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Facilitating a Blended Learning Community:

A Collaborative Approach to Professional Learning

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ABSTRACT

This thesis has researched the question of "How can blended learning communities be facilitated to support the professional learning of inservice teacher educators?" Inservice teacher educators work to build teacher capability with the ultimate goal of raising student achievement. This relatively small group of people work across large geographical areas and are having increasing difficulty meeting the demands of the teachers. In addition, inservice teacher educators' contact with teachers is often less frequent than is desirable to ensure sustainable shifts in practice. However the growth in internet-based collaborative tools has meant that different ways of communicating are being created at exponential rates. Due to the natural limitations on inservice teacher educators' work, innovative ways of sustaining the professional development they provide are becoming increasingly important.

The action research project described in this thesis has investigated one of these innovative approaches; not towards shifting teacher practice but focusing rather on improving the practice of the inservice teacher educators themselves. Five inservice teacher educators known as Isteam (Inservice teacher educators at Massey) formed a professional learning community to investigate the use of blended learning communities which use a combination of both face to face and online learning environments. While this thesis discusses how blended learning communities can be facilitated to support the professional learning of inservice teacher educators, Isteam themselves investigated the potential of using both blended learning communities to support the professional learning of teachers they worked with.

Isteam met physically face to face on regular occasions and carried on their learning virtually between meetings through an easily modifiable webpage

environment known as a wiki. This thesis discusses how these two environments wove their relative strengths together to build the professional learning of Isteam in ways that far exceeded the possibilities of using one or other learning community on its own.

Research findings indicate that blended learning communities require early phases of building knowledge and social relationships, and that developing pedagogical capability relies on these building blocks to be in place first. Blended learning communities worked most effectively to improve the professional learning of inservice teacher educators when the facilitator:

1. Provided a range of online and face to face opportunities for inservice teacher educators to build their professional knowledge and gain confidence and competency in using online collaborative technologies, particularly in the early phases of the community's development.
2. Engaged inservice teacher educators in a range of online opportunities, including non task-related activities, to develop social relationships and get participants 'talking' comfortably online.
3. Challenged inservice teacher educators to use their growing knowledge and social relationships as platforms for critically reflecting on their professional learning and practice issues.

As a result of these findings, the inservice teacher educators involved in this research project are now strengthening the communities they have already established to ensure they grow to their full potential, and are mentoring other colleagues to develop their own blended learning communities in response to requests for help. Blended learning communities have piqued the interest of inservice teacher educators at Massey as having powerful potential to embrace the demands of working in the 21st century.

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DEDICATION

For Paddy

You helped us understand the true meaning of community my friend.

Thank you for allowing us to be part of your journey;

we were truly privileged.

We only wish it could have ended differently.

Arohanui.

Rimu rimu

Rere ana

Korowai aroha e

Wrap me again

In bright weed

Which will be

A blanket for me

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