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IS THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE FOR EARLY PHASE STUDENTS, THEIR PARENTS, AND TEACHERS IMPROVED THROUGH THE USE OF MANAGED ONLINE TOOLS?

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Abstract

Positive authentic partnerships value those developing the building blocks for successful transition of students beginning their early years at school. A Learning Management System (LMS) encourages new community members to observe and interact as they get a 'feel' for school through genuine communication online in a 'third space'. This research seeks to identify opportunities for parents, teachers and students to be involved in the use of online LMS communication tools. It is hoped that the development of the platform will support a blended online and face-to-face network replicable for future cohorts and at different schools. Strategies to increase participation will highlight the impact of the school community's attitude towards online communication. How use is made of the LMS will become apparent and through descriptive case study methodology, a rich narrative will contribute to the understanding of the needs of those involved. Empowering parent involvement is integral to the common goal of supporting student success. With the early years' student at the centre of an ecological view of school, parental involvement is a most significant factor affecting sustained engagement, achievement and success at school. An opportunity is presented here for recognising the transfer of knowledge between both home and school.

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to improve an available online communication channel at one primary state school in Brisbane, Queensland. Involving parents has the potential to encourage students to relate enthusiastically to what is taking place at school. The Learning Management System (LMS) platform provides an opportunity to develop a third space in which to recognise and blend what is learned at home with the mandated curriculum. Supporting positive partnerships values those who contribute to building the successful transition of students as they begin their school life. A welcoming environment is essential to embrace the school community to improve that transition. Interacting in an online environment it is possible to provide a setting that allows engagement with staff, observation of children interacting with others and to also get a 'feel' for school as they find their place. Development of partnerships between home and school for early phase students, who are beginning formal schooling for the first time, is crucial (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Street, 2009).

This paper reflects upon the initial findings of the researcher and how opportunities might arise for the community of parents, teachers and students, as they are involved in the use of online communication tools. It is hoped that the communication features of a LMS will be used to develop a supportive network, a 'third space' through which users are able to make contact. Research findings will inform future conversations about community participation and determine the impact of use for the school community.

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Literature

Building community

Much has been said of the need for all in the young learner's sphere of influence to be involved in bridging the communication gap between home and school (Epstein, 2010; Stone, 1999). Offering an invitation to a "third space" raises possibilities for re-establishing the traditional notion of student/teacher roles (Ikas & Gerhard, 2008; Quigley, 2011). Third space in this context will refer to the opportunities made available to the school community in an online environment. Participants are provided with tools to engage in conversation, exchange information and share ideas online in a password secure LMS.

Potential for the development of a broader definition of the knowledge considered being of value beyond school and limited by the daily routines. First space is a real place, the home environment; second space is the instructional or school space, again real. The third space then evolves online where discussions and learning connects both 'local knowledge' and school knowledge (Quigley, 2013). The third space can also work towards establishing a community of learners where the holder of the power (knowledge) is not always the teacher and in which common ground can be established (Ikas & Gerhard, 2008). The conversations and experiences that may develop for those committed to the online learning environment take place in the third space. Providing a virtual environment within the Queensland state school LMS offers participants another resource through which they are able to make their voices heard. As those involved in the LMS environment interact, network and enjoy the experience (Quigley, 2013), a community may develop, creating the concept of 'third space'. Options for communication include the use of text, graphics and voice files if required.

A major barrier to the involvement of parents noted by Hattie (2012) is that many parents and caregivers feel unsure of the correct language to use or their ability to support their children with their school learning. Hattie argues teaching and learning goals need to be made accessible. This includes the teacher becoming involved in communication with parents around curriculum and activities. Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early (1999) and others emphasise the importance of providing opportunities for parents to participate in multiple conversations before their child is enrolled at school (Epstein & Selinas, 2004). This level of communication, they argue, is possible through an online environment providing anytime access on a wide range of devices communication tools or interactive resources.

Developing relationships

The LMS offers a secure online environment providing access to a selection of digital tools, learning resources and a choice of spaces that are used for collaboration and networking. In this context it is not open source and it is acknowledged that password protection is a barrier to be overcome in Queensland. Teachers have to commit to the regular renewal of student passwords. Students must remember their password or request a new one to be generated; and passwords are not currently available to parents. The real value is when teachers are able to model appropriate behaviours and language, to combine face to face contact with digital options and fulfill the requirement purported by Clinton, Hattie & Dixon (2007) that parents be shown how to make the best use of resources available to support their children (Bretag, 2006).

Schapiro (2009) suggests a coaching model is possible, where students and teachers 'build' a relationship in a symbolic third place. Unfortunately her aspirations do not eventuate in her research due to frustrations encountered facing 'fears and fantasies' of teachers involved. Schapiro argues that teachers will continue to feel the balance of power is not in their favour whilst developing their

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understanding of new technologies unless they engage in discussion with those who will be sharing and making use of it.

Cavus, Uzunboylu et al. (2007) describe the LMS as a "bridge between instructors and learners". In their research, they investigated the use of an LMS to support a constructivist learning approach to enhance teaching in higher education. This is pertinent to the current research, as parents, who are potentially adult learners in their use of the online environment, will be expected to explore and be self-motivated when engaged in that exploration. Cavus, Uzunboylu et al. (2007) found significant success when students used the advanced collaborative tools. These tools are an essential feature for design of a space to encourage interaction and long term engagement.

Methodology

Case study methodology is providing the observations contributing to understanding the experience of members of the school community. A narrative or description of the communication channels that occur in this one school are unfolding to inform an understanding of how the school community interacts. This research is exploring the use made of the LMS and how this online environment can be developed to blend online and face to face learning experiences that include others within the school community. School staff and administration are able to investigate the LMS resources in everyday classroom use, sharing opportunities for interaction and learning experiences between school and home online.

Recording and reflection of experiences to date has provided an opportunity to consider the possible consequences of a similar course of action being taken in another context. The emphasis is being placed upon the regard of participants and how I have drawn interpretations as researcher. New understanding that unfold will build predictable generalisations possible in other contexts, rather than replication.

After Creswell (2008) and Grandy (2010) a descriptive case study is being used to understand the use made by teachers of the available LMS. The design of the case will be constructed to gather a 'thick' description (Grandy, 2010). The intention is not to determine generalizations of use, but to understand the use made of available communication tools and the impact of that use. Initially, information has been gathered through a cross sectional survey to determine the beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and demographic composition of the school population which has access to the online LMS and accompanying tools (Creswell, 2008, p. 390). This framework will provide indicators of the potential use that can be made of the different online resources and highlight areas of note. This is allowing response to real community needs. Descriptive data is being collected using an adaptation of Epstein's Measure of School, Family, and Community Partnerships survey to determine which areas indicate potential for further development.

A sample survey of a pilot group representative of the final cohort to take part in the research provided initial opinions of students, parents, teachers and Administration staff. This group determined the feasibility of questions used in the survey, providing an indication of the information that would be possibly produced (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). As I have worked with staff at both the pilot study and focus group schools, my influence was minimised on teachers' responses as they were invited to interview together. It was believed that this format might encourage more open discussion. This group interview did not eventuate. Instead, to avoid the participants feeling obliged to respond in a particular way, a brief anonymous Survey Monkey questionnaire was used providing an opportunity to share opinions that might not have been. A follow up survey will be administered at the conclusion of the school year. This will provide an indication of any change in user attitude after one full school year of access.

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Sheldon & Epstein (2007) offer a suite of questionnaires to adapt and administer in order to gather information of family and community involvement in the elementary and middle grades of school. Their items were developed for fifth and sixth grade and seventh and eighth grade students, parents and teachers. Those questions were adapted, with permission, and used to highlight how parents and the school community currently work together. Then responses used to explore how participants thought they would develop successful partnerships between home and school for students in their early years of school.

Items in the survey include measures of student:
- confidence in their own ability to learn and succeed in school
- sense of belonging at their school
- feelings about the school involvement of their parents
- reporting of school and/or teacher relationship with their parents
- work that requires them to interact with their parents

It was expected that the survey would produce initial evidence of the familiarity of the participants with communicating online. As the research is concerned with the development of an online system it was hoped the members of the focus group would be familiar with using computers and the Internet. Support would be offered if not at a mutually convenient times and venues. Attitudes were analyzed to inform discussion topics around the opportunities for parents and teachers to collaborate online with young students at home and at school for follow up discussions. Following the survey ongoing collection of feedback from users and changes to curriculum content is guiding development of the LMS space.

Data collection

An invitation to take part in the research was distributed a couple of weeks into the new school year. Surveys were distributed to those who returned completed Consent Forms. Of the twenty-eight returned signed consent forms, seven surveys were subsequently returned. The surveys were offered in both hard copy and as a link to a SurveyMonkey questionnaire. Face to face interviews have been conducted with a school Administrator, three classroom teachers and the children for whom consent to participate has been received. Some parents have spoken with me informally, by telephone and via email.

The survey was offered in both hard copy and email format to maximise the potential return. Conversations with students are recorded for the noting of their responses. In order to identify potential of the LMS to contribute to the learning capabilities of the students, the connections between users need to be identified and the environment developed to encourage sustained student and family and school involvement.

Access registered to the LMS is recorded as a date of last visit in the Blackboard virtual classroom (VCR) and as a number for site hits for the edStudio. Two school staff have logged on to the VCR and twenty-one students. Those students do not all have permission to participate in the research; the VCR is open to all students in the class.

Findings

The aspiration for undertaking this research has been to share the potential for change to the balance of power in communication channels between school and home. To provide a window to that learning considered valuable for students, at the same time recognising their experiences beyond school. In their longitudinal study, Brock & Edmunds (2010) found parent involvement in school-related

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activities at home had a significant effect on student achievement. Using the communication features of the LMS, it would be possible to share work and collaborate between school and home as well as between students. The option is available at any time to engage in online discussion and to offer support when required. Information gathered will inform the development and encourage use of the dynamic online portal.

School Administrators places high importance on the communication of day-to-day school information, as well as the needs and well being of students and opportunities to engage in community events. Paper newsletters, notes home and a bulletin board at the front of the school provide the primary forms of communication. Phone calls and face-to-face conversations occur daily, parents are encouraged to approach teachers before and after school or make an appointment with Administration staff. Online, the school Facebook account currently has 800 followers and the school website is updated from time to time. Apparently many families do not have 'good' Internet access, they access content online using smart phones not computers. Approximately 90% of email addresses recorded as contact details are out of date.

It was raised that a significant barrier for access of the LMS by parents and young students is the system for maintenance of passwords. They are changed regularly and are time consuming for young users to enter themselves. Currently it is only students and staff at Queensland state schools who are allocated a unique user ID.

Teachers are concerned that the time invested in maintaining the VCR will not have impact on the school's clientele. Currently there is a whiteboard outside each Prep classroom to share brief daily messages. Teachers also write notes home and make phone calls to parents. Although teachers were directed by the Principal to share email contact details with the parents and carers of their students, no emails had been received from parents during Term 1. Online resources were described as too numerous and it was considered hard to find appropriate resources.

Smith (1998) explores the challenge of changing attitudes towards the historical expectations of school, he believes participating in a different context will provide reassurance of the value of change. Communication tools such as blogs and virtual classrooms had been experienced at another school where a parent in the classroom updated a blog daily uploading photos, information and links to homework resources. Contact was possible between teachers and students as well as student-to-student. This was easily accessed in contrast to the significant barrier of passwords for Queensland state school communities where only students and staff are allocated a unique user ID. It was suggested that the school community would perhaps be interested in a similar arrangement if both visual and oral options were offered. This would support the high proportion of families who use English as a Second Language.

The literacy level of the school community is another barrier. Teachers are not sure if letters sent home in bags are read and actioned. They are aware that communication tools would have value for those parents and carers who are not able to get into school to see the teachers. Teachers would like to see easier access to reduce the time it takes to find resources and navigate the LMS. Of value would be the ability to push messages to all parents to share important updates. Teachers want interactive games, information in one place and a simple pathway to access the learning objects and tools without wasting time. The challenge is to share the value added by the LMS resources to the child's school experience and parent involvement.

Prep students are keen to use the interactive learning objects and handwriting tool. Both boys and girls engaged enthusiastically with the challenges of both literacy and numeracy problems of interactive Learning Objects. Boys were particularly keen to include a popular song used for their daily

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movement routine. Only two entries have been made in the blog by myself attempting to engage participants in conversation. Interestingly, older students in Years 3 and 4 have been using their VCR blog to share research, ask questions and share opinions on what is of value in the VCR. They post entries in their own time without adult support, sometimes later than would be expected in the evening. Prep students are not generally independent users of digital devices, relying upon older siblings and adults for support.

Staff have raised the concern that our families do not have access to computers and the internet at home. Many children have informed me that they do have access to smart phones and Internet connected video game consoles. Many families at the school are of Samoan heritage, English language resources of parents and carers are a documented issue. Kearney, Fletcher & Dobrenov-Major's (2008) study found that support from the church community was invaluable for developing Samoan parents' understanding of computers as a learning resource. Identifying the ethnic backgrounds of students and increasing intercultural sensitivity of the school community helped them to "align the worlds". A number of families in the focus group have indicated that they do take advantage of the free access to computers and the Internet at their local library.

Discussion

Limitations

Teaching staff have not become as involved as had been hoped for. It was intended that the focus group would include the four Prep teachers for whom the topic of optimising the value of communication between home and school was a priority. Two teachers have participated in conversations with myself, one is now on maternity leave and her replacement has agreed to be involved. The limited number of participants in the focus group will perhaps raise implications for the defensibility of the final report. To offset this, transparency of methods, analysis and interpretation of data collected as well as the recognition of bias will establish the credibility of results.

The teachers state the amount of time required to maintain the LMS is a problem. The potential value gained from possible results, e.g. students revisiting concepts learned via Learning Objects or a comment entered in a blog demonstrating development of relationships between students, is where real value can be identified of the time regarded as well invested.

Recommendations

Administration staff supports the engagement of parents and carers wholeheartedly. Encouraging the teachers more tangibly by offering non-contact time to update online resources will be supported. Perhaps an option could be to encourage teachers to team teach, providing moments of support for each other to update elements of the LMS whilst classes are engaged in whole group activities. Also, allocating a competent user of the digital system to the year level to offer consistent exemplary use.

Appreciating difference

Learning occurs beyond the school walls and well beyond the restrictions of the school timetable. Today knowledge is being generated every minute, everywhere. It is being shared in many different ways and curating knowledge is becoming an increasingly important skill. Children require the ability to actively manage the vast amount of information to enable them to sift and sort for truly useful information when it is required (Goldstein, 2013). Learning theories are evolving to include informal learning or new literacy studies, informal learning of children also necessitates that schools investigate the motivation children have to commit time to learning the uses of digital technologies, e.g. computer games, or creative opportunities on mobile devices, and ask what elements can be applied to the design of formal curriculum delivery (Sefton-Green, 2004).

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Irrespective of background, families "do care about their children's learning and are equally involved in their learning at home, although the forms of involvement may look different across race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002 in Mitchell, 2008). The opportunity is presented here to recognise the value of knowledge that can be transferred between school and home as well as communities beyond school.

Recommendations

Offer support for parents, particularly those who have limited English or Literacy skills, to enable access to the LMS, both with the technical requirements to logon and also with understanding of how to make use of the tools. Kearney et al. (2008) identify implications for the culturally and linguistically diverse groups in the Logan area. This context is one of those schools where a number of disadvantaged groups might benefit from such support.

Barriers to involvement

Passwords are an issue in the current model of VCR access. Logging on with a unique user ID is mandatory for early phase and older students alike. Many consider the length and regular updating of passwords a barrier. Parents and carers are not given access to the password protected resources or the LMS. Their access is incidental when supporting their children as they use the platform.

Starkey & Klein (2000) also raise communication as "an important step to take ... to provide parents with the tools they need to support their children's informal … development." They argue for identifying impacts on the development of the learner and anticipating potential opportunities for support of the agencies concerned with the success of young students. Online communication tools for parents, family and community will welcome them to be involved.

Recommendations

Work together to engage parents and carers in face-to-face meetings demonstrating how to access the LMS and where to include their voices. A couple of parents have requested support; their experiences do not appear to have filtered through to the rest of the parent community. Posters on the classroom noticeboards have not elicited a great response, nor notes sent home with participating children inviting parents into school or encouraging enquiries. Next term on Friday mornings a regular parent session will begin offering parents and carers after they have dropped their children at the classroom. Encouraging older siblings to support their brothers and sisters and sending passwords home again to reignite interest will be continued.

Conclusion

This paper has indicated the early findings of a case study. This qualitative research will include a descriptive case study within which the contribution of the school community builds the context of the encounters that take place and which will then be analysed. The study will take place within one school in Logan, Queensland. It is acknowledged that this is a small focus group. This research will make a unique contribution at this location that may influence the choices made by the school community for online communication. In turn, this may provide an exemplar for others to replicate and adapt in their context. Channels may open to share and gain better understanding of our students as we offer an open and supportive environment that values the support of both home and school. The research seeks to determine what takes place as a consequence of decisions made and actions taken. Description of the consequences as we navigate the twists and turns of the disruptive events taking place through the school year will contribute to understanding of the change process that is possible to improve the experience of our young children as they make the transition to primary school. Involving

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their families in the learning experience can add improved engagement from a child's significant others and improve their early school experience.

As the school year moves on participants registered in the virtual classroom have recorded limited access. Parents have recorded no entries and the teachers have not updated the resources. As Selwyn, Banagi, Hadjithoma-Garstka & Clark (2011, p. 323) reflected on their results, expanding the means for parents and carers to be involved by offering a virtual space does not guarantee involvement. In the context for this research parents who were interviewed did not raise their unfamiliarity with the platform as a barrier, rather, they were positive about the possibility of having access to school resources. The present situation encourages the existing practice of school providing the most important information, rather than drawing their own experiences and skills into the mix. The aim is to reconfigure the school/parent relationship to enable engagement with a common 21st Century online platform that is constantly evolving and used through high school, tertiary study and in the workplace. At the moment, in this location, there is no impact on the school experience of students. Taking a step back to develop strategies for uptake for the next cohort of early phase students and their families has become the goal.

Future research

Future research could address how the school could provide equitable access to the online resources. Identifying limitations and possible solutions to expand community participation could work towards the promotion of schooling as a shared responsibility with parents. It would be useful to identify and work to reduce the challenges and facilitate involvement at home and at school.

Exploring the impact of use by those students who do engage with the LMS is another area for further study. As Beauchamp & Kennewell (2010) suggest, researching how and why students interact with the LMS platform could indicate how it is possible to motivate others less willing to look at the resources.

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