

Preservice Mathematics Teachers on Professional Practice: How can the Internet Help?

Tony Herrington
Edith Cowan University
<a.herrington@ecu.edu.au>

Jan Herrington
Edith Cowan University
<j.herrington@ecu.edu.au>

Arshad Omari
Edith Cowan University
<a.omari@ecu.edu.au>

This paper describes the development of a web-based resource designed to support preservice mathematics teachers on school practice. The development of the site resulted in part from a needs analysis conducted with a focus group of students and reported on below. As a result of focus group discussions with students from the target group, the website was developed and refined to provide a comprehensive resource to suit their needs while on professional practice. Elements of the site, together with potential further developments and research, are described.

Introduction

Despite Strommen and Lincoln's (1992) claim that: "The technological changes that have swept through society at large have left the educational system largely unchanged" (para no. 3), almost a decade on, technology has made significant, and one might argue, sustained inroads into higher education. The use of multimedia and the internet have provided educators with powerful tools to create effective and immersive learning environments (Wilson, 1996; Jonassen & Reeves, 1996; Jonassen, 1995). Such technology-based learning environments (for example, Herrington, Sparrow, Herrington, & Oliver, 1997; Mousley, Sullivan, & Mousley, 1996) have been particularly productive in providing pre-service teachers with authentic and realistic contexts within which to explore problems and issues that face teachers today, *before* they move to real classrooms.

The use of a range of technologies in the preservice teachers' learning environment has meant that they have become adept at accessing appropriate technology, and are able to use electronic resources and the internet effectively as an information source. However, the tendency has been to neglect these powerful resources to support preservice teachers once they leave the confines of university and move to schools for professional practice.

The Web as a Support Tool for Preservice Teachers on Practicum

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of a web-based resource designed to support preservice mathematics teachers on school practice. The idea to develop such a resource arose from a number of concerns of mathematics teacher educators at (deleted) University. As with many teacher education programs, cost reductions have led to a cut back in university staff preventing many preservice teachers from direct involvement with university supervisors on their school practicum. Students are receiving less specialist supervision than in the past to the extent that on block practices, more than one third have a university supervisor outside their chosen specialism. In many cases, school visits have been replaced with phone calls, with the handing over of responsibilities to school staff. Other problems with the professional practice system have been identified in the literature: the disparity between the theory students learn at university and the practical realities of the

classroom (Goodlad, 1991); the removal of students' "web of support" while on practice (Roddy, 1999); supervising teachers' inability to relate practical teaching episodes to general pedagogical principles (Kennedy, 1991); the concern that students exposure to a small number of supervising teachers limits the value of the experience (Richardson-Koehler, 1988); and the practical focus on *how* to teach at the expense of having to make decisions about *why* and *what* to teach (Zeichner, 1981).

Many students also find themselves in schools with limited resources for lesson planning, particularly the type that reflect the teaching approaches developed in methods courses, such as concept development through problem solving, and investigations.

With these concerns in mind, and a recognition that the internet could be employed productively for such a purpose (Casey, 1994; Hutchinson & Gardner, 1997), a Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development Grant (CUTSD) was applied for and awarded to develop a web site that would provide:

- Open communications channels, to discuss problems, with peers and lecturing staff;
- A database of prepared lesson plans accessible through a simple search engine;
- Links to other web-based resource materials for use in lessons;
- Video clips of teaching strategies with teacher and student commentary; and
- Answers to frequently asked questions by students on school practice.

Assessing the Need

To establish the effectiveness of the resource, focus group interviews were conducted with eight students, studying mathematics education method, to determine their perceived needs on school practice and their views on how a web resource could assist. These students were required to attend 18 weeks of school practice during their teacher training, varying from continuous blocks of time in a school to distributed practice.

Focus group techniques were used to elicit opinion from the students. The interaction between the students proved to provide data on issues and problems, which were of greater richness and depth than might have been collected by individual interviews. As Morgan (1988) notes one of the strengths of focus group methodology is the intentional and explicit use of the group interaction: "to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (p. 12).

The purpose of the focus group discussion was to gain from the students their ideas about the type of support that would be most helpful to them as they prepare to teach mathematics lessons, and involve themselves in school life generally. In particular, we wanted to know the types of problems they have, and how the university might be able to assist in these sometimes prolonged periods in school where the students are without their traditional support structures. In the focus-group discussion, students were asked questions related to two principal areas:

1. What are some of the difficulties you face on professional practice? (*Prompt questions:* Can you tell us about some of your professional practice experiences? Have you had any difficulties relating to lesson planning? Teaching the students? Dealing with supervising teachers? Resources? Did you have difficulty contacting lecturers? Have you found educational theory useful to your practice?)
2. Do you have any suggestions on how the university might be able to assist you to overcome these difficulties? (*Prompt questions:* What kind of resources could the university produce that would help you, e.g., booklets, videos etc? How useful would

a web-site devoted to teachers on professional practice in mathematics be? If you were to use such a web-site in your professional practice in school, what would you want it to provide? Content? Communication? Resources?)

The focus group discussion was audio taped and transcribed for analysis. Transcripts were analysed using techniques of qualitative analysis recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Student comments were grouped to reflect common themes. From these themes and comments, specific recommendations were formulated by the researchers on the type of web-based resource that would best meet the needs of students on professional practice. Table 1 provides a summary of responses for the first area of investigation, together with suggested solutions and their possible manifestation within an online resource.

Table 1

Summary of Difficulties Encountered on Professional Practice with Possible Solutions

<i>Area of investigation: Difficulties and problems encountered on professional practice</i>			
Problem	Example student explanation of problem	Possible solution	Possible manifestation in online resource
Problems with mathematical understanding	'Getting across to the kids, how to do things basically, fractions and things like that. Actually explaining to them.... the things I don't understand myself, it's hard to get across'.	Web-based resources that develop mathematical understanding	Links to appropriate websites
Disparity between the way students are encouraged to teach mathematics and the way they learnt mathematics	'I find the hardest thing is that, we were taught a certain way at school, and now we are being taught not to teach how we learnt it'.	Exposure to different teaching approaches	Video clips of teachers using a variety of approaches
Disparity between the way students are encouraged to teach mathematics and the way mathematics is taught in school	'Like not doing multiplication—tables wise—or not doing carrying and that sort of thing. I find it hard because they are still doing it that way in schools, but we are told we should steer away from that. It's really hard to know where to go'.	Exposure to different teaching approaches	Video clips of teachers using a variety of approaches
Lack of resources	'We have to plan the night before. Sometimes they give it to you a couple of nights before, and you have to find resources. You don't have enough time to run about here and there to find these resources'.	Provide resources for mathematics teaching	Lesson plans URLs of appropriate sites
Lack of ideas for lesson plans	'Trying to create some ideas to relate it to what you are trying to teach the children to do, and how to do it. We are told one example, like how to do a shop but not how to set it up and how to make it work'.	Provide students with a range of lesson plans related to strands and year levels	Lesson plans classified according to content, process and year level
Lack of practical strategies for dealing with large classes	'We are told ideas but not really how to go about them, like in a class of 30, you know its such a huge class'.	Access to broader educational issues such as class management	Links to other general educational websites

The student teachers gave several ideas on the type of support the university might provide to make their practice more enriching and productive. These are listed in Table 2, together with the researchers' view of solutions and manifestation in a web-based resource.

Table 2

Summary of Suggestions on how the University might Assist in Overcoming Difficulties

Area of investigation: <i>How the university might be able to assist in overcoming difficulties</i>			
Suggestions for university assistance	Example student explanation	Possible solution	Possible manifestation in online resource
Practical exemplars	'I would like to be able to see a lot more in practice, like videos in schools, seeing demonstrations of these things, because it's easy enough to read in a book, but to actually see it puts a whole different perspective on things'.	Practical demonstrations of teaching strategies suitable for a variety of class levels	Video clips of teachers in real classrooms using teaching strategies
Resources for lesson ideas	'Have a Resource Centre, may be on the internet to give you some ideas'	Ready access to resources	Lesson plans with downloadable lessons resources Links to lesson plan websites
Support via telephone	'It would be nice to be able to speak to someone instead of an answering machine.'	Ready access to lecturer and other students for mutual support	Email access to lecturer Discussion board with other students
Australian web-based resources	'It would be good to have something Australian ... not dimes and nickels'.	Web-site with variety of cultures represented	Links to sites reflecting cultural and ethnic diversity
Easily accessible lesson support	'When you're on prac, you're just so busy you don't have time to go searching'.	Centrally located resources for just-in-time support	Fully searchable site covering a variety of resources

Generally, the student teachers were enthusiastic about having a variety of lesson planning ideas readily accessible, but they made it clear that they required much more substantial support. While just-in-time support was clearly important, particularly when students had little notice that they were required to give a lesson, more resources on learning mathematics and mathematical pedagogy, that could be accessed in a reflective way, were also required.

The feedback received from the students enabled the basic website to be developed with a more specific focus which would directly address the concerns and suggestions of the target group. The design of the Mathematics Education On the Web (MEOW) site is described in more detail below.

Design of the MEOW Website

The interface of the site resembles a typical (if well-equipped) teacher preparation workspace. It features a desk and other items that act as metaphors for the resources that can be accessed from the site. Figure 1 shows the central interface which acts as a main menu, and it is here that the students choose the type of resource or support they require.

The design of the MEOW website utilises databases to simplify management and provide a flexible, yet efficient means of displaying and representing the content. The database driven approach has been used for a range of reasons:

- management and display of media is separated and hence more easily controlled
- simplifying the design process by requiring fewer HTML source files
- simplifying the maintenance and extension of the website by not requiring any editing of display information, only content;
- cross referencing of lesson plan and teaching/assessment content for flexible navigation and discovery of information.
- future extensibility by the addition of note taking and “shopping cart” of useful MEOW links.

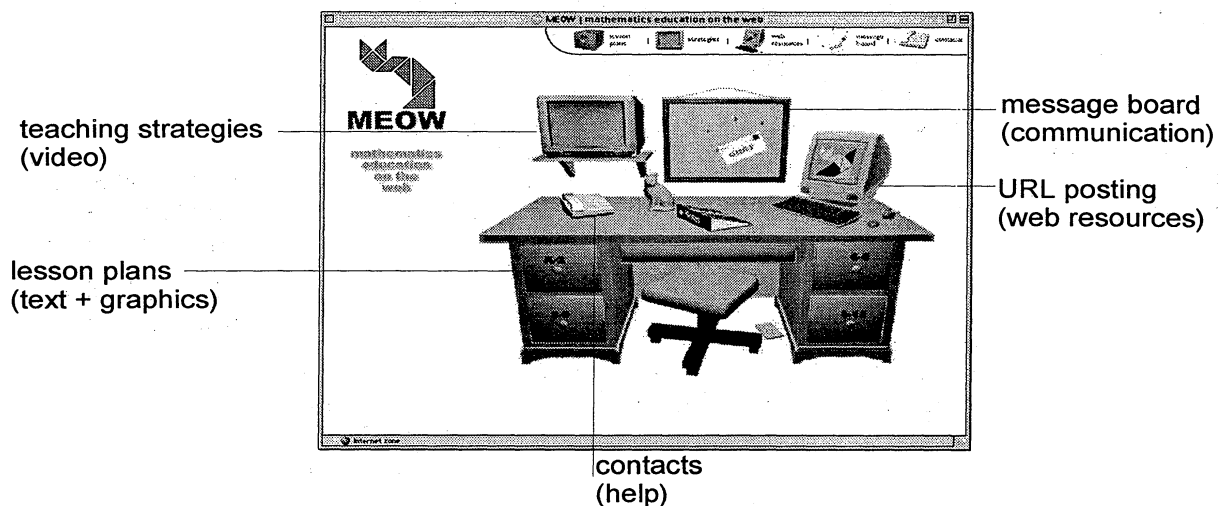


Figure 1. The main MEOW interface.

A student on professional practice can access the following elements:

Contacts: “It would be nice to be able to speak to someone”

Regardless of where the students complete their professional practice, students can have email access to their lecturer via the phone metaphor on the desk on the interface. Clicking on this image gives students access to the lecturer’s phone number (with available times), together with a direct email link.

Message Board: “I find it hard sometimes going into prac”

Clicking on the message board gives students access to a threaded discussion board, where messages and all related postings are grouped so that students can follow discussions in logical sequence. If students have problems, they can post messages to the discussion board, where other students and the lecturer can make suggestions and provide support. In such a way, contact with traditional support groups can be re-established.

URL Posting: “You’re just so busy you don’t have time to go searching”

When students click on the computer on the desk, they have access to a range of relevant websites beyond the MEOW site. Students can access any of these sites by simply clicking on the link. They can also add any interesting sites themselves, together with a short annotation describing its value to other preservice teachers.

Teaching Strategies: "I would like to be able to see a lot more in practice"

Students wishing to access examples of classroom strategies can presently observe video clips of teachers in real classrooms demonstrating teaching and assessment strategies appropriate to mathematics classrooms. These strategies use a database to record a text description of each strategy, its type (assessment or teaching), and details about the video sequences available (Figure 2). Each screen is created dynamically from the teaching strategies database. Students can observe teachers demonstrating a particular strategy, check teachers' and students' perspectives on that strategy and read descriptions, enabling them to explore different classroom strategies reflectively.

Selection of teaching and/or assessment strategies

Viewing selected scenario

The teacher perspective

The student perspective

Figure 2. Teaching strategies in MEOW.

Lesson Plans: "We have to plan the night before"

A student on professional practice, when faced with little notice to prepare a lesson can access a variety of mathematical lesson plans from the drawers of the desk on the interface. The lesson plans database enables students to choose according to a number of different parameters, giving them lesson plans which precisely meet their needs. Lesson plans are categorised according to a number of keys: the *year level* (k-2, 3-5, 6-8 and 9-12), *content categories* (e.g., space, number, measurement) and the *processes* being used (e.g., classifying, visualising). These keys are not only used so that teachers can find plans relevant to their specific requirements, but are used to provide cross references between common content and

processes. For example, in the Dacey boxes lesson (see Figure 3) the content area is *space* and the processes are *classification*, *prediction* and *visualisation*. A teacher interested in finding other exercises in *classification* can select from a menu of processes and find other plans that also relate to that category.

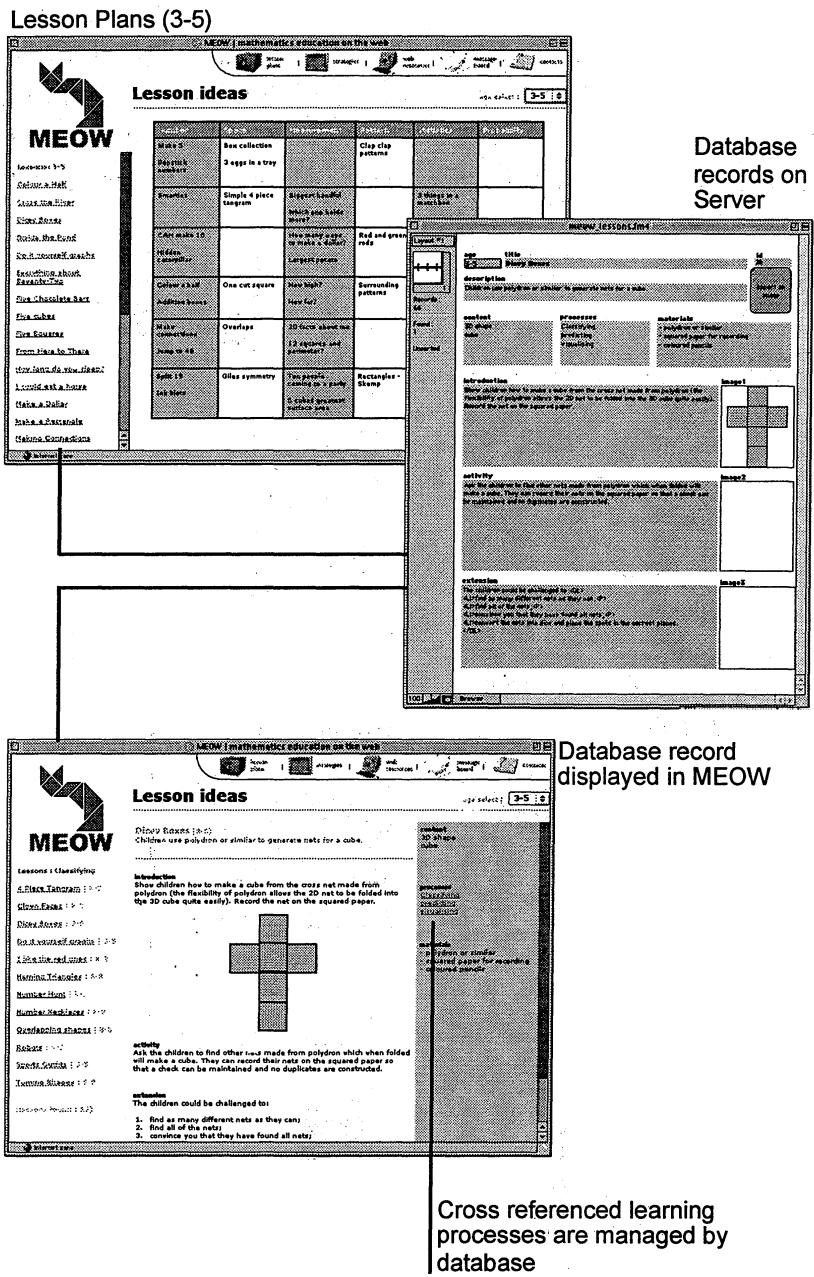


Figure 3. Lesson plans in MEOW.

The use of databases means that the content can be extended by simply adding records in the appropriate database—the display of menus and the cross-referencing of content is then automatically updated with no need to update the underlying display (HTML) code. In this way, the resource grows as a vigorous, comprehensive, and current resource.

Conclusion

A web resource of this nature is both dynamic and adaptable. Student teachers will be encouraged to add lesson plans and links to other web resources. A rich collection of advice should grow in response to students' periodic and prevailing concerns. The potential is there

to extend the functions of the web site and its boundary of support. As a resource developed with Commonwealth funding it is available for use by any University and any mathematics education community that wishes to use its capabilities. However, in building a community of learners, the boundaries need not be national ones. The project team is now working with a team of mathematics educators at the *Institut für Didaktik der Mathematik* at the *Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster* in Germany to extend the capabilities of the site for German student teachers.

While budget cuts will continue to be part of the higher education landscape, the internet can be a useful tool for reducing the isolation and providing preservice teachers on school practice support in both their pedagogical and communication needs. Further research is underway to investigate how students use the resource, and to determine their opinions on ease of use, functionality and development of the site.

Despite recent claims that the internet could be “the ultimate isolating technology that further reduces our participation in communities” (Nie & Erbring, 2000, p. 19), the project described here attempts precisely the opposite. When fully operational, it will provide all the benefits of collaboration, communication and human contact, without the physical constraints imposed by the lonely isolation of teaching practice. In so doing, it will maintain and enhance students’ roles as valued members of a community of scholars, able to learn, plan, create, and consult as they practice mathematics pedagogy in a fully supported environment.

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