IT support for the learning of beginning Teachers in New South Wales, Australia

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New or beginning teachers are well received by the education profession, yet for a large portion of new teachers the assessment of how successful their transition into the first year of teaching tends to be overtly negative. Research reports indicate that the often traumatic and difficult nature of new teachers’ experiences is not a new phenomenon and is a problem shared by many new teachers nationwide and in the western world. Consequently, the retention rate for new teachers is decreasing at an alarming rate and is currently reported that 33% of beginning teachers in New South Wales do not expect to be teaching in public schools within the next 10 years. While literature about how to teach is prolific, yet according to new teachers, managing the real life situation is often more daunting than first envisioned.

This paper reports on the experiences of education graduates of the University of New England teacher in their first year of teaching based on their postings to an on-line support network launched by the University of New England in 2005, entitled the Professional Development Support project. Analysis of the postings revealed that these beginning teachers sought support from the network on a number of specific topics at different times of the school year. This paper presents the findings of this analysis in terms of the categories of their inquiries and the variations in their experiences. The paper provides recommendations for teacher education programmes in response.

Key words: Beginning teacher, teacher retention, teacher training, mentoring, professional development.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of a beginning teacher’s experience in the first years of teaching has implications for the formation of a positive attitude towards teaching as a career. Reports on the quality of beginning teachers’ experiences indicate that most are challenged and recollections of their first year teaching experiences are typically negative. Anecdotal evidence from beginning teachers shows that their first year teaching experiences fail to meet their own expectations of professional practice (Ailwood et al., 2006; Ewing, 2006; Harrington et al. 2006, Maxwell et al., 2005). A lack of support from staff at school, an inability to cope with the workload and the ‘reality shock’ (Veenman, 1984) experience, have been put forward as some of the underpinning tensions contributing to their difficult teaching experiences. The knock-on effect of their trauma is invariably followed by a departure from the profession by some. In fact, NSW Department of Education (DET) figures indicate that 40% of beginning teachers are expected to retire or resign between 2006 and 2011 (Hague, 2007).

In response to the consistency of reports highlighting the poor quality of beginning teacher experiences, an online support network for both primary and secondary teachers was funded by UNE in 2005, entitled the Professional Development Support (PDS) project. This paper reports on the experiences of teacher alumni in their first year of teaching based on their postings outlining their classroom triumphs and tragedies. Analysis of the postings revealed that these beginning teachers sought support from the network in a number of specific topics at different times of the school year. This paper presents the nature and patterns of their postings and

Abbreviations: UNE, University of New England; NSW, New South Wales; DET, Department of Education; PDS, Professional Development Support.
puts forward recommendations for teacher education programmes in response.

**Research background**

Evidence suggests that as a consequence of negative school experiences, some teachers questioned their faith in the education system, their capabilities as educators and intention to stay in the field of education (Appleton, 1998; Bezzina, 2006; Harrington et al., 2006; Herrington and Herrington, 2001; Yarrow et al., 1999). Teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction are linked to unhelpful transitions to the teaching profession (McCormack and Thomas, 2003) and have significant implications for teacher retention. The ripple effect of the poor quality of beginning teachers’ experiences is reflected in the 2007 Australian Education Union survey of beginning teachers in public schools. The survey showed that approximately 33% of beginning teachers in primary and secondary sectors in NSW did not expect to be teaching in public schools within the next ten years. Based on this figure, it is imperative that immediate action is taken to avert a looming teacher crisis in NSW schools. Despite this disturbing figure being reported to the State Government’s Review of Teacher training in NSW, Quality Matters (2000), the response has been inadequate. Limited resources continue to hamper initiatives launched to address this issue e.g. the maintenance and expansion of the Teacher Mentor program introduced in 2003 designed specifically to respond to the needs of beginning teachers in public schools.

The successful transition of new teachers into professional practice particularly in regional and rural Australia, may be further exacerbated due to both geographical and social isolation and a lack of professional support networks. It is widely acknowledged that professional, as distinct from geographical, isolation is a factor contributing to teacher attrition (Dow, 2003a, 2003b; Manual, 2003; Preston, 2002). One of the aims of the PDS project was to respond in the short and long term to the increased concerns of new teachers in the first year of professional practice. Teachers, particularly those new or about to enter the profession, require someone to provide support when questions arise in their minds. Herrington and Herrington (2001) noted the internet can be an effective strategy in addressing this problem for new and inexperienced teachers.

An emerging theme from recent literature is that contextualised or workplace learning, supported by productive mentoring relationships, can enable new teachers to develop professional knowledge that may guide or create transformative (versus conservative) teaching practice (Furlong and Maynard, 1995; NSW DET, 2000a, 2000b). These productive mentoring relationships may depend on:

1. An understanding and appreciation of the values and ideas of others.
2. Collaborative partnerships which can be fostered through discussions, group activities, reflections, writings and conversations.
3. Sustained inquiry and disciplined talk about problems of practice.

The PDS network proved to be a resource for on-going learning in the workplace as most of the beginning teachers, irrespective of whether they had secured employment at a school or was in the process, accessed the network to either share their experiences, seek advice and support, or simply read others’ postings to inform and understand. This paper examines the sorts of topics they wanted to discuss, when in the school year and why it was, they lacked certain knowledge and whether areas of their teacher education training be improved to include certain knowledges?

**DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The conceptual framework adopted by the PDS network was Wenger’s (1999) idea of participation, identity and community. The PDS explicitly connected two distinct groups of participants within a community of teaching practice so that they could learn from each other. The two communities were the 90 (approximate) new teachers who could provide personal and professional support to each other and two UNE academics acting as mentors and overseeing the project for one school year. The PDS project drew on the expertise, experience and needs of each group of participants to create an explicit extended teaching focused’ learning community. Each group learned from the other by aiming to evoke useful learning experiences in a ‘safe’ learning environment yet always with a critical, objective agenda. The PDS project aimed to:

1. Provide efficient support mechanisms that drew upon expertise and authentic learning for UNE teacher education graduates through a work place model.
2. Respond to the increased concerns of attrition of beginning teachers in their first years of practice (Dow, 2003a).
3. Develop, implement and promote support through the use of WebCT.
4. Broaden the base of experience offered by UNE academic mentors to beginning teachers.

Additionally, the project provided UNE teacher education graduates with an important source of ideas, as well as an avenue for reflective practice, problem-solving and practical classroom issues such as how to manage noisy classrooms and effectively manage specific groups of boys and/or girls. The key concepts underpinning the PDS project provided three areas of support to the beginning teachers: academic, social and professional. For example, academic support was conceived as providing models of appropriate student behaviour, learning theory, context and subject knowledges. Professional academic support was provided by academic mentors in the area of Behaviour Management and in the area of Teaching and Learning. Social support was provided by the peer group, especially to those relocated elsewhere, removed from family and friends, for their teaching. In broad terms, the project sought to find out if the PDS model provided as needed support from peers, new teachers and academic facilitators to improve the beginning teachers’ confidence, effectiveness and teaching experiences.
Two academics from the UNE School of Education acted as mentors for the four different forums in the website. The website included forums for:

1. Social interaction (Coffee Lounge);
2. Academic and peer shared resources or links to resources (Contributed Resources);
3. Permanent and Short-term (that is, up to 10-12 weeks or one term) contract teaching (context specific discussions); and,
4. Casual/relief (One up to five days) teaching discussions (context specific discussions).

The project used the UNE’s web-based technologies to deliver support for UNE new teachers by providing access to an on-line forum for sharing professionally based and academically based information (e.g. curriculum/classroom resources and ideas) and interaction. The essence of the project was to support the 93 UNE teacher education graduates through an electronic support service at no cost during their first year of teaching.

Data analysis

Different types of data were collected from the project including,

i) Electronic text from their postings,
ii) Participant tracking statistics collected by the WebCT programme and
iii) Twenty five responses to evaluation survey questions distributed at random to 2006 education graduates.

The Leximancer Version 2.25 Beta (2001) qualitative program was used to assist in the analysis of the electronic text data. The postings were analysed for their thesaurus-based concepts that were subsequently coded into the text. The results were patterns of asymmetric concept co-occurrences located in the texts, which were then applied to generate a series of venn-concept maps. The maps provided a visual illustration of the concepts common to the texts, the frequency of concepts and the themes that underpinned the concepts. The data presented in this manner formed the basis of interpreting the postings relating to the research aims and objectives. The project evaluation was in the form of a number of semi-structured survey questions sent out by e-mail to 25 randomly chosen participants from the alumni teacher cohort.

RESULTS

Approximately 1400 postings were received by the PDS project in the four school terms of 2006 between 30th January and 21st December from the 2005 cohort of 93 teacher graduates at UNE. Approximately 25% of these new teachers were able to share their beginning teaching experiences that promoted reflective practices and authentic work placed learning experiences. Of the 25% participant response, 8% had secured full time employment of which 2% was in the secondary sector and 6% in the primary sector. Closer examination of the 1400 postings revealed differences in the frequency, posting topic and posting time that is, school terms, over the school year. Identification of participants as an early childhood, primary, or secondary teacher was removed based on the experience of earlier projects’ postings that found that whilst pedagogical differences exist in the education system from K-12, the beginning teachers, irrespective of their teaching level, tended to benefit from reading all postings pertaining to a particular subject, such as behaviour management.

Analysis of the PDS postings found that most tended to be the sharing of challenging and negative experiences. Yet, positive experiences and words of encouragement also resonated in the postings. The act of sharing one’s experience provided valuable reflective learning within a supportive, non-judgemental environment and offered encouragement to ‘soldier on’.

“We will all look back on this time at some stage and wonder why we were so fazed! Good luck to everyone and do not forget that we are all in the same boat so be cheered by the thought that you are not alone!”

“May the jobs roll in for all our cohort of teaching graduates! If schools only knew what a talented and enthusiastic bunch of brand spanking new models we are, why the phones would be ringing hot!!!”

“Good luck to all and remember to stay positive! Do not ever give up!!”

Remaining positive and hopeful, dumping negative experiences, sharing emotions and recognising that other beginning teachers may be faced with similar issues appeared helpful for the UNE beginning teachers to make sense of their experiences.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the PDS project found that it was a useful and complementary learning tool for beginning teachers. It is important to note that for a number of teachers employed on a casual basis, it was their only form of support. Participants commented that:

“I am so glad that I had the PDS network to draw from! I had some really tough situations that I simply was not prepared for and I looked forward to going home and seeking advice from others with the same challenge on how to manage it. I know [the PDS project] definitely helped me cope as a new teacher”.

“Thank God for the PDS network! I used it all the time. I did not always use it to post my stuff, but I learned a lot from reading other teachers’ experiences and matching their responses to how I would respond. Sometimes I was able to provide some help and at other times, I had no idea”. The next section briefly examines the frequency and nature of beginning teacher postings from the four forums in the 2006 school year, in an effort to understand the sorts of things beginning teachers asked to know and thought worthwhile to discuss, in their first year as graduate teachers.

Term-by-term topics

Initial analysis of the postings showed that the new teachers accessed the PDS network at varying rates over the 2006 school year as illustrated in Table 1. Of interest was that teachers engaged in both permanent and casual employment not only sought support during the school
Table 1. PDS postings over the 2006 school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006 School year</th>
<th>Contributed Resources</th>
<th>Casual and Relief teaching</th>
<th>Permanent and Contract teaching</th>
<th>Coffee Lounge</th>
<th>Number of postings over the school term</th>
<th>% of postings over the school year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Term 1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 1 Holidays</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 2 Holidays</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 3 Holidays</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total postings</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>1401</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

terms, but continued to access the network during the school holiday periods.

In order, of which of the four school terms had the most posting activity over the school year, irrespective of which forum, Term 1 dominated with 40% of postings, followed by Term 3 with 27%, Term 2 with 16% and Term 4 with 9%. This pattern of posting activity meant that new teachers tended to access the network seeking advice on how to secure casual/on-going employment with the DET, classroom behaviour management strategies and professional and personal support, at the beginning and middle of the school year. One way to fully understand why teachers accessed the PDS network at different times of the year is to explore the motivations for their involvement, that is, what the nature of their postings were during each of the school terms. The next section delves into the content of postings and these results may shed light on the learning needs of some beginning teachers during their first school year.

Casual and relief teaching

The Casual and Relief teaching forum was the most popular site accessed by beginning teachers recording a total of 735 postings, or 52% of the total 2006 postings (1405) over the year. This was not surprising given the uncertainty and demanding nature of their work, feelings of alienation and low status associated with casual teachers and the lack of support and access to professional development, induction and mentoring (Duggleby and Badali, 2007; Lunay and Lock, 2006; McCormack and Thomas, 2005). Once again, postings in first term dominated the forum with 38% of all postings over the year occurring at that time. Terms two and three recorded postings at 22% each, with term four recording a posting activity of only 9%. The three school holiday breaks recorded a 3% posting activity for each period.

The topic postings for the Casual and Relief forums were wide and varied. Despite this, topic themes emerged that assisted in providing an understanding of the sorts of issues beginning teachers were seeking and about which they were sharing knowledge in their first year of teaching. The themes and their frequency over the 2006 school year are presented as Table 2. By far, dominating the Casual and Relief forum were postings seeking and sharing advice on how to secure regular and on-going work at schools. The postings described the frustrations experienced by teachers desperately trying to make ‘in-roads’ to schools with the hope of being offered either blocks (a term or a number of weeks) or simply a few days of work. There were a number of teachers who despite their on-going efforts were unable to secure a single day of casual and/or relief teaching over the whole school year. For those who gained work, there were still dilemmas. Duggleby and Badali’s (2007) interviews with casual teachers gave insights into these predicaments, which included feeling trapped in the mornings and having to be careful not to say ‘no’ to work at any cost. ‘No’ could be punished with little follow up work. The forum served as a site where teachers could vent their frustrations dealing with anomalies and perceived incompetence of the NSW Education Department.

A sustained issue which arose throughout the 2006 school year at this site was the stark contrast between the beginning teacher perceptions of what their career would look like once graduated as a teacher and the actual reality of a teaching professional in the education system. The media and Education Department were criticised heavily for seemingly misleading beginning teacher career expectations by advertising an ‘apparent teacher shortage’ (Hague, 2007), only to find that despite countless attempts to secure a day of relief teaching, for the bulk of beginning teachers, this was not forthcoming. For those teachers who were able to secure some form of casual and/or relief teaching, another topic that attracted much attention concerned the management of classroom behaviour. Once again, this is not unexpected given that classroom management is a prominent issue for casual and permanent beginning teachers alike, especially when the school hierarchy often takes note of a casual when they demonstrate their ability to keep the classroom running smoothly (Duggleby and Badali, 2007). There were numerous re-counts of classroom
experiences characterised by inappropriate student behaviour, a lack of support from the school and an overall sense of despair and hopelessness from the teachers themselves. These experiences fuelled an angry debate about how little the Department was doing to prepare and 'look after' their casual teachers, despite the important role they play in the education of students in schools. Specifically, they referred to the limited, if any, access to professional development days and other forms of on-going training offered to their full-time colleagues.

**Contributed resources**

The contributed resources forum recorded the lowest number of postings (86) out of the four discussion forums over the school year. The purpose of the forum was for teachers to seek out and share teaching resources for use in the classroom. Initial analysis of the site revealed that Term 1 attracted most of the postings, or 56% of the school year, followed by Term 3 with 28% of the years' postings. Terms two and four were even at 6% of the total school postings, with the term one break recording 4%. Table 3 summarises the overall frequency of posting topics over the 2006 school year. Initial analysis found that beginning teachers sought advice about resources that targeted solutions to problem behaviour in the classroom that is, behaviour management. Approximately one-third or 28% of the years' postings related to behaviour management, with 44% and 56% of these occurring in the first and third school terms respectively.

Of the subject topics, postings relating to Drama/Dance, Literacy and Science dominated the forum. Evident in each of the school term periods were postings seeking and sharing Drama/Dance resources, followed by resource ideas relating to classroom activities eg. 'settling down' and 'fast finisher' activities. Analysis of the Contributed Resource postings showed that the beginning teachers of 2006 accessed the forum most in terms one and three respectively, seeking and sharing resource advice primarily on classroom behaviour management and general resources.

**Permanent and contract teaching**

Approximately 8% of the 1400 postings were referred to the Permanent and Contract teaching site. Initial analysis of the postings showed similar posting patterns as found in the other sites: terms one and three dominated the frequency of postings with 31% and 32% of the sites' postings respectively. The term one recess recorded an 11% posting activity to be followed by a 15% activity recorded in term two. The term two and three school holiday periods recorded no activity at all. Term four reported a posting activity of 11%, the highest activity recorded in fourth term of all four posting sites. Table 4 highlights the difficulties experienced by most beginning teachers securing full-time employment. Trying to secure employment dominated the discussion at 40%, dwarfing the positives (1%) and the joy from those that actually secured work (4%). For those who had secured employment, many postings sought assistance and advice on how to manage inappropriate student behaviour experienced in the classroom. The Education Department again got its fair share of criticism, especially concerning the lack of forthcoming job offers as first anticipated and the disappointment and disillusionment that closely followed. This illustrates part of the 'cycle of hope and disappointment' (Duggleby and Badali, 2007) that continues to frustrate teachers who are forced to take on the role of a casual teacher.

These results highlight the difficulties experienced by beginning teachers when trying to secure full-time employment in their first year of teaching. The results reinforced how frustrating and difficult securing work was. The expectation of gaining full-time employment and the

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**Table 2. Casual and relief, % of posting topics over the school year.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posting topic</th>
<th>% of postings over the school year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trying to get work</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour management</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Teacher tips*</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Education Department~</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources for casuals</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Beginning Teacher tips included how to stay confident and motivated, preparation of learning materials, presentation of self and time management. ~The Education Department included postings about pay rates, geographical locations, the 'apparent' teacher shortage, c.v preparation and accreditation.
Table 3. Contributed resources, % of posting topics over the school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posting topic</th>
<th>% of postings over the school year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour management</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General resources*</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama/Dance</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easter resources</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Society and its Environment (HSIE)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General resources postings referred to time management skills, classroom settling down activities and fast finisher activities.

Table 4. Permanent and Contract, % of posting topics over the school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posting topic</th>
<th>% of postings over the school year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trying to get work</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Education Department~</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Teacher tips*</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got work</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positives</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Beginning Teacher tips included how to stay confident and motivated.

~The Education Department included attacks on the DETs computerised matching of people to jobs.

Coffee lounge

The coffee lounge forum captured approximately one third (33%) of all postings received in the PDS site for 2006. Again, terms one and three dominated the forum recording 42 and 34% of postings for the school year, with terms two and four recording comparatively minimal postings at 7 and 9% respectively. The three school recess periods showed nominal postings of 3, 0.2 and 5% correspondingly. Table 5 below details the percentage of posting topics over the school year.

The purpose of the coffee lounge was to provide the beginning teachers with a 'space' in which to maintain social contact with each other and in these terms, the forum worked well with approximately one third of all postings falling under the social agenda. This underpins the importance of being able to de-brief, share and confess difficulties and get involved in a critical reflective practice at a collaborative level in a safe and supportive environment, one that may escape a number of beginning teachers in their workplace. This also proves consistent with the findings of McCormack et al. (2006), who identified the greater value beginning teachers assigned to the informal nature of unplanned collaborative learning, which they gained from university peers and their teaching colleagues, when compared to more traditional forms of mentoring. Present in this forum and overlapping with other forums, were topics associated with the difficulties linked with securing full-time or casual work (21%) and classroom behaviour problems (20%) either related to inexperience, youth, or position that is, casual and or relief teaching.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the PDS data for the 2006 school year showed beginning teachers who accessed the network sought assistance, advice and support throughout the year. Patterns emerged of popular discussion topics and in which term the beginning teachers most accessed the PDS network: specifically, terms one, three, two then four respectively. Those teachers who had successfully secured some form of employment be it permanent or casual and for those who were still in the process of
securing work, both categories found the PDS network of use. Of the four forums, the most number of postings was recorded on the Casual and Relief site. A possible explanation for this is the lack of support provided by the DET and the schools to their casual teachers.

The two topics that dominated the four forums were those concerning employment and the management of classroom behaviour. Most beginning teachers that accessed the network were those that had not been offered full time employment and were trying to gain casual or relief work. They accessed the PDS site to share the on-going difficulties and mounting frustrations they encountered. By contrast, only a small number of teachers that identified being in full time employment discussed their experiences. It is no coincidence that the answers to topics most sought after were those concerning behaviour management.

Most beginning teachers who were offered work found it was on a casual/relief basis, so not only were they grappling with the reality of teaching for the first time, but also the inherent difficulties associated with casual teaching. The unpredictable and transient nature of casual teaching meant that teachers were usually unable to build positive relationships and rapport with students due to the brief period of time they spent with them. Popular postings from casual teachers related to not being taken seriously by fellow teachers and students, instructions being ignored by students, a range of overt and covert behaviour issues, noise management and managing groups of student behaviour especially boys. Another widespread complaint concerned the lack of support casual teachers experienced from other teachers, the Deputy Principal and Principal, especially in relation to following through with individual student disciplinary actions.

The NSW Department of Education and Training was a regular topic in the forums. Teacher postings demanded clarification of certain DET requirements eg. accreditation and report writing and an explanation as to why, despite the wide-spread publicity of ‘shortage’, so many continued to experience on-going unemployment. The difficulties associated with securing work was of particular interest to those mature-aged students with families who had specifically gone back to study in response to the publicised looming teacher shortage of the future, completed their training, only to find in reality, schools were weighted down with choice of teachers. Frustrations soared when teachers felt they were in the middle of a bureaucratic catch-22 e.g. a school would offer them work but they could not accept the position as the DET had not issued their casual teaching number, or being offered a full-time job that was a three hour drive each way from their home. Other examples of frustration included beginning teachers working on a casual basis trying to fulfil the DET accreditation requirements, but finding that due to the casual nature of their employment, no full time teacher willing to mentor them. Teachers that were fortunate to secure blocks of work also felt frustrated as they were excluded from school-based professional development days due to their casual employment status. Lunay and Lock (2006) speak of the issue of inadequate access to professional development as creating a ‘double financial burden’ for casuals. Ultimately, the only way for them to be involved in professional development training is to finance it themselves whilst simultaneously forgoing paid employment.

As mentioned earlier, there were a number of teachers that were not offered any work by the DET over the 2006 school year, despite their on-going active efforts. Rumours of waiting lists of up to three years in certain regions of NSW (typically coastal) also did little to keep people enthused. Staying motivated and avoiding disappointment were popular topics discussed by the beginning teachers. Topics about moving house and family to teach interstate and overseas surfaced, as no local work opportunities seemed likely in the short-term. Seeking advice of ‘what do I do now?’ and considering career change options soon followed. The DET needs to recognise and respond to the needs of beginning teachers if they hope to address the decrease in retention of teachers to the profession. Feelings of uncertainty, alienation and a lack of support will do little to inspire perseverance in a casual workforce past a certain point of time (Duggleby and Baddali, 2007; Lunay and Lock, 2006; McCormack and Thomas, 2005).

Teacher educators can learn much from the experiences of the 2006 beginning teachers involved in the

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Table 5. Coffee lounge, % of posting topics over the school year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posting topic</th>
<th>% of postings over the school year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello and introduction</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to get work</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Education Department~</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Teacher tips*</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got work</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Beginning Teacher tips included how to best present yourself to get work.
~The Education Department included negatives about DET incompetence.
PDS network. The reality for the 2005 UNE education alumni appeared to be that most of them began their teaching careers as casual beginning teachers and history and literature shows us that the learning needs of casual teachers are quite different to their full-time counterparts (Dendwick, 1993; Duggleby and Badali, 2007). Empowering students in their final year of study with 'survival' skills and strategies to manage the casual teacher classroom may address some of their immediate concerns and improve the quality of their teaching experiences. Making explicit the experiences of beginning teachers to student teachers prior to them joining the profession, may alert them to the realities of teaching that is, the difficulties and problems often experienced in their first year of teaching. In doing so, they may be able to stave off personal disappointment and disillusionment when they realize that the reality of teaching is for most, far removed from their understanding of what their teaching career may look like. The DET could provide more accurate and regular up-dates of the likelihood of gaining employment in what subject areas, year levels and in which regions of NSW, to assist beginning teachers to plan their employment soon after graduating. Certain UNE academics have taken 'on-board' the experiences of the beginning teachers as a learning opportunity to evaluate and re-visit current education offerings in certain units such as behaviour management, to include knowledge gaps identified via the postings.

CONCLUSION

The PDS network allowed beginning teachers to interact and share 'real life' experiences cooperatively online in order to find constructive ways to deal with a range of issues. It was evident that the UNE teacher education graduates of 2005, based on their 2006 postings as professional casual and/or permanent teachers, sought certain knowledge, advice and strategies as the school year progressed. The project addressed ‘survival’ and ‘reality’ concerns of new teachers and provided access to expertise through feedback on postings.

Academic peers and executives of the NSW DET (Gorman, 2006; White, 2006) have since recognized the PDS project for its significant contribution to on-going teacher education. The effectiveness of the PDS project is due to the recognition that learning is primarily about entry into a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1999), in the case of the PDS project, an educational community of practice. This social perspective on learning recognises that beginning teachers continue to form identities, knowledges and skills as newcomers into this ‘community of teaching practice’ which is already implicitly present in our classrooms – real or virtual. However, making this connection explicitly through the PDS enabled UNE academics to provide a powerful, multidisciplinary range of perspectives and support to new teachers likely to experience considerable transition difficulties in schools.

Working collaboratively with beginning teachers, teacher educators and the DET in the short-term, may address some of the frustrations experienced in their first year of practice and in the long-term, retain their services as a professional in the field of education.

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