Report of the review of teacher education NSW. Sydney: Ministry of Education and Training.

- Richards, L. (2009). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide* (2nd ed). London: Sage publications.
- Ryan, J., Jones, M., Buchanan, M., Morris, P. Nuttall, M., & Smith, C. (2011). Effective preservice teacher education 'At a distance': An investigation of the multimodal delivery of a secondary preservice teacher education program- perceptions of preservice teachers, teachers and university lecturers. In MacTeer, C. *Distance Education* (pp. 149-166). New York: Nova Publications.
- Saba, F. (2005). Critical issues in distance education: A report from the United States. *Distance Education*, 26 (2), 255-272.
- Schulz, R. (2005). The practicum: More than practice. *Canadian Journal of Education* 28 1 & 2, 147-167
- Tynan, B., Dunne, K., & Smyth, R. (2007). *Collaboration to support small courses/subjects*. Final Report on Carrick Forum May 17-8 downloaded from, http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/webdav/site/carricksite/users/siteadmin/public/grants_report_smallcourses_feb08.pdf
- Ure, C. (2009). *Practicum partnerships: exploring models of practicum organisation in teacher education for a standards-based profession*. Parkville, Vic: University of Melbourne.
- White, S. (2008). Placing teachers? Sustaining rural schooling through place-consciousness in teacher education. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 23(7). Downloaded from, <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/23-7.pdf>.
- Willis, S., & Reid, I. (2006). *Supporting learning at a distance. The challenge of bringing it altogether*. Presentation at the Supporting Learning and Teaching at a Distance Forum, University of Southern Queensland, Nov. 9-10. http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/webdav/site/carricksite/users/siteadmin/public/grants_competitive_eidosforum_willsand Reid_presentation_nov06.pdf
- Zeichner, K. (2002). Beyond traditional structures of student teaching. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Spring, 59-64.