On-line Reflection: Does it Enhance Teaching Practice?

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Abstract: This article describes the use of an on-line reflective journal in the third year of an early childhood teacher education qualification in New Zealand. The aim of this initiative was to build students’ confidence and understanding of the use of ICT. The students were surveyed before and after using the on-line reflective journal on teaching practice. Feedback suggests that many students appreciated the immediacy of the on-line component as well as the opportunity to stay in contact with classmates and lecturers, but that submitting on-line did not necessarily encourage deeper reflection. The lecturer valued the opportunity to build closer relationships with the students through one-to-one communication.

In today’s society technology, especially Information and Communication technology (ICT), plays an increasingly important role in the daily lives of both adults and children (Balfour, 2005). The report Foundations for Discovery (Ministry of Education, 2006) defines ICT as a “term used to describe the equipment (hardware) and computer programmes (software) that allow people to capture, access, use and share information electronically” (p. 2). In early childhood education, ICT has the potential to enhance the teaching and learning of young children, as well as provide support for the administrative tasks that teaching requires (Ministry of Education, 2006). The present generation of children are engaging with technology at a younger and younger age and, for example, are the first generation to grow up not knowing what it is like to be without the internet. Hence, they become very competent ICT users at a very early age. This is often not the case with the adults who surround them as they have usually been introduced to ICT later in life (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Often both parents and teachers lack confidence in the use of ICT.

As the potential of ICT to enhance children’s learning has been recognised and many early childhood programmes now include using ICT with children (Bolstad, 2004), it is important that early childhood teachers, instead of playing catch-up in ICT matters, become confident users of ICT, with the ability to mediate children’s learning effectively (Buckingham, 2004). This viewpoint is reflected in the ten year strategic plan formed by the Ministry of Education for early childhood education in New Zealand, Pathways to the future: Nga Huaraki Arataki (Ministry of Education, 2002) that outlines confident ICT use by early childhood teachers as one of the goals to be reached by 2012. This article outlines an initiative to build an understanding of and competency in the use of ICT, into the third year of a traditional early childhood education course.

Background

As a teacher educator in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching) that is offered in a traditional classroom environment, I was aware that many students were not confident or knowledgeable ICT users. Many early childhood education students are mature age students from a variety of backgrounds and many reported that they had had little experience of using
a computer. Although it is a course requirement that assignments are word-processed, this is often the extent of a student’s use of the computer, so sometimes students are unaware of the many ways that ICT can be used as a tool to enhance teaching and learning and to assist in administrative tasks. Hence, I was motivated to create innovative ways of integrating ICT into the students’ coursework to enable them to become confident in using ICT in a meaningful way that was a part of, not apart from, other coursework.

Reflective journals have long been a requirement for student teaching experience (Duff, Brown, & Van Scoy, 1995). While I had always been convinced that reflecting on action (Curtis & Carter, 2008; Schon, 1983) was an essential skill for students to develop, I was often frustrated that the existing process did not support the student’s learning as well as it might. This was because the reflective journal was paper based. Students attended a centre for several weeks while on teaching practice and completed their journal entries, but only handed them in for feedback when the teaching experience was complete. This meant that there was a time lag, often of several weeks, between reflecting on teaching and receiving feedback that could extend the students’ thinking about teaching. It was frustrating to both lecturers and students that any new understandings of practice could not be acted on in the same context during the same teaching experience. I believed that this diluted the effectiveness of the reflective journal to enhance student learning. As a result students often regarded completion of the reflective journal as a chore, rather than a practical tool to support their teaching practice. I concluded that if I could create an on-line reflective journal I could give students immediate feedback that could be integrated into their practice, either to improve or affirm it. This would have the two-fold effect of building confidence in the use of ICT, as well as making the reflective journal assessment more relevant.

The on-line reflective journal

Using Blackboard as a platform for the online reflective journal, I decided it should include three components. The first component provided a means for students to maintain contact with each other while on teaching practice and to engage informally in discussions about practice. I thought that this would be a non-threatening way for students to become familiar with the on-line tool. The discussion board function was used for this purpose. As the students were able to dialogue with each other through this component, the discussion board was also used as a medium to introduce the concept on-line netiquette to the students, as I was aware that although the discussion board could only be accessed by those enrolled on the course, it was a public space, so I was concerned that it might be used for inappropriate gossip, rather than as a forum to build a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) through the use of professional dialogue to share ideas about teaching practice. The netiquette rules were that any discussion must be positive, constructive as well as respectful of people, places, and the early childhood profession, and that confidentiality must be maintained.

The second component was a series of web-links that I hoped would encourage students to become adept at accessing information from websites and e-journals about early childhood education. Although the students could already access these e-journals through the library by home computer, I was aware that students who were not confident often found this process to be daunting and so avoided it. I thought that providing direct links to these data bases might encourage more students to access web-based
information. I believed that if students became adept at using the links, they would be able to use this as a strategy to remain informed about current initiatives in early childhood education once they graduated and were no longer able to use the University library.

The third component was the reflective journal. As it outlined a formative assessment task it comprised the most important component. This learning task required students to reflect weekly on one incident that was significant to their teaching practice by describing and analysing it according to one of the models of reflection that had been introduced in class. Unlike the informal dialogue on the discussion board, the reflective journal entries could only be accessed by myself. As this task was a formative assessment no marks were given, but feedback was integral to the learning process.

The reflective journal was created using the grade-book function on Blackboard, whereby the students could submit one journal entry per week of teaching practice, to which I could reply and give feedback, whilst the student was still on teaching practice. I hoped that the students would benefit from the immediate feedback and this would in turn provide more depth to the subsequent weekly reflections. As I taught the third year students, I thought this alternative approach to the reflective journal assessment would create enthusiasm for the task. I posted several models that could be used as a basis for reflection on the web-site, so that the students had a reference point (O'Connor & Diggins, 2002; Smyth, 1989).

In order to further motivate the students' interest in this on-line component to their course, I made the web-site as attractive as possible by including graphics, photos and logos of the different web-sites. An additional feature, as with all Blackboard web-sites, was a feature that allowed me to e-mail the students, either in a group or individually. This feature was particularly practical for as it allowed the lecturer to contact students quickly.

**Student feedback**

Before students commenced the teaching practice, I introduced the on-line reflective journal to the class in a computer lab. As this was my first attempt to blend the use of ICT with face-to-face class teaching, I thought it was important that the initiative was evaluated. To do this I designed two questionnaires – one to be completed by the class before going out on teaching practice and one to be completed by the same students once the teaching practice was over. University ethics approval was obtained and the student representative administered and collected the questionnaires from the students. The pre-practicum questionnaire was designed to ascertain the students' feelings about the reflective journal being on-line. I had 52 responses to the questionnaire, all of whom were female, and spanned an age range from 20 to 49 years of age. Students were surveyed as to whether they were extremely confident, somewhat confident or not at all confident with computers and the use of on-line technology. In addition students were asked how enthusiastic they were about the on-line reflective journal. A space was also provided for other comments. I had expected that younger students would report that they were confident in the use of ICT, while the older students would lack confidence. There was, however, no such trend, as it appeared that many older students were competent ICT users, and some of the younger students were reticent to complete on-line coursework. If a student was more confident in the use of ICT generally, they were usually more enthusiastic about the introduction of the on-line
reflective journal. The students who reported that they were somewhat confident also reported that they would be willing to try it, while students who reported that they were not at all confident reported that they were reluctant to submit reflections on-line. More students were willing to use the on-line component than not. One student commented that: “The links will give me a wider range of readings etc to help me reflect on my practice & extend my knowledge base.”

Another commented that she had already shared the web-links with her colleagues:

I know it is already enhancing & extending my teaching practice. This on-line learning reconfirms what I already know and it gives me new knowledge. I am able to share it with my work colleagues and friends by sending them the links. The tool is a positive source of using the technology to the maximum & utilising this as a teaching tool… great idea & great initiative.

Not all students were positive in their responses. Some students resented the fact that a new approach had been imposed at the end of their course:

For us students who are so close to finishing, I feel it would be better for first years to learn.

Another voiced a similar concern:

It would have been more appropriate if it was introduced during our first year. At this point in time, it is an extra stress to cope with something new when I am not IT savvy - for those who are confident, it is probably a cool idea.

Although students were not required to participate in discussions, the discussion board was initially popular. It allowed the students to maintain contact with each other while they were out on practicum. The discussion generally centred on different ways that children’s interests could be extended. As the time on practicum progressed and the students felt more relaxed and confident, the use of the discussion board faded.

The reflective journal entries were a requirement of the course. The entries reflected the standard that had been evident in the paper-based journal – some were concise and descriptive, rather than reflective and analytical, of teaching practice. Other students reflected in depth on their teaching practice and were able to link their actions to the many theories that had been discussed in class. It is my perception that the on-line reflective journal alone does not improve teaching practice but as I am able to provide prompt feedback on the entries while the event is still recent, I am better able to stimulate further reflection.

After teaching experience was completed, the same students were surveyed again regarding the on-line reflective journal with a post-practicum questionnaire. The responses outlined a number of benefits such as information being easily accessible, enjoying being able to keep in touch, that the reflective journal was instant and that it allowed the students to see what everyone else was up to. In answer to the question How did on-line components influence your teaching practice? some students commented further about how they often felt isolated from classmates and lecturers while being on teaching practice, and the on-line journal and the discussion board allowed a support network to form:
It helped me not to feel so isolated out on practice. Knowing everyone was in the same boat and having the same issues was reassuring. Feedback from everyone was great.

Another commented:

I had back-up for myself readily available.

I believe students felt supported because as the lecturer I was able to read their on-line journals and e-mail them instantly if I felt, after reading the journal entries, that they were anxious about their practice.

Some students reported that because they were requested to send in a weekly reflective journal entry which they knew would be read and sent back immediately, they did think more deeply about what they wrote. For example, students wrote:

It made me reflect more on my practice and it kept me on top of my journals

I like the way we can support each other through on-line discussions while we are still on practicum. We can ask for advice and receive multiple perspectives on incidents which have occurred while on placement. And I like submitting our significant incidents on-line, I find it handy and quicker.

In contrast, in answer to the same question, some students simply answered, “It didn’t.”

My reflections

As a lecturer, I had always presumed that relationships would be built with students in a face-to-face teaching situation, and that any form of on-line teaching and learning would be mainly technical and non-relational. I have been pleasantly surprised to find that this opinion is mistaken. The on-line reflective journal has enabled me to build relationships with the students through the conversations we had on-line. As students reflected on their practice and the learning and teaching they have been involved in, I was able to comment on it while the experience was still fresh. Prior to the inception of the on-line journal I had found it difficult to comment on teaching practice in such an individual way. The on-line reflective journal created a space where I could listen to each student in a personal way that I could not otherwise. The students appreciated this and have given me the feedback that they feel this created a shared understanding of what they were trying to achieve. I feel that for me this has been an unexpected, but pleasing aspect of the on-line reflective journal. As the importance of professional dialogue and the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2006) are concepts that I emphasise in lectures as being vitally important for all teachers, I value the opportunity to be able to model these. I appreciate being able to conduct a dialogue that engages students on a one-to-one basis so that I can not only pose questions that I hope will provoke the students to reflect more deeply, but also offer practical suggestions that they may find useful.

It’s really awesome to know we can jump online and see what everyone else is up to on prac. And to get others advice and
converse with our lecturers too, kinda like a cyber space support system, any way Yes, i like it, very good A+. And I think its cool how we can have lecturers comment on our significant incidents as we are still on prac so we can implement some of the suggestions or advice they give, as in the past I have finished prac then received really useful comments that I would have liked to try out while on placement (Student feedback, post practicum questionnaire).

Although the on-line reflective journal has provoked some students to reflect more deeply on their practice, sadly other students still regard reflective practice as a chore. However, all students benefitted from the immediacy of the on-line reflective journal, and the feedback is more meaningful if received while on teaching placement. All students also gained from the opportunity to engage in a professional dialogue with a lecturer on a one-to-one basis, and to feel supported while in an unfamiliar context. For some students feeling supported and connected to someone who can provide constructive feedback to them may ultimately lead them to think more critically about their practice (Meyer, Ashburner, & Holman, 2006). In addition, students enhance their ICT skills and build confidence through their use of the on-line reflective journal. Although it is very difficult to ascertain whether the on-line reflective journal improved student teaching practice, it is hoped that by receiving prompt feedback in a timely manner, students existing knowledge and skills of working with young children and their families improved, and that by extending students use of ICT, students have gained more confidence in an alternative learning mode and method of accessing information (Raban et al., 2007).

**Conclusion**

There is currently substantial literature on the positive effects of including ICT in early childhood education, not only to support children’s learning, but also to support the administration and management in the centre (Bolstad, 2004). However, there is evidence to suggest that ICT is more likely to be used in effective ways if the teachers are confident ICT users and understand the ways that ICT can enhance children’s learning (Yelland, Grieshaber, & Stokes, 2000). If early childhood teachers’ experience and confidence is limited, this may ultimately limit the experiences children have with ICT. For this reason, it is important that a wide variety of uses of ICT are introduced into early childhood teacher education courses. This initiative to blend the use of ICT into traditional early childhood teacher education resulted in an on-line reflective journal being undertaken. The introduction of an online reflective journal is an attempt to build pre-service teachers understanding of and confidence in the use of ICT. Feedback from the students indicated that while submitting reflective journal entries on-line did not necessarily provoke students to reflect more deeply, most students appreciated the immediacy of the feedback as well as the opportunity to gain support and remain in contact with lecturers and classmates while on teaching practice. It also created new possibilities for the students and myself to build a more meaningful relationship by engaging in individual conversations via the computer. In addition, all students gained additional experience of ICT.
References


