

Chapter 5

Managing and Cultivating Professional Online Learning Communities: Three Cases

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ABSTRACT

Three cohorts of preservice teachers, about 300 altogether, studying at an Australian tertiary institution, engaged in various community-based learning activities for 70 hours over a ten-month period. During this time, they reflected on and shared their experiences with peers via asynchronous online discussions. The three lecturers linked to these cohorts reflected on their managerial styles and inspected the nature of participants' postings for evidence of the development of professional learning communities. They found that preservice teachers in all three cohorts developed attributes of professional learning communities as they shared their experiences. Many acted as guides, mentors, and companions for each other. The tool and approaches used to guide preservice teachers' reflections were helpful, yet suggestions are offered to extend practices in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The mission of the University in which this study is set “seeks to develop its students as educated, skilled and ethical graduates, who are sensitive to injustice and work for the common good” (Austra-

lian Catholic University, Mission, 1998). We acknowledge that many teacher educators worldwide also share, at least in part, this aspiration. Finding ways to enact this mission within preservice teacher education programs is challenging. Despite this, globally many teacher educators are incorporating service learning experiences in their preservice teacher education programs to facilitate opportu-

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nities for their students to see for themselves how they may contribute positively to community-based activities (Butcher, Groundwater-Smith, Howard, Labone, McFadden, McFadden et al., 2003; Gannon, 2010; Power, 2010; Ryan, Carrington, Selva & Healy, 2009; Wasserman, 2010). In many cases, this involves participating for a period of non-paid work in a setting outside the tertiary institution. In some cases, it also involves preservice teachers reflecting critically on their community-based activities and experiences in light of their own learning development (Bell, Horn & Roxas, 2007; Scott, 2011; Scott 2012).

Asynchronous online discussions can promote behaviours for inclusivity, initiation into a professional culture, and critical reflective thinking in preservice teachers in small groups (Scott, 2010). They may provide opportunities for thoughts, experiences and resources to be exchanged between group members about shared issues especially when preservice teachers are off-campus involved in community-based activities. A challenge many teacher educators face is finding efficient ways of orchestrating and managing these online discussions to cultivate professional learning communities especially in cases where there are large cohorts of students.

In this chapter, we describe the ways three teacher educators utilised asynchronous online discussions as the vehicle for managing opportunities for preservice teachers to reflect on their learning and experiences of community-based activities. More specifically, we investigate: *To what extent, if any, the managerial approach and structured experiences promoted the development of professional learning communities among these preservice teachers.*

BACKGROUND

There are many perspectives about three aspects which are central to our discussion: *service learning*, *reflection* and *professional learning*

communities. *Service learning* is often used to describe a curriculum-based program that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities; yet, what distinguishes service learning from simple volunteer work are the reflections on what is learnt as a result of that activity (Saggers & Carrington, 2008). Thus, the working definition of service learning in this discussion is a combination of participation in community-based activities with deliberate reflection on academic goals and personal learning.

Similarly, the notion of *reflection* has various interpretations. Ramsey (2010) wrote “reflection is thinking about and engaging in dialogue (with self and others) about an experience. This thinking is not unconscious, but conscious and deliberate thinking, giving mental attention to something” (p. 208). We use this as a working definition and we refer to reflective thinking and reflection interchangeably depending on the context.

Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) described *professional learning communities*, the third aspect being considered, as a new paradigm in which teachers work together and engage in continual dialogue to examine their practice and student performance and to develop and implement more effective instruction practices....teachers learn about, try out, and reflect on new practices in their specific context, sharing their individual knowledge and expertise. (p. 49)

We take the essence of this description of professional learning communities and translate it to the preservice teacher education context. In this study, preservice teachers engage in online dialogues and reflect on their experiences of working in community-based activities. Ethical and professional behaviour are expected from preservice teachers in all of their interactions with others, in both physical and virtual settings. Over time, they gain/develop a sense of belonging to a virtual community that shares a common focus. In these professional learning communities many seek to improve their own practices by sharing and reflecting on contributions offered in the virtual space.

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