

Becoming part of a community of practice: Supporting early-career teachers

Abstract

This interactive workshop will enable each seminar participant to actively interact with the MusicTeachersProject.net community. This community of practice has been established to support early-career music teachers. The international project is a world-first, initiated and funded from November 2011, to cater for teachers who began teaching in January 2012. This workshop will enable participants to gain insights into alternative ways of ensuring the success of their pre-service music education students once they have graduated. Workshop participants will have the opportunity to actively participate in the online community of practice, and in so doing experience how this might benefit their own graduating students.

Keywords

Community of practice, identities, mentoring, online initiative, graduate success

Introduction

Teachers, particularly music teachers, often experience praxis shock in their first few years of teaching (Ballantyne, 2007a; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Praxis shock is the experience that teachers have when their expectations of teaching life do not match up with the realities of teaching. The impact of this is widespread – teachers who are suffering from praxis shock are likely to be less effective in their work teaching children, and therefore may be unable to provide their schools and communities with the best possible education that they can. In addition, people who are suffering from praxis shock are most likely to ‘burn out’ at an early

stage of their career, choosing employment away from schools, in order to cope.

The detrimental effects of praxis shock can be addressed at two main points in a teacher's career – through appropriate and effective pre-service teacher education, and appropriate and effective induction and mentoring support in the first few years of teaching (Ballantyne, 2007b). It has been suggested that this pre- and in-service support needs to be proactive (from the providers), but responsive to the needs of the teachers as they develop and change. Central to effective pre-service and in-service provision is the development in teachers, over time, of a productive and realistic professional identity. A productive teacher identity should align well with the nature of teachers' work and their perceptions of themselves, be flexible and allow for teacher agency (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Sachs, 2005).

Online Community of Practice

It is not just research which points us towards the need for action in this area - early-career music teachers are already actively seeking support in their first few years of teaching. This was clearly seen when, in a previous project, an overwhelming number of teachers and members of the public (more than 2000 in total) voluntarily joined the online Community of Practice (CoP) that was developed (initially to support *pre-service* teachers). Most of the early-career music teachers who joined were searching for ideas and support as they developed their practice (Ballantyne, Harrison, Barrett and Temmerman, 2009), and at the same time, their professional identity. It seemed from their online discussions that they felt that an online CoP was a very effective medium for support in their early years.

The current project has been established to investigate how music teachers' professional

identities develop, and the ways that this may impact on their successes as early-career teachers. At the same time it reflexively provides participating teachers with the support that they require, as they require it. By utilising an online CoP model (Barrett, Ballantyne, Harrison & Temmerman, 2009; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), it aims to address praxis shock at both the theoretical and practical level, by better understanding *how* teachers develop their professional identities, and how teacher identity (Beijaard, et al, 2004; Hallam, 2006), impacts on the success or otherwise of early-career music teachers (Ballantyne, Kerchner and Arostogui, 2012).

Method

The Music Teachers Project website is a forum based online CoP. Recruitment of members at the initial stages focused on first-year, Australian music teachers. Such was the reaction to the site and the potential for professional development, that many experienced teachers also joined, and membership has begun to spread internationally. Through members' discussions, the site aims to capture the developing identities of the participants, whilst providing a means to cater to their immediate, contextual concerns and needs. The site allows for text-based and video-based posting, , with the aim of allowing members to express themselves more easily and clearly.

Purpose and Design of Workshop

. This workshop is aimed at academics and teachers who are interested in the development and construction of music teachers' professional identities and the impact of this upon their success

as teachers. A further aim is to provide insight into the CoP method as a device for capturing real-time development, mentoring and feedback to educators that may assist in the delivery of pre-service and in-service guidance for new teachers.

Following an introduction to the project as a whole, the presenter will assist participants to sign up to the website and use its features. They may post threads of their own, respond to threads posted by other users, or examine the themes that have emerged in the various topics posted to date. This will allow them to establish for themselves how the project works, its relevance to their own context, and implications for future implementations. Time for discussion of these issues will be allocated at the end of the workshop

Relevance of the Workshop

This workshop will be of interest to participants because:

- They shall gain a better understanding of music teachers' developing identities by interacting directly with early-career music teachers. This will in turn potentially inform the field of pre-service teacher education and in-service education in their individual contexts.
- By better understanding the developing identities of music teachers, it will also be possible to assist pre- and in-service music teachers to improve their practice, and survive and thrive in the profession (rather than burning out early on). This will additionally have the benefit of providing a strong workforce, by teachers who have productive teacher

identities.

- The user-friendly online aspect of this project builds on the adjunct findings of a recent ALTC project (Ballantyne, Barrett, Temmerman, Harrison & Meissner, 2009), which found that early-career music teachers are desperately seeking online supportive communities with which to connect, in their first few years of teaching. This may be something that participants might like to try in their own contexts.
- This project takes into account the specific needs of early-career music teachers. These needs are built into the design of the project, and the resultant CoP greatly informs the ongoing development of the study in order to benefit participants. In particular, the use of real-time online data collection ensures the sustainability and growth of the project, and allows all early-career music teachers (regardless of geographical location) to take part in the CoP and the project as a whole.

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