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Please cite this paper as:

Masters, E. (2009). *Taking the 'tyrany' out of distance.* Paper presented at 'Teacher education crossing borders: Cultures, contexts, communities and curriculum' the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Albury, 28 June – 1 July.

Review Status: ☐ Refereed – *Abstract and Full Paper blind peer reviewed.*
☒ Non-Refereed – *Abstract Only reviewed.*

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Taking the 'Tyranny' Out of Distance
(Enhancing Professional Experience for Distance Education Students)

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Abstract
Professional experience can be an emotional time for any preservice teacher, particularly the first placement. For distance education students, the natural tension of working in an unfamiliar setting is exacerbated by the "tyranny of distance": they often need to find their own placement, have rarely had face-to-face contact with any university personnel, are often without a peer support group, and have not had the advantage of preparatory lectures at university. These students also have times when their placements are too distant for focused supervision. In 2008, the Professional Experience Office at the University of New England began trialling a variety of measures to assist external students before and throughout their professional experience and new initiatives are being trialled in 2009.

This paper describes the initial trial of an on-line support structure, using the Sakai Open Source Learning Management System, and begins to evaluate the efficacy of that trial. The support structure provided students with a variety of resources that had to be studied before professional experience began and with a structure that was designed to guide them through a reflective process for their teaching portfolio. There was also the opportunity for the students to be involved in electronic forums where they could ask for advice from university personnel and interact with their peers. Evaluation of this on-line approach revealed that the support and feedback, accessed asynchronously by preservice teachers before, when, and after they were in-the-field, had the potential to strengthen and enhance their teaching during the professional experience placement. However, ongoing technical difficulties sometimes caused more frustration rather than the structure providing assistance.

From early data collection, it was also clear that greater assistance was required when students were engaged in professional experience placements. The employment of Practicum Liaison officers and the introduction of virtual supervision are new innovations that are currently being trialled. Research is also being conducted through a trial of simulated teaching through the use of a Second Life classroom. This last is in its infancy, but will hopefully be expanded in 2010.

Keywords:
professional experience, distance education, e-learning

Introduction
For just a few moments, please, indulge in a flight of empathic imagination. Place yourself in the shoes of a distance education university student studying towards a teacher education award. You have chosen to embrace a career in teaching and have probably come to this decision after pursuing other fields. It is likely that you not a current school graduate. You have probably never stepped in front of a class to teach, but you can remember what occurred in classes when you were still at school where students, on the whole, would have had some engagement with learning, but where there were always the one or two who challenged the accepted norms of behaviour.

Imagine, further, that your first professional experience placement is looming. You have completed the required units about teaching and learning and about particular key learning areas, although you

know that more will be presented in units later in your course. Everything that you have learned has been accomplished as a distance education student: you have had readings to guide your thinking (and hopefully your practice); you have had activities to complete, which may or may not have been online; you have submitted your assessment pieces. Contact with university lecturers has generally not been personal, but rather online or via phone conversations. You are probably the only person in your area studying at this particular university and in this particular course. You are now faced with finding your own school placement and commencing four weeks of professional experience. Are you confident or do fears of the unknown assail you? Do you feel supported or alone?

Because preparation and support for professional experience is more problematic the further away from a university a student's placement is, what can be daunting for any student can become intimidating for students enrolled in preservice teacher awards via distance education. It is not really surprising that the following snippet of conversation occurred between two distance education students:

Student A: *I'm a distance student - this is so-o-o overwhelming!*

Student B: *Your head's not the only one swimming at the moment. Every spare moment I have I am reading something and must admit that I have little room for anything else. I met with my supervising teacher yesterday to discuss my prac and was so overwhelmed that I'm sure he thinks there's something wrong with me. The feeling of being overwhelmed is so great at the moment that I'm beginning to doubt myself. I'm seriously dazed and confused.*

(Students approaching their first professional experience placement)

It is clear that these students feel isolated and there is an iconic phrase which has been coined to describe the effects of isolation: "the tyranny of distance" (Blainey, 1966). This "tyranny of distance" can exacerbate the challenges that already exist in professional experience placements. Professional experience, per se, has been regarded as problematic in that it promotes isolation and practical expediency (Goodlad, 1990) and Cohen (2000) argues that preservice teachers who encounter difficulties are unsure who they can trust. While professional experience is difficult for all students, requiring support such as visits to schools, Simpson (2006) posits that "for distance education students that experience is often minimalized because of administrative costs and a range of supervision factors" (p.241).

Although isolation is seen as an issue for all students involved in professional experience, but there is a range of issues specifically relating to the provision of quality professional experience for distance education students including:

➢ preparing students for placement
➢ inducting supervising teachers into their roles
➢ finding quality placements in areas that are frequently used for placement by other local higher education providers
➢ providing personal support to the student.

Simpson (2006) states:

In traditional on-campus initial teacher education programmes lecturers (or faculty) work with their students to prepare them for field experience and often supervise them while in the field. Such preparation and support is more challenging to provide for distance education students (p.242).

An important aspect of any professional experience is providing preservice teachers with quality experiences. This was highlighted in *Top of the Class* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), the report of the review into teacher education by the Australian Parliament's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, which stated that "high quality placements for school-based professional experience are a critical component of teacher education courses". This was reinforced by what was then the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in its document "Administrative Guidelines: *Improving the Practical Component of Teacher Education Programme* 2008-2011" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), where instruction was made that any Higher Education Provider (HEP) offering teaching awards is to provide written assurance that the professional experience provided to preservice teachers is of a high quality. A change of government during 2008 saw the quality indicators ratified and strengthened as the new Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) signed a new agreement with universities. Both DEST and DEEWR also imposed a requirement that those universities providing preservice teacher education awards guarantee that students are prepared for their professional experience, a task more readily accomplished through internal courses rather than for external students.

Given this milieu of challenge and opportunity, the professional experience team at the University of New England (UNE) began to examine ways in which the experience of school placement could be enhanced, most particularly for distance education students. Significant changes began to occur in the preparation of students for and the support during these placements. These changes include:
  ➢ the use of the Sakai Learning Management System for preparation,
  ➢ the wider employment of Practicum Liaison Officers for placement support and/or supervision,
  ➢ the introduction of virtual support and/or supervision, particularly for students in rural and remote areas,
  ➢ the initiation of a pilot study in the use of a virtual classroom and playground in Second Life for professional experience preparation and for skill development through microteaching.

1. On-line Preparation through Sakai
In 2007, UNE had 17,782 students of whom 13,875 studied through the external mode (UNE Statistics 2008). This large proportion of students studying by distance education contributed to the decision to have an on-line presence for all units of study across all awards at UNE from the beginning of 2008. This policy affected the professional experience office significantly.

1.1 The Process
Prior to 2008, the on-line presence for professional experience students at UNE was minimal with basically a few web pages giving information about course requirements. At the beginning of 2008 a heavily augmented on-line presence began. There was firstly a main 'site' on Sakai for all professional experience students irrespective of both the specific award in which they were enrolled and the number of placements that the student had already completed. This site contained a series of topic areas such as child protection, information about lesson observation and lesson planning, and the NSW Professional Teaching Standards.   At this site students could also engage in forum discussions with each other and also the Director and Assistant Director of Professional Experience. A number of other sites, specific to the particular units in which students were enrolled, complemented this main site. These unit specific sites were available for students to ask specific questions relating to their particular placement requirements, engage in forums about topics of particular interest or relevance to them at their particular stage in their professional experience journey, and also to complete activities to demonstrate that they were prepared for placement.

The main focus for the professional experience team was on those students approaching their initial school placement. Hence, the site for their unit was the most developed, with several forums on particular issues as well as a forum for general concerns, a range of modules for student information and two developed activities which helped to demonstrate their preparedness for professional experience teaching. Throughout 2008 further modules were added. Modules were also added to those sites established for students who had already completed at least one placement, but technical difficulties such as slow access times and an inability to track the students meant that these other sites were used far less frequently.

While aspects of the Sakai project proved successful in providing information and access for distance students, this was not universally true. There were a plethora of problems that frustrated both the students and the professional experience team. Just a few comments from students trying to access the system make clear that these problems needed to be seriously considered:

Student E: *I am so scared about all of this on-line stuff. I'm really worried I'm going to miss assignments. I haven't even found if this subject has work for it yet. As you can tell I am completely against technology and I get in crap from my friends for being a 23 year old girl who refuses to get Facebook!*

Student F: *Can anyone point me in the direction of the pre and post placement activities that we are supposed to do? I have no idea where to find them and having just spent the last half hour going through this site trying to find them I have just about had enough of Sakai and its crapness.*

Student G: *I am feeling fairly frustrated by it all, too. I am not a technophobe or a Luddite, but I am increasingly a technosceptic. ... I also feel that this playing field is a very uneven one. I live in a remote area with many difficulties accessing the internet. I want things to work well and quickly. I want them to work the first time and every time I use them. I have a limited amount of time in which to do my study as I am a mother and I also help to run our property. I don't like having to spend so much time simply figuring out how to do all this stuff and reading through messages 'just in case'.*

(Students contributing to Sakai forums)

Such disenchantment with the learning management system environment should perhaps have been anticipated. Allen and Lawless (2003) state that student surveys showed that "on-line activity is one of the least popular elements of OU courses" (p.564) and argue:

> Stress in a distance learning course … can be minimised by course design and by appropriate "acclimatisation" of the student to situations such as collaboration at the start of the course (pp.564 -565).

Whilst acknowledging that the planning behind the process left a lot to be desired, there were also other problems, some of which related to the slow speed of the technology and some of which related to the lack of training of the professional experience team. Disenchantment with the system (both student and staff) and a concern that the needs of the students were not being met resulted in further development of the sites and research into the needs of the students.

As time progressed, and more students began to use the system, the professional experience team actually became more and more disillusioned with the learning management system approach. More time was spent answering technical questions than assisting students with concerns about teaching. It also was proving difficult to track the students as the link between the activities and the

tracking system had still not been developed. There were also concerns that the number of 'complaints', comments reflecting negatively on the on-line experience, was increasing. However, student comments such as:

> *I would like to thank you for a well organised and well prepared practicum program. ... I followed the advice on the prac websites and arranged a professional portfolio where I had written my own perspectives on the quality teaching elements and this completely prepared me for my interview.*

and *I didn't feel like an external student* encouraged the team to persevere.

1.2 The Next Phase

2009 began with an extra seven sites for professional experience on Sakai – instead of the original 11 there are now 18, the result of two early childhood awards coming under the professional experience purview. However, some changes have been made. The information is accessed within each unit site rather than through the 'generic' professional experience site - too many students had reported that they couldn't access both sites. The forums have also been refined, with reflections being structured through the use of De Bono's Six Thinking Hats strategy. Students are more reflective about the issues and they have also commented on how they are now able to use this strategy in their classrooms.

A further refinement has been that all sites were carefully developed before being opened to students. There are now graduated readings and activities as students move through their professional experience units. It is also now possible to monitor student interactions and use of the sites, allowing refinement of the modules as the year progresses. It is still very apparent that those students new to their courses are the people who most frequent the sites, asking questions, raising concerns and sharing ideas and reflections. Early feedback suggests that the sites are useful. The main modules for reading and reflection were carefully chosen based on the concerns raised in 2008 – child protection, behaviour management and lesson planning. Students report feeling more prepared. However, the process is still plagued by technical problems, including some students not being given access to the sites automatically, as is supposed to occur. This is frustrating when students have been told that they cannot go into schools unless the activities have been completed.

1.3 Tentative Conclusions and Future Directions

A decision about the efficacy of a learning management system such as Sakai in enhancing the professional experience of distance education preservice teachers at UNE requires the collection of data over a longer period of time, further development of the system, and further training of those charged with developing the on-line materials and monitoring the sites. Ballantyne and Mylonas (2001) argue:

> Teacher education academics need to consider in greater detail how they are to influence their students' learning while on practicum placements and take advantage of the obvious benefits of using on-line learning systems to structure and improve student 'school-based' learning (p.271).

More importantly, the current on-line preparation only goes part way to alleviating the "tyranny of distance" for distance education students. One of the greatest concerns for student teachers reported through discussions while visiting these students on placements was the infrequency of visits from university personnel. A frequent question on the on-line forums: is anyone coming to visit me?

2. Practicum Liaison Officers

It is clear, from both preservice teacher and supervising teacher report, that students and supervising teachers appreciate being visited by a representative of the Higher Education provider. However, covering 100% of preservice teacher placements is not always possible. Supervision of distance education students has traditionally been difficult at UNE. Prior to 2007, visits to preservice teachers while on placement were predominantly undertaken by the Director of Professional Experience and some university academics. This generally meant that many distance education students were not visited unless the professional experience office was notified that the student was at risk. These students might be visited by the Director or by someone from another university where agreement was reached about remuneration. In contrast, between 75% and 80% of internal students received visits either because of their closer proximity to the university or because of their intern status and the concomitant necessity for a visit as stipulated in the internship agreement.

2.1 The Initiative

In 2007, the Director was joined by another person, on a part time basis, who assisted with visiting preservice teachers during their placements. There was also the beginning of hiring of what Slick (1998) describes as "adjunct educators" (p.822), people who are frequently retired school educators or education lecturers. These people were casual contract staff who visited preservice teachers during peak times. Throughout 2008 the number of casual contract staff, now known as Practicum Liaison Officers (PLOs), was increased, as were the number of hours for which they were employed. The aim from the start of 2008 was to phone every supervising teacher at least once near the beginning of a placement and then to follow up later in the placement. To do this, extra people were needed to assist with the calls. The visiting schedule to schools was also being increased in an attempt to reach as many preservice teachers in schools as possible, including in the more distant areas such as Sydney and Broken Hill.

2.2 The Issues

While a check of the percentage of both phone calls and visits to schools shows a significant increase (from 30% to 95% in phone calls and from 25% to 40% in visits), there are significant issues relating to the use of casual PLOs. Some of the issues are related to the nature of UNE as a significant distance education provider. Other issues relate to the nature of the PLO relationship with the Professional Experience Office, while still others are related to the individual preservice teacher contexts.

Firstly, as a distance education provider, students enrolled in UNE teacher awards are not only spread throughout all of NSW, but also a significant proportion is interstate and some are international students. In 2008, 12% of the external students studied and completed professional experience placements interstate, the majority in Queensland, but with large numbers also in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia. There were also 12 students who were completing their awards overseas and they completed placements in 8 different countries spread across Asia, Europe and the Americas. The issue for these students is that university contact has been limited to phone calls (to the interstate schools) and emails (to the international schools). To date, PLOs have not been employed interstate, primarily because of the need to interview these people and to provide them with enough support regarding our policies and procedures. (This need for interview and support is discussed further as a separate issue below). Even more than for interstate students, contact with international schools has been minimal. The lack of more in-depth contact can raise questions about the understanding of supervising teachers in these distant schools of the reports, which conform to the New South Wales Institute of Teachers (NSWIT) Professional Teaching Standards and also about the processes for 'at risk' students. One attempt to reach these more distant students is being trialled with the use of technology and is described in section 3.

A further issue in employing PLOs lies in the need for the liaison officer to be firstly interviewed and then trained. Because the aim was to have PLOs in areas such as Sydney, an area where many external students were placed, but lack of funding prohibited university staff from visiting, the decision was taken to call for expressions of interest. Curriculum vitae were scrutinised and discussion held by phone with likely people. Unfortunately, in the 2008 trial, no interview was actually held. Also, training occurred by phone and a published handbook being sent to the chosen casual contractors. What occurred was that one PLO acted in a way which did not serve the university well, and actually alienated some schools, teachers and preservice teachers. It is clear that more thorough screening is required and that training takes place in a more rigorous manner.

The final issue with the use of casual contract staff for visits lies in the need for consistency of personnel for some students, particularly those 'at risk' either because of poor reports in early placements or because of prior failure. Casual staff are not always available when required and lack of consistency caused problems in at least two instances in 2008.

2.3 Future Directions
In 2009, the Professional Experience Office continues to use a small group of Practicum Liaison Officers. These people have been employed before and are mainly locally based. They are people who are very familiar with the UNE teacher awards and with the programme of school placements within them. Instead of using these PLOs in an ad hoc manner, an attempt is being made to have them linked to a group of schools based on geographic location. We are also using one of our PLOs to visit Sydney schools until we finish our trial of virtual supervision (see section 3).

Reports from schools indicate that they prefer the new system of being linked with one particular person. Occasionally it is not possible to send the same person, so another PLO visits in emergencies. However, while this programme of support and supervision is beginning to address some of the problems in the more distant regions of NSW, the interstate and international placements have required another initiative.

3. Virtual Supervision
Currently, a trial of virtual supervision, with web cams connecting classrooms and university, is beginning. A grant was received from the Commonwealth government in early 2008 to purchase several Tandberg units and the software to link to computers and web cams in classrooms of a few DET schools in NSW. Over the next few months, eight schools will participate in the trial, once the Memorandum of Understanding between the DET and UNE allowing online access via the DET intranet has been signed. This technology will give university personnel a capacity to give immediate feedback to student teachers and an opportunity to discuss plans with supervising teachers.

There is evidence of research regarding the use of technology in order to enhance the practicum experience (Carter, 2001; Harvey, Charnitiski & Haslam, 2005; da Ponte et al, 2007). Harvey, Charnitski and Haslam (2005) report that "the creative use of various emerging technologies can help solve many of the problems" (p.720) and da Ponte et al (2007) argue that the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can provide "ways to have a closer contact with student teachers and promote their reflective attitude" (p.79). However, all of these reports involve ICT more at the level of Learning Management Systems such as the previously reported Sakai initiative where discussion forums and sharing via blogs, emails and wikis can occur. While there is a place for this form of electronic communication, da Ponte et al (2007) acknowledge that "all student teachers agree that e-mail interactions must not replace face-to-face interactions in supervisors' visits to schools" (p.84). By using web cams and, thereby, talking with both preservice

teachers and supervising teachers, as well as observing lessons, it is hoped that the relational aspects of a physical visit can be replicated.

Initial experimenting with the technology between members of the Professional Experience Office team and the School of Education lecturer who is leading the research has already spawned more ideas as to how the technology might be used in the future. With the capacity for multiple users to sign on at the same time, there is the possibility that tutorials can be held to support students with similar problems while engaged in professional experience, that supervising teachers can share particular areas of expertise with a group of preservice teachers and that supervising teachers can be supported by the Professional Experience Office team through prior training and discussion. These few new ideas allow a cautious optimism that this initiative might have even more far-reaching possibilities in the future given that "as users become more experienced with the technology, new innovative uses usually emerge that could not have been anticipated before the new technology was available (Harvey, Charnitiski & Haslam, 2005, p.722).

4. Second Life: A Virtual Classroom Experience

The most recent initiative designed to enhance professional experience, which is still only in its infancy, is a new research project to build a virtual classroom in Second Life. Second Life is a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE):

> A place where all conceivable types of human interaction can be tried out, with limited repercussions in the real world when things go wrong; a place to fail safely, and in relative anonymity; … It is in some senses, an ideal space for learning (Helmer, 2007, p.4).

Within the internal courses, students are provided with frequent opportunities to practise their teaching skills, most commonly in microteaching situations. These situations are carefully controlled and provide a safe environment to make mistakes. In contrast, the first teaching that external students most commonly experience is in a real classroom with real students and, while risk taking can occur, there is always the knowledge that the supervising teacher is assessing the performance. A classroom in Second Life, where students can log in and be teachers in a 'microteaching' experience similar to microteaching experiences during tutorials for internal students, has the capacity to redress this difference.

At present, almost all e-learning at UNE takes place through one of two Learning Management Systems (Sakai or Blackboard), utilising downloads of pdf files, html documents, discussion boards, wikis, chat rooms and blogs. To more deeply engage distance students, a virtual world such as Second Life could be used to advantage to conduct classes either synchronously or asynchronously. Preliminary research conducted by a lecturer in one teaching unit has demonstrated that students appreciate this environment because they *feel like* [they] *are really there* with the other students and lecturer; for these students it is like a *face to face encounter*. This mode of learning has been more engaging and meaningful for students.

This project has received a small School of Education research grant to allow a mini-trial. The classroom and accompanying playground area is currently being established in Second Life and the first learning experience within that environment will involve the first year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students. They will be involved in learning in the virtual classroom, using De Bono's Six Thinking Hats strategy and the topic for discussion will be about a Second Life classroom as a learning environment. The discussions should provide rich data on the efficacy of a virtual world environment and allow further development of the concept. The intention is to use the virtual

classroom for microteaching and also professional experience tutorials from the start of 2010, providing that the data from the mini-trial support the use of Second Life as an effective learning environment.

Conclusion:

The experience gained from participation in school practicum placements is regarded as pivotal in preparing pre-service teachers for the world of the classroom (Keogh, Dole & Hudson, 2006) and Zeichner and Gore (1990) suggest that professional experience is the second most influential factor in teachers' socialisation into the profession. It behoves universities to provide a quality professional experience programme for all students in teacher education awards, both internal and external students. To this end, the UNE Professional Experience Team continues to strive to find new ways to 'take the tyranny out of distance' for external students. While international students will always be at the mercy of extreme time differences, it is possible that the use of the virtual environment may assist them to feel a more integral part of a community. For interstate students, the use of virtual supervision should allow more quality time for observation and discussion. However, having learned from the Sakai experience that technological problems can sabotage a good idea, there is a determination to have these issues, such as firewalls in schools and slow Internet connections for students, ironed out before the projects commence on a large scale. Early indications are that professional experience at UNE will be able to take advantage of new technology as it becomes available.

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