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Coaching and Mentoring on the Internet Highway

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by Kathleen Roney and MaryAnn Davies

The mission is not just to prepare teachers for the mechanics of their occupation . . . but to develop in them the intellectual habits of reflection on their calling and daily work that are the mark of a professional continuously engaged in self improvement. (Goodlad 1990, 38)

Educational experts identify several program factors that support professional development: standards-based outcomes, collaborative and collegial interactions, and ongoing opportunities for discussion, reflection, and follow-up (Mertens and Flowers 2004; Kent 2004). Addressing each of these factors poses several challenges. How do educators efficiently provide standards-based feedback and maintain records of each student's progress? Given limited resources, how do educators create structures that provide for ongoing interactive dialogue between faculty and students? What is the value of an archiving system that allows teacher education candidates to monitor and reflect upon their development over time?

The teacher training programs at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW), which are charged with fostering a commitment to professional growth, use a Web-based tool, TaskStream, to address these challenges. In this paper we report on our use of TaskStream to develop in teacher candidates the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions for ongoing professional development. Providing examples from the internship/student teaching semester, we discuss using TaskStream to support professional development both during the coaching cycle and in the development of e-portfolios. In particular, examples of the tool's use during pre-observation conferencing illustrate its potential to guide and deepen reflection, promote awareness of standards, provide retrievable samples of a candidate's work, and map the connection between that work and a candidate's thinking.

The Standards Movement and Technological Proficiencies

Teacher education faces an era of standards-based accountability. Making teacher education candidates aware of educational standards and their developmental nature, and in turn guiding candidates in the process of reflective, evidence-based self-assessment, contribute to professional growth (Davies and Willis 2002). At UNCW our school aligns its eleven standards with those articulated by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) (Table 1). This practice guides pre-service candidates in recognizing the link between their preparation and the demands of the profession. However, using standards to guide and measure teacher candidate growth and program improvement requires balancing limited resources, including time, energy, and funds. We found that a Web-based tool can assist in managing and monitoring the data.

In turn, our adoption of such a tool was motivated by other factors as well. Commenting on how teachers are taught, the American Council on Education (1999) notes that "technology will fail to meet its educational promise if we neglect to equip teachers with the skills they need to understand and use it . . . . teachers must understand, be able to use, and be prepared to teach with and about the new technologies . . . . veteran teachers and prospective teachers need sophisticated, intensive exposure to the uses and misuses of technology" (22). In helping our teacher interns acquire and refine these skills, we decided to adopt an online tool that would require them to develop technological competencies for lesson design and porftolio development.

The Development and Adoption of TaskStream

In deciding which Web-based tool to use during the internship/student teaching semester, the university turned to an organization that was new in educational technology and willing to work with us. The tool needed to help supervisors, faculty, and candidates perform two basic functions: monitoring teacher education candidates' progress toward standards and providing a vehicle for self-reflection. More specifically, a number of key tasks were defined for the design of such a tool:

- developing lessons that integrate technology, standards, rubrics, and reflection;
- submitting lessons for review and feedback;
- sharing lessons and resources with others;
- communicating with faculty and peers through the e-mail system;
- creating electronic portfolios to demonstrate fulfillment of program standards;
- integrating Cybrary (Internet library of resources) resources in lessons; and
- rating interns on program standards.

The TaskStream system was created with a range of functions, features, and applications to address these needs, as can be seen in the design of the main page that candidates see upon entry into the system (Exhibit 1). By providing its users with a comprehensive tool for developing, sharing, and evaluating lesson materials aligned with program standards, as well as engaging sustained self-reflection and professional mentoring to ensure focused professional growth, the system successfully fulfilled the preliminary criteria we had established for its design.

Application of TaskStream began with teacher interns in fall 2004. Our intern class typically represents all four programs in teacher education in the Department of Curricular Studies, as well as licensure-only students in these areas (Table 2). We place teacher interns at public schools in the ten school districts comprising the college's Professional Development System (Figure 1); this means that our teacher interns are widely dispersed geographically during their intern semester. This dispersion, which requires more time and funding for travel, poses particular challenges for the supervision of teacher interns. The adoption of a Web-based tool addresses these challenges by enabling university supervisors to review intern work and communicate with their interns electronically. Although TaskStream does not replace direct supervisor observations, it opens a vital channel of communication during and between observation cycles.

The Development of Reflective Practice: The Coaching Cyle and Professional Porfolios

Reflective practice has become a fundamental component of teacher education programs. Daniels (2002) reports in her study of K-9th grade teachers, "Once the teachers confronted their espoused theories through dialogue journals with their professors, professional readings, and interactive dialogue with their colleagues, they began to change their practice to align their actions with their visions for teaching" (¶ 8). These practices are designed to encourage professionals to examine personal assumptions and values, attend to the institutional and cultural context of teaching, examine and attempt to solve classroom dilemmas, and take responsibility for their personal professional development. Teacher preparation programs continue to seek ways to provide candidates with ongoing opportunities for reflection. In accord with Daniels's suggestions, we use the coaching cycle—consisting of a pre-observation conference, observation of a lesson, and a post-observation conference—to develop reflective practice among our student teachers. In our experience, questioning, collaborative dialogue, examination of work samples, and time to ponder during the coaching cycle all nurture the development of reflective practice. For similar reasons, we also require our interns to create professional portfolios that document how they have designed teaching strategies to fulfill educational standards in their work. In both cases, the design of TaskStream provides a valuable tool for supporting these tasks.

Pre-Observation Conference

Previously, pre-observation conferences were held in the few minutes immediately before the university supervisor observed a lesson. Since the candidate's attention was focused on the delivery of the already planned lesson, supervisor feedback at this point had minimal impact on the observed lesson. TaskStream provides a way to address this concern by allowing the intern to request feedback before the observation.

The instructional design applications within this tool include a lesson template; a utility for importing institutional, state, and national standards aligned with the lesson (Exhibit 2); an upload tool to include slides and other material to be used during the lesson; and an online submission process to allow the lesson to be reviewed by the supervisor (Exhibit 3). Upon completing the lesson design, the teacher intern requests feedback from the university supervisor and possibly from other interns as well (Exhibit 4).

Subsequently the university supervisor provides feedback to the intern, which results in further dialogue regarding the effectiveness of the lesson design (Exhibit 5). First, the university supervisor clarifies technical aspects (when and where the lesson will be taught) and poses questions that require reflective practice (what the intern's professional goal is for this week of the internship and how this goal might be met in the lesson design). The supervisor also offers positive feedback, boosting the intern's confidence as he or she anticipates teaching the lesson for the first time. With the feedback provided well before the observation, the intern has the opportunity to reflect upon it and make changes to the lesson prior to the observation. This increases the likelihood of a lesson's effectiveness, allows for interactive dialogue, and provides time for the teacher intern to use the feedback to reinforce and expand upon his or her understanding.

Post Observation

The pre-observation online communication tool provides opportunities for ongoing dialogue that guides reflection, facilitates organization of the novice's knowledge, and supports modifying instruction in order to better meet teacher intern's needs. In like manner, the lesson is not over, nor the dialogue complete, until the intern has completed the final section of the template—Reflective Information (Exhibit 6). This section is completed after the teacher intern has taught the lesson; the section requires commentary on how the intern's teaching strategies may be improved, modified, or expanded in light of the overall quality of the lesson (Exhibit 7). In response, the university supervisor then offers further feedback to the intern's reflections based on his or her own observations.

Professional Portfolio

Our teacher education program uses the electronic portfolio as a tool for monitoring candidates' progress toward mastering program standards. The portfolio is introduced in the foundation courses that candidates take prior to admission to the program. From these initial courses through program completion, the candidate builds a product that provides evidence of proficiency in each of the standards.

The purpose of the portfolio is to enrich and complement the field experience of teacher interns. As they gather evidence, teacher interns reflect upon their classroom experiences, analyze the significance of those experiences, and link theoretical knowledge to the practical realities of the classroom. The end result is a document that illustrates the candidate's progress and maps out the candidate's professional development plan for continued growth. A periodic review of the portfolio by the university supervisor and partnership teacher at mid-term and final is a major factor in the internship grade.

Collected artifacts vary based upon individual experiences, but in any given case reflections by teacher interns accompany each standard. For example, Standard 7.0 of the UNCW teacher education program requires that teachers adopt diverse methods of instruction and provide a range of learning interactions in their course design (Exhibit 8). As candidates select materials for their portfolios, they must reflect carefully on how the evidence they provide reflects their proficiency in the standard. As was the case in lesson planning, the university supervisor is given an opportunity to comment upon the intern's presentation of and reflection upon each standard (Exhibit 9). The electronic aspect of the portfolio facilitates periodic revision of

reflections and work samples, thus aiding the teacher education candidate in monitoring growth over time. This reinforces the dynamic, developmental nature of professional growth.

Reactions to TaskStream

After three and a half years of using TaskStream during the internship semester, feedback from teacher interns and university supervisors provides insight into its benefits and limitations.

Perceptions: Students

As part of the annual program evaluation, interns offer feedback regarding the benefits of the Web-based tool during their internship semester (Exhibit 10). A look at spring 2006 data (n = 155) indicates that students use the tools in a variety of ways: to develop their portfolios (98%), write lesson plans (97%), communicate with their university supervisors (94%) and other teacher interns (85%), and access the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (85%). While 75% of the students indicated that using the tool was "easy," qualitative data helps paint a clearer picture.

Pros

Responses on the survey affirmed two primary uses of this tool: communication and organization. Student responses elaborated on the usefulness of the tool in these contexts:

- Communication
  - "I liked using it because it lets you easily communicate and share lesson plans in a standardized format. Since all interns and supervisors are required to use it, there was never a problem with miscommunication or unread messages."
  - "I liked being able to receive quick feedback from my supervisor."
- Organizational Tool
  - "It was easy to keep track of all the numerous requirements of being an intern; I think it is wonderful!"
  - "At first I didn't like it, but it is a great resource to keep things organized . . . . the templates for rubrics are very easy. It covers the NETS-T standards."

Cons

At the same time, there were responses that indicated less positive reactions to TaskStream. These fell into two categories, doubts about its usefulness and difficulties with connectivity.

- Usefulness
  - "My supervisor never left any feedback."
  - ". . . will not be used once in a school and teaching full time."
- Connectivity
  - "The download time it takes to put a document into the folio or lesson plan is really slow."
  - "If there is a problem with the Internet, then there is no way to use it."

Perceptions: University Supervisors

Some university supervisors are employed on a part-time basis. Full-time, tenure-track professors are also asked to rotate out into the field every third semester to supervise interns. Although students are readily using the tool, faculty members (full-time professors and part-time instructors of methods courses) vary in the degree to which they have integrated TaskStream into their classes. The university already uses a Web-based tool for faculty to deliver and enhance their courses online (WebCT); adding yet another Web-based tool thus becomes cumbersome for many faculty members. During the normal course of a semester's work, many School of Education faculty members choose one or the other. Those who have

worked with interns seem to choose both, but those who have not generally choose to work on WebCT.

Those serving as university supervisors have provided feedback on the tool through an informal survey and anecdotal discussions about using TaskStream to support the professional development of teacher interns. Supervisors have been pleased with the ways in which the tool promotes communication, supports program goals, and facilitates the management of intern work, specifically mentioning a number of features that they found particularly useful:

- The ability to provide immediate and ongoing interactive feedback allowed supervisors to guide instructional design decisions of teacher interns and support interns in professional development.
- Specific features reinforce effective instructional design decisions, including the ability to import standards into lesson designs, to use a lesson template that includes components associated with effective teaching, and to reflect on a lesson's effectiveness after teaching it. Student use of the tool further develops technological competencies.
- Supervisors appreciated the ability to archive and retrieve student work as a way to monitor progress in meeting program standards and to guide students in ongoing reflection on their growth.

On the other hand, supervisors also perceived limitations in the tool. A number of desirable features are not currently available, including the ability to incorporate single standards, rather than full sets of standards, into lessons; to use highlighting tools such as underlining or bullets in e-mail text; and to sort e-mail messages by name.

Challenges for the Future

After an extended period of using this tool, several implications arise for its continued use. First, both students and faculty members will need to learn how to use TaskStream. Using the tool in all courses from pre-admission to internship provides students with ongoing opportunities to develop skill in its use. By acquiring facility with the tool early in the program, students can direct their learning during the internship toward program standards. Optimizing faculty use of the tool requires determining factors that both support and block its use and creating support structures for faculty, such as forums for exchanging successful applications and technical support.

Second, several operability issues need to be addressed. Some teacher interns experienced connectivity problems at local school sites. Although the university cannot resolve these problems directly, discussion has begun on how to increase access to on-campus technology during the internship semester, for instance by providing 24-hour access to some computer labs. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, TaskStream does have limitations, both in the functions it offers and in its accessibility to students and supervisors. We have yet to decide whether to work with the commercial firm to address these limitations or to create a custom tool.

Finally, we must assess the tool's support of program goals. The next step is to design research that examines how university supervisors impact the development of interns' professional skills. What types of feedback support the development of these skills and how frequently should it occur? How does the tool support these practices? How could it do so more effectively? Faculty working with TaskStream are currently designing research proposals to answer these questions.

Conclusion

As expressed in the mission statement of the UNCW School of Education, the goal of our program is to prepare "highly competent professionals to serve in teaching and other educational leadership roles in southeastern North Carolina, the state, and nation" (2000, "UNCW Mission Statement," ¶ 1). Adopting a Web-based tool assists in creating structures that support students' professional development and provides a system for managing the evidences required to demonstrate competence. Continuing to refine this tool to

better support our mission is an ongoing challenge; however, in light its potential for enhancing reflective practice, facilitating coaching and mentoring by supervisors, and documenting the growth of standards-based teaching practice, such technology merits further development. Meanwhile, our experience with this tool at UNCW may serve as a helpful model for other schools of education, particularly those that wish to foster the sustained professional growth of interns and ensure continuity between their training and their teaching practice. In this context online technology has a vital role to play, and systems such as TaskStream offer a valuable resource for schools of education as they prepare their students to meet the future challenges of their careers.

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