

Using Wikis to Facilitate Communication for Rural, Remote and At-risk Practicum Students

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Abstract

The practicum experience is often highlighted as the core of any pre-service teacher education course. Unless effective communication mechanisms can be established to support students in off-campus locations, the practicum experience can be compromised if students feel isolated and abandoned when faced with difficulties. Such a scenario may be particularly relevant to students in remote placements or for those who have been identified as being at-risk. The main goal of this project was to determine whether a Wiki could be an effective tool for facilitating meaningful dialogue between the university, school-based personnel and students during the practicum. A Wiki was selected as the tool for the project as most students are familiar with this second generation web-based social software. This paper reports on the nature, organisation and results of the project.

Keywords: teachers, asynchronous, internet, university, qualitative, Australia

Introduction

It has long been recognised that the practicum experience is integral to any pre-service teacher education course (Al-Musawi, 2003; Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Grootenboer, 2006; Turney, 1982). It has also been shown that the amount of practicum experience received correlates with longevity in the profession. Fleener's (1998) study with 1,959 Texas primary teachers, for example, found that candidates who received increased amounts of field experience in their teacher preparation programs remained in the profession significantly longer than those prepared through traditional campus-based programs. Three years after they started teaching, 12% of those in more traditional programs had left the profession compared to 4.8% of those from the field-based programs.

Recent Australian reports have likewise recognised the important role the practicum plays in teacher education programs. Ramsey (2000) reported that areas of greatest innovation and best practice in teacher education is "directly related to professional experience" (p. 62). The significant national parliamentary inquiry into teacher education entitled *Top of the Class* (House of Representatives, 2007) concluded that the practicum component of any course needed to be better and separately funded by the Commonwealth, be of reasonable duration and be closely integrated with the on-campus component. A further finding of the *Top of the Class* report was that,

...universities must give greater priority to properly supporting students on practicum...universities need to provide ongoing support... throughout the practicum period through regular contact (not just in response to problems) (p. 78).

The School of Education at the University of Notre Dame Australia recognises the important role played by the practicum experience in teacher formation. Accordingly, Bachelor of Education students undertake 32 weeks of school experience consisting of two weeks in the first year followed by 10 weeks in each of

the subsequent three years of the course. With students undertaking 32 weeks of practicum in total, on-going and supportive communication regimes during the experience are essential.

The school-based practicum within the School of Education is organised by the Office of Professional Practice (OPP). The OPP liaises with schools to obtain the most appropriate practicum placements for students. Each student is provided with a mentor teacher in the school and either a university assigned supervisor or a Head of Professional Practice (HOPP). Whereas the university supervisor is assigned by the OPP and visits the students as required (normally three or four times during a ten week practicum), the HOPP is a member of the school staff who has been upskilled to act *de facto* as the university representative. At the end of the practicum, the mentor (classroom) teacher and university supervisor/HOPP collaboratively decide upon a final grade for each student.

In an uneventful practicum there will be minimal communication between the OPP and the university supervisor/HOPP. If a student is at-risk of failing the practicum, or if they are located outside the metropolitan area (country or rural region), however, communication needs to increase dramatically in response to either situational or contextual requirements. It needs to be remembered that Western Australia, where the Fremantle campus is located, accounts for about one third of the entire continent, or covers about two and a half million square kilometres.

As students are placed in all areas of the State, it is understandable that communication between students and the OPP tends to be problematic. Further, internal statistics show that the number of students placed outside the metropolitan area for the ten week school-based practicum has been steadily increasing over time. In 2009, fifty students were placed outside the metropolitan area. The OPP was concerned that there was little accessible university support available for these students. Many, due to their isolation (e.g. Balgo, Wyndham, Leonora, Wongan Hills), did not have a university supervisor and were in danger of having only limited access to the university – either by email (where available) or 'phone. Nor were students able to receive support from others, as is usually the case when being placed in a metropolitan school with several other students, as many found themselves in a single practicum student situation. It was for these reasons that Wiki software was identified as being a potential means of facilitating communication between students and the OPP, and between practicum students themselves.

What follows is a description of the communication system that existed prior to 2009 for practicum students who were identified as being at-risk of failure. Next is a description of the pre-2009 communication system for students who were placed in rural or remote communities. A brief description of Wiki software then follows. Finally, consideration is given to how the introduction of Wiki in 2009 assisted in creating a communication system that offered effective support to at-risk and isolated students.

Communication Precursors and the Need for Wiki

The Pre-2009 Communication System for students requiring extra support.

Typically, when concerns relating to student performance are raised with the OPP, the Office liaises with the course coordinator, university supervisor/ HOPP or mentor teacher, as necessary, and relays relevant information to all parties by 'phone, email and in person. This is an extremely time-consuming process and one that is exacerbated during those times when several student-related concerns require immediate and simultaneous attention. Each time ongoing concerns are expressed, the university supervisor/HOPP or mentor teacher and the OPP would make many 'phone calls followed-up by emails relaying largely repetitious information. Documented evidence of discussions is then organised and stored for possible future retrieval, which also requires a good deal of time. This system thus relies on accurately recording the information, sharing it promptly with relevant parties, storing data for future reference, and creating a system for easy retrieval as necessary information is typically scattered throughout email inboxes and voice mail messages.

Experience revealed that in the case of student appeals against an awarded grade, the communication trail, especially relating to voicemail messages, often was not available to support evaluation protocols. Even though discussions had occurred between the mentor teacher, university supervisor, OPP and course coordinator, clear and consistent documentation was often difficult to amass. It was at this point that consideration was given to developing a more cohesive communication system, one that would involve all relevant parties, save precious OPP time during the busy practicum period, allow the student evaluation team to act swiftly, was transparent (Gibson, 2006), and would provide comprehensive and defensible documentation in case of student appeals.

The Pre-2009 Communication System for students placed in isolated environments.

It has been shown that students assigned to rural and remote locations may face added burdens associated with the isolation in which they find themselves (Murdoch University, 2003; Sharplin, 2002), Lock's (2008) research lead him to conclude that "students need to be equipped to face the special challenges and conditions for rural teaching prior to appointment" (para. 10). Concerns identified by Lock included personal loneliness, professional isolation, and cultural dislocation. To ameliorate such concerns, students often have only their mentor teacher as their primary resource, which in itself potentially places them in a situation of personal/professional conflict.

From experience, during a practicum in an isolated region, there is rarely formal communication with the OPP unless a significant problem surfaces. Students are normally supervised by the school principal or deputy principal with no university input. To complicate matters further, some students complete a concurrent unit (Teaching Method) at the same time as their practicum. Whereas their metropolitan counterparts complete this requirement after school in a supportive cluster context, isolated students are forced to work through the materials in the external mode with little or no support. As with the at-risk cohort, it was considered that Wiki software could provide a learning community for rural and remote students in a way which offered greater personal and academic support.

Setting up the Wiki.

Wikis started in 1994 with the launch of Ward Cunningham's original *Wiki Wiki* (<http://c2.com/cgi-bin/Wiki>). Today, *Wikipedia* (n.d.) is probably the best known example of a large scale Wiki. A Wiki is a communication tool that allows asynchronous communication between select participants (Hastings, 2008). The asynchronous nature of Wiki allows individuals to access information at their leisure – a very useful feature when attempting to communicate with teachers who are otherwise engaged during the course of the day. Asynchrony also enables participants to contribute to discussions at their own convenience but without 'speaking' over the top of each other (Vonderwell, Liang, & Aldermann, 2007). Wikis are a simple interface that allows web pages to be created and edited. Images, files and videos can easily be added by Wiki members (Sarrel, 2007). As a web-based tool, Wiki is accessible from anywhere that internet access is available. The information is kept together and when any Wiki member edits a page all members immediately receive details, by email, informing them that an edit has occurred.

Apart from their use as a tool for social communication – Hammond (2007) has quipped that a person cannot test drive a Wiki alone – Wikis have been shown to have considerable educational merit (Mader, 2006; Wetpaint, n.d.). They are also easy to use. LeFever (2007), for example, has created a *YouTube* video which takes the viewer through a step-by-step explanation of how to set up a Wiki and use it to coordinate a group's activities. As LeFever correctly asserts, once the appropriate software has been selected, operation of the Wiki is largely driven by intuition and common sense.

The School of Education Wiki Project*Stress testing the system.*

In school term four of 2008, the OPP created a Wiki to be used by students engaged in their two week 'immersion' practicum. This small scale trial was conducted not to monitor student performance but to test aspects of the software's accessibility and security. *PBworks* (2005-2009) was chosen as the preferred Wiki tool for as Hammond (2007) observed, "it is as easy to make as a peanut butter sandwich" (p. 32). A discussion board was created for general use by first year teacher education students. Within a very short timeframe, these students made comments, uploaded photos and resources to the Wiki, and generally interacted with one another. A few students added their own pages with teaching resources and ideas for sharing. The following verbatim comments are intended to provide a flavour of Wiki discussions:

Student:

I have never experienced being in a state school; all my schooling has been in Catholic and private schools. I didn't really know what to expect, but after my first day today, I have found it to be really great. I think it's really interesting to see what it like and how to accomodate for students of different religions, espesially now during christmas time. Has anyone found themselves in the same situation?

Course coordinator:

I really pondered the points made on the Wiki about the difference between schools and systems, and it was interesting to read your entries from the point of view of people new to schools. Thank you for stirring my thinking! Our own perceptions and expectations are frequently inaccurate. For example, you might have gone through Catholic schools all your life, and really lack personal knowledge of state schools. I hope my reflection here on this Wiki might stir your thinking.

In the last five years, I've been to literally hundreds of schools, in city and rural locations, and around the nation, in my University role. I've been teaching since 1982, so I'm not new to the life of schools. I've found that in every system – independent, catholic and state that there is a range of quality.

So my reflection on this is that I've learned to avoid simplistic images of any suburb or system and to look at each school as I find it. I've learned that the generalisations, both positive and negative, made about schools and systems are just not borne out when you spend time in those locations.

The trial with first year students indicated that the Wiki was simple to use, data uploading caused no problems, and students appreciated this mode of sharing information. It was also observed that a supportive learning community was beginning to emerge.

2009 Wiki trail for students at-risk of failing a practicum.

In school term two of 2009, 330 second and third year students were engaged in a ten week practicum. Concerns, which varied in nature and severity, were raised in the first three weeks about 37 of these students. Issues identified included level of professionalism, relationships between the student and the practicum school, attendance, teaching ability and health. After investigation by the OPP, it was determined that 29 of the expressed concerns could be easily addressed and solved. The other eight cases, however, were more problematic. Accordingly, Wiki folders were set up for these eight students as it was considered that these needed close monitoring and support over an extended period of time. Levels of access were established by the OPP, who controlled the site. Levels of access were necessary to prevent students from seeing comments that were only intended for the performance evaluation team (mentor teacher, supervisor/HOPP, OPP, course coordinator). Edits of communication with the student, on the other hand, were available to all parties.

An email was sent out to each of the eight students and other participants directly involved with their supervision, informing them about the Wiki. Stakeholders were provided with information to help them gain access to and negotiate the Wiki site. In addition to general information about the Wiki, stakeholders were given additional information about the purpose of creating a folder for a student potentially at-risk of failing the practicum. It was made clear to all stakeholders exactly who had access to which folders. Figure 1 is a screen shot of the information sent to stakeholders, with user instructions, about students flagged as being at-risk of failing the practicum. Figure 2 indicates the purpose for which the discussion board was set up.

It was observed that folders for at-risk students highlighted concerns in a cohesive, accessible and transparent fashion and gave all stakeholders the opportunity to participate in the process at their level of access. At-risk students were asked to upload planning documents so that university and school-based staff could view these and make comments as appropriate. This provided students with extra feedback. All stakeholders received email notification when information had been posted to their Wiki page. Some students used their folders extensively (81 times) while others did not use them at all, as is evidenced by the data detailed in Table 1. Overall, time was saved in relaying information between parties and students were fully informed about issues and able to ask questions as soon as notification of a posting had been received.

The following provides an indication of the dialogue between at-risk students and relevant staff:

Student:

I will submit my form to withdraw on Monday as I noticed February 16th is the census date and leave it in the university's hands to decide. I don't have the ideas needed to do a fwd in the time required...Kindergarten is a lot easier as its all craft based, and year 3 is easier because the children can write and read, but split class pre-primary/year 1 is something I need time to familiarise myself with for many weeks and get my head around how to program lessons for them. Also thinking of the kids, they need a competent teacher who will guide them and teach them right,

and if I'm not at the right level they will be the ones to suffer and I will lose alot of money.

Talking to [xxxx] my co-ordinator was really good, she encouraged me to build up my resource file and strategies and observe good teachers (be a volunteer and help out with kids) and then approach the prac more confidently.

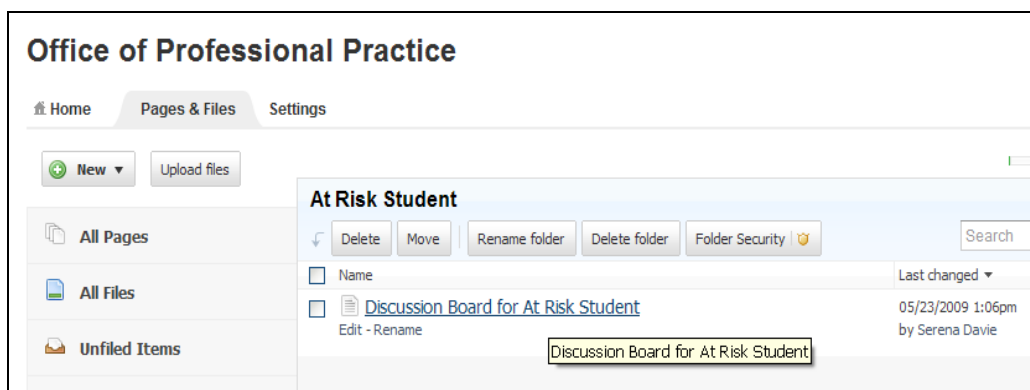
Response by supervisor:

Dear [xxxx]

I admire your honest evaluation of your abilities/teaching skills at this stage of your studies. I wish you all the best in your teaching journey - it was a pleasure to have met you.

Kind Regards

[xxxx]



[The following user instructions were relayed to all participants:] Now you need to click on the *Discussion Board for the At-risk Student*. When you do this you will see some information about the student and other members of this folder. To make a comment, type into the box at the bottom where it says *Add a Comment*. When you have finished typing, click the *Add a Comment* Button and your comment will be posted.

Figure 1. Screen shot and information sent to stakeholders of an at-risk student.

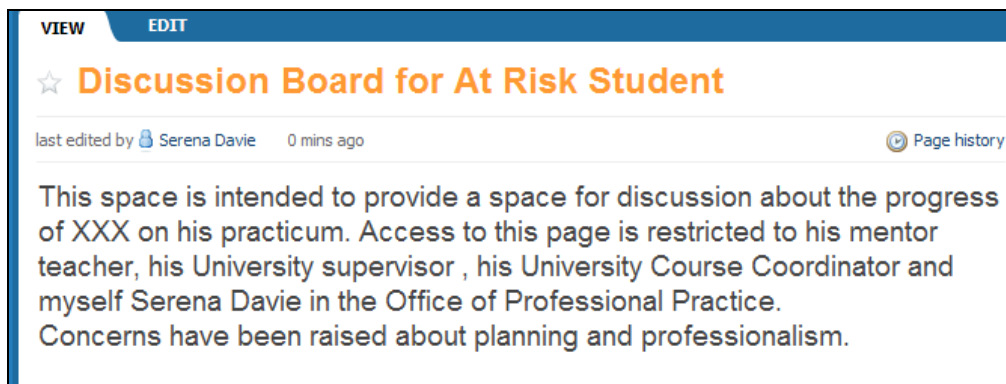


Figure 2. Discussion board instructions.

Table 1. *Use of folders for students at-risk of failing a practicum*

Student at-risk	No. of invited participants to folder	No. of participating members	Total No. of contributions to each folder	Files in each folder	No. of visits each student made to the Wiki
Student 1	6	5	10	11	81
Student 2	5	3	15	4	5
Student 3	4	2	3	1	0
Student 4	6	3	6	1	3
Student 5	4	2	3	1	0
Student 6	6	1	1	1	0
Student 7	5	2	4	1	5
Student 8	7	3	7	1	0
TOTALS	43	21	49	21	94

Having learned much from this Wiki experience, it was decided to adopt a modified approach in school term three, 2009. During this time, 200 final year students would be undertaking their qualifying practicum (Internship). Of these, 35 students were flagged as being at-risk during the practicum. Again, only a small number of these required ongoing attention. Individual Wiki pages were not set up for these students. Instead, the OPP set up separate primary, secondary and early childhood Wiki pages for flagged students completing Bachelor of Education studies in these individual courses. It was here that all the relevant information about flagged students was recorded. Course coordinators had access to these pages and were able to edit them. Table 2 indicates the extent to which the Wiki pages for at-risk students were utilised on this occasion.

At the staff level, all communication regarding any of the flagged students was recorded via the Wiki. An immediate email notification was sent out to stakeholders involved with the supervision of each flagged student as soon as new information had been posted. The information also proved useful for providing details to additional supervisors who may have been called upon in a confirmatory role. In cases where students might later appeal their grade, the Wiki provided an accurate and comprehensive record of events. It was found that these pages were used on a regular basis and enabled staff to be kept up-to-date regarding the progress of any at-risk student. This modified approach proved to be successful in that the Wiki attracted far greater usage by staff. What follows are examples of staff interactions around the issues relating to an at-risk student:

HOPP to course coordinator:

I am extremely happy to report that there has been a dramatic improvement in [xxxx's] work output and classroom management this week. He is staying after school, better prepared and much more accountable for his classroom management.

He has begun to demonstrate some 'sound to good' teaching qualities.

I hope that this continues as there is still 3 weeks to go.

I encourage him to become familiar with the university final report document so as to ensure that all areas are competently addressed by him.

From OPP to relevant staff:

[student name]...[prac location]

Flagged before start date. School phone number is [xxxx]

[date] - Call from School - Tutor teacher [xxxx] concerned already! rang with concerns day 1. [tutor teacher's] mobile number is [xxxx].

[course coordinator] has said that she would like [student] to have a 2 week settling in period. [course coordinator] will visit [student] on [date].

[course coordinator] asked for a Supervisor to be sent out quickly. [OPP] has left a message for [supervisor]... [date] re weekly visit ???

[course coordinator] to speak with [xxxx] (Principal) or [tutor teacher] this Friday [date].

Table 2. Use of at-risk Wiki pages in term three, 2009.

Course	No. of Students on prac.	No. of students flagged at any stage of the prac.	% flagged	Wiki edits
Early Childhood	54	10	2	22
Primary	79	9	11	60
Secondary	67	16	24	207
TOTALS	200	35	37	289

2009 Wiki trail for students in remote and rural practicum locations.

A Wiki discussion board was created in school term two, 2009, for 22 second and third year students placed outside the metropolitan area for a ten week practicum. Students were asked to participate in on-line discussions and reflect upon specific tasks. The aim was to create a learning community by facilitating interaction between these isolated students. Twenty nine comments were sent to this discussion board during the course of the practicum.

A Wiki folder was created for 10 of the 22 students completing an external unit (Teaching Method) concurrently with their school-based practicum. These students were emailed instructions regarding how to access and use the Wiki. The Wiki contained resources for the students and instructions about completing the unit in the external mode. Students were asked to share experiences about matters such as planning, professionalism, questioning techniques, relationships, classroom environment, behaviour management, collaborative learning, and use of classroom rewards. Table 3 shows how the Teaching Method Remote and Rural Folder was used by the students as a group, and Table 4 shows how the individual students used the Teaching Method Rural and Remote Folder.

Table 3. Use of the Teaching Method Rural & Remote Folder by students as a group.

No. of pages created in Teaching Method folder	No. of comments made on the discussion board	Total No. of comments or edits on pages in the Teaching Method Rural & remote folder
21	67	158

This discussion folder grew from one to 21 pages as a result of dialogue and students creating their own pages and uploading files. Pages were also created for their weekly Teaching Method tasks. All students tended to access the Wiki folder regularly and kept up with the weekly tasks. Students were also required to comment on each other's remarks and most did so with considerable perspicacity. The average number of visits each student made to the Wiki was 94, indicating that the students were clearly seeing the Wiki as a valuable resource. Such results tend to support the findings of Locke and Latham (2002) who reported that learning increases when individuals are encouraged to set their own intrinsically motivated goals.

With the success of the school term two Wiki program for second and third year rural and remote students, it was decided to make the tool available to 23 final year students undertaking their 10 week qualifying practicum (Internship) in school term three, 2009. Two Wiki pages were created for remote and rural students. The first was a discussion board for the students and the second, for use by the OPP to

monitor the progress and supervision of these students. The OPP provided specific scaffolding on the student page for the purpose of promoting collaborative practice between the students, many of whom were located more than 1000 kilometres from each other. As is indicated in Table 5, there were 84 comments made on this board and the page was visited 350 times. The additional scaffolding encouraged students to participate and share their experiences in a structured way. The OPP was able to monitor what students were saying and respond to specific queries, but was careful not to dominate the discussion.

Table 4. Use of Teaching Method Rural & Remote Folder by individual student.

Student	Number of times student edited own page	Number of times student visited Wiki
1	7	62
2	4	62
3	7	131
4	6	81
5	6	97
6	9	114
7	4	38
8	6	141
9	11	73
10	9	144
TOTALS	69	943

Table 5. Use of the Wiki pages for remote and rural students in term three, 2009.

No. of students undertaking practicum in remote locations	No. of comments made by students on discussion board	No. of times page visited by students	Wiki Edits made by OPP staff monitoring supervision of students
23	84	350	395

The data indicate that the discussion board was used extensively and appeared to be of benefit to staff and students alike. The 395 edits made by the OPP clearly illustrate the value of having this kind of mechanism available for dialoguing both within the Office as well as with other staff at a distance. The 350 visits made by students to the discussion board indicates that this mode of communication was being well received by them. Prensky (2001, 2008) and Beldarrain (2006) echo many Generation X and Y researchers in stating that the 21st century learner wants to stay connected to peers and receive prompt feedback. It has also been recognised for many years that immediate feedback has greater motivational efficacy than feedback of a delayed nature (Good & Brophy, 1994; Mory, 2003; Skinner, 1958). Wiki facilitates immediacy very well. What follows are examples of verbatim reflections by students in isolated placements relating to the Teaching Methods unit which they were completing externally:

Student 1:

DYNAMICS: It is so hard to write down the dynamics of my classroom and school in [remote location]! The first difference in structure is that school starts at 8.20am, finishes at 2pm (to avoid the heat) and Mungarri [recess] is from about 10.50 until 11.30. At 11.30 there is a whole school

assembly which consists of a prayer, announcements, and for staff and admin to keep track of attendance. Every Monday at assembly awards are given out for attendance for the previous week, an award is given to a member from each class. Another difference in this school is that it ranges from kindergarten to secondary.

In my year 2/3 class there are usually about 12 kids on average and there are about 90 in the whole school. There are aboriginal teacher assistants in most classes however in the first 11 days of school I have had an ATA only 4 days so it is a little inconsistent.

The following excerpt is poignant. It describes verbatim eye-opening experiences encountered by practicum students in a remote location. It is here that Wiki can be extremely useful in helping students to 'debrief' the various emotions that may have been encountered during the course of a single day.

Student 2:

Hi!! I hope I am commenting in the correct place!! I am in [location] with [student] and [student]. For use of a better word this place is crazy!! It is like a whole other world!! We spent the weekend in [nearby town] and arrived in [prac location] late Sunday night. We woke up Sunday morning to a dry and red front garden!!! Visiting the shop and around town was a little overwhelming but we had lots of help and friendly people to show us around.

Tuesday, being the first day of school was so different to anything we had ever experienced before. Unfortunately a young man around 20 hung himself on the Thursday before and so the town was in "sorry time." At our staff meeting we were advised that no kids would be coming to school this morning, and that all the staff were to walk to "sorry camp", do what we were advised to do by the local people and bring the kids back to school.

This was so daunting as we had no idea what to expect. We walked to sorry camp to find about 100 indigenous people of varied ages gathered around. One lady said that the mother of the boy wanted us all to greet the family. We one by one shook that hand of everyone in a symbol, of saying sorry to the family. It was so emotional. Another lady then made a thick mark of ocher on our foreheads which is meant to signify being part of their family. We then were given branches and as a whole group everyone walked to the school and through the school brushing the branch along the floor to get rid of evil spirits and remove his foot prints. They were so appreciative that we cared and got involved. It was very moving but overwhelming. We then tried to resume school as normal. I am in a year 2/3 class. We had 12 kids on the first day and numbers seem pretty constant. They are so lively and active and utterly gorgeous. Literacy and numeracy levels are pretty low as you'd expect. We are all really enjoying ourselves. Will keep everyone posted!! sorry if this was really long!!! [student author]

Drawbacks

Although the Wiki proved to be an extremely valuable communication and performance tracking tool, as with most initiatives, several drawbacks surfaced to which the reader ought to be alerted. Firstly, overall coordination and configuration can be time consuming and this will need to be factored into any future forays with Wiki. The benefit is that now that the software has been trialed, future ventures will likely be more effectively managed. Once up and running though, experience has shown that the site is largely self-supporting. What will always be required, however, is time availability for servicing Wiki. Relevant staff, especially those in the OPP, are engaged in constant monitoring and responding in an effort to provide the best possible practicum outcome for students. It would be difficult to sustain such a commitment with a larger group of students without extra staff being assigned to the project.

Perhaps the second drawback to be noted is that the software is not yet completely reliable. There was one occasion where a glitch in the system caused students to receive comments which had been intended only for staff. Fortunately on this occasion, the comments did not contain prejudicial information, however, a warning was sounded regarding the security of intended data. No doubt further refinement will prevent such a situation from recurring.

Finally, rural and remote areas are not always blessed with the most reliable internet access. Where such access is available, the speed is often slow and connection erratic. Such concerns may be addressed in time as Australia's telecommunications providers rally to improve access 'to the bush'. Software is today fairly reliable, as is the hardware that drives it. Regardless of this, however, Wikis are only as reliable as the infrastructure that supports them.

Conclusion

The trial conducted with second, third and final year 10 week practicum students showed that Wiki is a valuable asset in the dual tasks of communicating and monitoring. It seemed to appeal to an IT savvy generation of students who were easily able to make the transition from social communication to using Wiki as an educational resource. Staff likewise appreciated the asynchronous aspect which allowed them to be informed by each other's comments prior to engaging in further intervention. The immediate availability of information was also seen as a significant advantage. We live in a 'now' world where several decades of increasingly sophisticated electronic communication possibilities have conditioned people to expect rapid turn-around times.

Although several drawbacks have been identified as a result of the project, none of these are sufficiently serious to indicate that the use of Wiki ought to be discontinued. Adjustments and modifications will be made prior to the next group of students being involved in a practicum experience. For reasons related to time commitment, however, it is unlikely that the endeavour will at this point be extended beyond students in the at-risk and isolated categories. Over time, a clearer picture of how best to configure, support and extend the Wiki program is likely to emerge. At this juncture, the intention is to utilise the tool into the foreseeable future as part of the never-ending task of attempting to enhance the practicum experience for students, albeit at this point, with a select cohort.

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