Title	School coordinating mentors in NIE's partnership model: Networking using multipoint desktop video conferencing
Author(s)	Moo Swee Ngoh, Angela F. L. Wong, Lachlan Crawford, Hu Chun, Leslie Sharpe and S. Gopinathan
Source	*ERA-AME-AMIC Joint Conference, Singapore, 4-6 September 2000*
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

SCHOOL COORDINATING MENTORS IN NIE'S PARTNERSHIP MODEL: NETWORKING USING MULTIPOINT DESKTOP VIDEO CONFERENCING

Moo Swee Ngoh, Angela F. L. Wong,
Lachlan Crawford, Hu Chun, Leslie Sharpe, S. Gopinathan
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore

Abstract: The National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore, introduced the Partnership Model for the conduct of its practicum in 1999. The rationale was to improve its effectiveness by optimising the complimentary strengths of NIE and the schools. The key school personnel in this model is the *School Coordinating Mentor (SCM)*. This is a new role for teachers, and although guidelines and preparations have been provided by NIE the tasks and responsibilities of the SCM will still need to be worked out in each school according to the conditions that exist. The Multipoint Desktop Video-Conferencing (MDVC) project is an MOE-funded project of the National Institute of Education. Launched in 1999 its aim is to help bring about closer collaboration in the practicum between NIE and the schools via MDVC. This will facilitate networking among school coordinating mentors, trainee teachers, and NIE supervisors. This study focuses on the school coordinating mentors. It investigates the SCMs' perceptions of their performance of this new role, and whether its effectiveness has been enhanced through professional collaboration and networking. Two groups of SCMs are studied. The experimental group's members meet on-line using the MDVC, while the control group comprises SCMs who meet face-to-face. This paper will also discuss if and how MDVC can help facilitate the networking and teachers' professional development.

The NIE-School Partnership Model

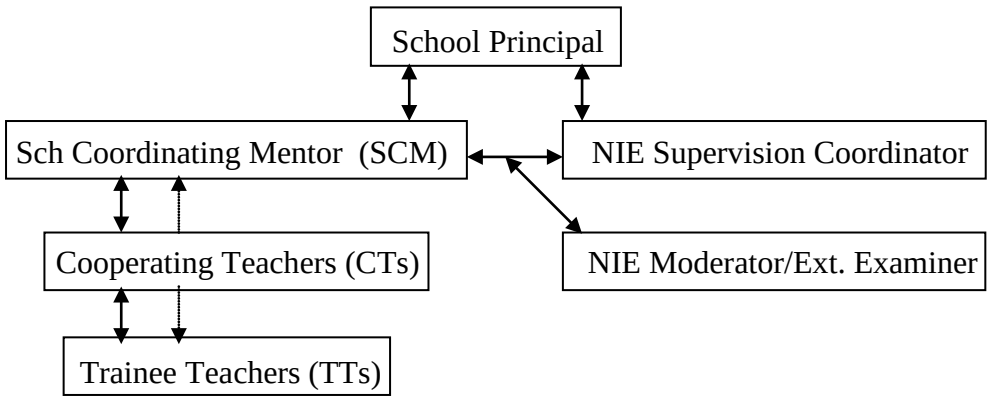
The NIE-Schools Practicum Partnership Model (PPM) was introduced in 1999. The partnership concept in this model recognises the complimentary strengths of NIE and the schools and endeavours to join them together for the benefit of the trainee teachers (TT). NIE provides TTs the theoretical knowledge and principles that underpin practice while schools are best positioned to guide the TTs in acquiring the practical skills and knowledge in classroom teaching and management. The Partnership Model acknowledges that the practical, experiential knowledge of skilled teachers is a valuable element that deserves to be more widely used in teacher preparation (Cameron-Jones, 1997).

With the implementation of the PPM, specifically for the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme, the role of the schools has been extended to accept a greater responsibility for teacher preparation, while the NIE has had to redefine the role of its staff to best serve the model. A School Coordinating Mentor (SCM) is appointed in each school to assist the principal in coordinating the in-school Practicum and the TT mentoring scheme. The SCM oversees the work of all the

cooperating teachers and the TTs. (A detailed description of the SCM's role and responsibilities is provided in the next section.)

The SCM's counterpart at NIE is the NIE Supervision Coordinator (NSC) who supervises all the TTs (except those specialising in mother tongue and PE) in a particular school. Therefore under the PPM system schools will liaise with NIE through their respective SCM and NSC. This facilitates a more efficient working relationship between the school and NIE. As each NSC is assigned several schools his/her role has changed to one of quality assurance, making sure that standards across schools are equivalent.

Under the PPM the assessment of TTs in each school is now under the charge of the cooperating teacher (CT) instead of the NIE supervisor as was the case in the old system. At the end of each Practicum, the final award of grades to the TTs in the school will be jointly decided by a Practicum Assessment Panel chaired by the school principal, and its members include the SCM, NSC and possibly the main CTs of each TT. A diagrammatic representation of the key players and their relationships is given in Figure 1 below.



The School Coordinating Mentor

The School Coordinating Mentor (SCM) is appointed by the school principal to coordinate the in-school Practicum programme. One of the first tasks is the assigning of CTs to the TTs and preparing the teaching timetables for all TTs according to NIE guidelines. The SCM also arranges an induction programme for TTs at the beginning of the Practicum. As the group mentor and coach to the TTs the SCM encourages, guides and supports the TTs in their professional development. He/She arranges regular whole-group meetings with TTs for the purposes of sharing, and discussing personal and professional concerns, and facilitates their networking with colleagues in the school. He/she may also need to organize extra support for TTs who are in difficulty. As a group coach to the TTs, the SCM would arrange for TTs to observe lessons taught by teachers other than the CTs, organise group sharing sessions with TTs to review teaching performance, and plan classroom teaching and management seminars/workshops for the TTs.

The SCM, as leader of the school's team of CTs, oversees the performance of their CT tasks. In addition, they work with CTs in assessing the needs of TTs and developing appropriate practicum learning experiences for the latter. SCMs guide CTs in their coaching and mentoring of TTs, and maintain an overview of each TT's progress. At

the end of the practicum SCMs ensure the completion of TT assessment requirements in consultation with CTs.

The SCM also serves as the main liaison person between the school and NIE**,** which is represented by the NIE Supervision Coordinator (NSC). They work together on all matters pertaining to the Practicum learning experiences and performance of TTs in the school, which includes closer monitoring and supervision of "TTs at risk", and deciding on the final overall grades to be awarded to TTs at the end of the Practicum.

The Singapore Multipoint Desktop Video Conferencing Project (MDVC)

The Singapore MDVC project is a research project of the National Institute of Education. It was launched officially in May 1999 and is funded by the Singapore Ministry of Education. Researchers have taken advantage of the SingaporeONE broad band ATM network and ADSL telephone lines provided by SingTel Magix to link up trainee teachers (TT) and Senior Coordinating Mentors (SCM) in the eighteen participating schools with researchers at NIE. Having purchased their own CU-SeeMe Meeting Point server and end-user software, the researchers have been able to set up secure, password-protected chatrooms where professional discussions can take place. MDVC conferences are held regularly, using the White Pine CU-SeeMe system. Each on-line conference group is made up of five or six participants (comprising either TTs or SCMs) from different schools and one researcher at NIE. The conference members see and hear each other via their desktop computer in real time, and share ideas, experiences and materials on aspects of their TT or SCM tasks and responsibilities relating to the practicum. Through MDVC the potential for adding value to their practice during the practicum is thus greatly enhanced.

Objectives of Study

School Coordinating Mentors in this study were from the N1 cluster schools of the research project. They were encouraged to network and collaborate on working out the SCM roles, responsibilities and tasks. They were to do this in two ways: a) through MDVC, and b) through conventional meetings. The purpose of this study was to examine how the SCMs perceived the networking. How did the networking impact on their performance of the SCM role? Was there any significant difference in the perceptions of the two groups of SCMs using different modes of conferencing? What were some of the main benefits? What were some of the common problems experienced? Did networking among the SCMs enhance their effectiveness, thereby adding value to the practicum structured under the NIE-Schools Partnership Model?

Methodology

Sample

Four groups of SCMs were studied, 2 control groups and 2 experimental groups. Each group had 4 members. All groups comprised SCMs who met on a regular basis to discuss their role and responsibilities. SCMs of each control group held fortnightly meetings in one of their schools. The duration of each meeting was 1½ to 2 hours. The SCMs of the 2 experimental group met once a week, on-line, via the Multipoint Desktop Video Conferencing mode. Each of their meetings also lasted around 2 hours.

Instruments
The researchers conducted a post-practicum interview with the combined group of SCMs. A questionnaire was also designed to gather feedback from the SCMs who participated in this study. The first section dealt with “housekeeping” matters, documenting how often they met, for how long, etc, The second and main section comprised 15 items which revolved around how the SCMs perceived the quality of their meetings. The third and final section had an open-ended question asking the SCMs for their views and comments on any issues that were not covered in the structured items.

Results
The results of the responses from the members of the control and experimental groups are summarised in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Part I : Findings from the Questionnaire Responses

Table 1
A. Did the School Coordinating Mentors value the networking* opportunities?
(networking through the SCM meetings)*

Strongly Disagree - 1;
Disagree - 2;
Agree - 3;
Strongly Agree - 4

	MDVC Exper'l	Non_MDVC Control
	mean	
1. I looked forward to the meetings.	3.1	2.7
2. I did not think the meetings useful.	1.3	1.9
3. I would rather not have been involved.	1.5	1.4
4. I am keen to have another round.	3.1	2.9
5. I enjoyed the discussions with other SCMs.	3.4	3.0
6. I was able to work collaboratively.	3.6	2.9
7. I valued the networking.	3.6	3.1

As a group the SCMs (both experimental and control groups) felt positive about meeting with fellow SCMs in other schools to discuss matters related to the tasks and responsibilities of their role. This is seen in the mean scores for all the items above. They found the meetings very useful; they were glad to have been involved and would not mind having another round; and they valued the networking.

However, by comparison, it is clear that SCMs in the MDVC (or experimental) group were more keen about having the meetings as reflected in the significant differences between the respective mean scores for Items 1, 2, 4, and 7. The comments of the non-MDVC SCMs (control group) in the interviews and the open-ended items of the questionnaire indicated the reason for this. It was because travelling to and from meeting venues needed time - a total of up to three hours for each meeting in the case of one of the SCMs. Those SCMs conferencing via MDVC, of course, did not have this problem at all.

Conventional wisdom has it that face-to-face meetings provide the "personal touch" which cannot be experienced in virtual conferencing via MDVC. It came as a surprise, therefore, when the SCMs in the MDVC group responded more favorably to Items 5,

6, and 7. Compared to their control group counterparts, the former had significantly higher mean scores in having enjoyed the discussions, in being able to work collaboratively with the other SCMs, and in valuing the networking opportunity. It would appear that the MDVC participants had a much better networking experience compared to their counterparts in the control group.

One possible explanation is that the MDVC participants were able to meet on a weekly basis as no travelling was required, whereas the control group members only managed to come together on alternate weeks. The frequency of MDVC meetings and the need for the participants to work more closely to trouble-shoot the many teething technical problems associated with "first time doing it" could have helped to develop a better bonding among them. Each time a problem was resolved members would be congratulating each other on the success. The feelings members had in being pioneers in harnessing technology for teacher education purposes would have also contributed to the positive relationship building.

Table 2

B. What were the benefits gained from the networking*?

(networking through the SCM meetings)*

Strongly Disagree - 1;
Disagree - 2;
Agree - 3;
Strongly Agree - 4

	MDVC Exper'l	Non-MDVC Control
	mean	
1. The discussions were focussed on SCM issues.	3.7	2.7
2. Networking greatly enhanced my effectiveness as SCM.	3.6	2.4
3. Networking enhanced my professional development.	3.6	2.9
4. I gained a much clearer understanding of the SCM role.	3.6	3.0
5. Networking gave me much confidence to play the role.	3.4	3.0
6. My CTs & TTs benefited a great deal from this networking.	3.3	2.4

Networking among the SCMs was perceived by the MDVC group to be positively beneficial, though much less so by their control group counterparts. The difference was significant for all the items with Item 2 having the widest discrepancy. MDVC participants clearly felt that their effectiveness as SCM had been greatly enhanced; the control group members were apparently less sure.

One possible reason for this is given in the responses to Item 1. They show that the discussions of the SCM meetings via MDVC were far more focussed on SCM issues compared to those of the control group's. This is certainly one strong feature of MDVC discussions - the clear focus on professional dialogue among all participants. Having to log on and to sit at the computer desk for the MDVC the participants were keenly aware throughout the conferencing what the purpose of the link-up was. The "not so conducive" setting of talking to the screen could have discouraged social dialogue. Furthermore, as all MDVC sessions had to be kept within one hour to one hour and thirty minutes, the participants were more time conscious. In the case of face-to-face meetings it was natural for the participants to have digressions into social dialogue as they did not experience the "constraints" mentioned earlier.

Another likely explanation was that the MDVC participants were able to share checklists, instruments, and other documents readily and conveniently via email and

fax during the discussions as all these were accessible because they were conferencing from their own place of work. Certainly there was more collaboration among MDVC participants in this area. For the control group the use of email and fax for the sharing of observation documents, and work-plans etc was also carried out, except that it would be after the meetings and they had returned to their own schools before this could be done. By then the momentum would have been diminished, and the follow-through action might not be sufficiently timely to be useful.

Related to the issue of SCM effectiveness is that of the spin-off of benefits for the co-operating and trainee teachers (Item 6). As it was more convenient for the MDVC participants to share their experiences and materials, these then could be passed on to their respective CTs and TTs almost immediately after the conferencing sessions. Feedback on their use was again shared the following week, and this kept the momentum going and the enthusiasm level high among the MDVC participants. This was lacking in the slower networking process of the control group whose members only met once every two weeks. This could explain why the MDVC SCMs felt that they were more effective in the performance of their role (Item 2). It could also be the reason for the wide discrepancy in the two scores for Item 6.

Table 3

C. What were the problems?

Strongly Disagree - 1; Disagree - 2; Agree - 3; Strongly Agree - 4	MDVC Exper'l	Non-MDVC Control
	mean	
1. I had difficulty making time for the SCM meetings.	1.9	2.4
2. The meetings took up too much of my time.	2.0	2.1

While the SCM meetings did take up their time the participants were of the opinion that this was not excessive. However, not surprisingly, it was the control group who experienced greater difficulty in making time for the meetings since for them travelling was involved. This saving of travelling time is a definite advantage that MDVC has over conventional conferencing.

Part II : Findings from the Group Interview

All the participants (from both the Experimental and Control groups) agreed that the meetings with other SCMs together with the NIE supervisors provided a useful forum for clarifying NIE requirements and SCM role expectations. Some of the groups' achievements included the following: sharing successful or useful practices in the practicum, affirming individual practices, sharing induction programmes, developing focussed observation checklists, and discussing the evaluation of trainee teachers in their teaching performance during the practicum.

A. The Experimental (MDVC) group

Once again they gave an emphatic endorsement of the *time saving* advantage of MDVC and *"time was spent more fruitfully on discussions*". MDVC made it possible for meetings to be held weekly and this was useful given the short duration (9 weeks) of the practicum and timeliness in sharing and discussing SCM problems was

important. They were able to clarify doubts frequently. Useful tips and strategies could be speedily exchanged among the SCMs and disseminated among their respective cooperating and trainee teachers.

On-line meetings gave the MDVC participants much *flexibility*. Meetings could be re-arranged with little difficulty and even called off at the last minute without causing much inconvenience. As the members were still in their respective schools they simply resumed their own work when this happened - *"hence no time wasted in travelling to venue to find meeting cancelled."* Substitutes could easily be found to attend the sessions when necessary. Flexibility also meant that the mode of the meetings could be varied easily. Cooperating teachers and trainee teachers could be (and were) invited to *"come on board"* and join in the discussions and share their experiences as and when required without being inconvenienced.

Again, it was pointed out by the MDVC participants that the *"meetings were more focussed; there were less digressions"*. However, this was both regarded as a positive as well as negative feature. While they had professional dialogues during the meetings, the discussions were also seen as being *"task-oriented"* and hence "*less personal than face-to-face meetings*". The participants also felt that *"communicating via MDVC was not so natural"*. This was due to the technical problems encountered such as frozen images on the monitor screen, and poor audio reception that caused the voices to sound crackled. Having to troubleshoot the technical problems occasionally was a waste of time and could be frustrating.

B. The Control (Non-MDVC) Group

The participants agreed that the SCM discussions *"helped to affirm what one was doing right and helped us to pick up new ideas on how to play the role of SCM more efficiently and effectively"*. Although the meetings *"took up time that could have been used doing other things, it was time well spent."*

The main complaint which the control group had, as expected, was that travelling to the meeting venues took up much time. When meetings had to be cancelled at the last minute and not all the participants could be informed in time, it resulted in much time wastage. This was most frustrating when the participants had had to forgo some important school activities in order to go for those cancelled/postponed meetings.

Summary

The findings have shown that school coordinating mentors clearly appreciated the benefits gained from networking with fellow SCMs and NIE supervisors. For the control group these benefits outweighed the inconvenience of having to travel to the meeting venues and the additional time this took. The collaboration among SCMs of both groups had brought concrete results as seen in the sharing of induction programmes, the development of observation checklists, and the sharing of useful and successful practicum practices and procedures. Such structured networking, whether on-line or face-to-face, had greatly enhanced the professional development of the SCMs who felt that they were more confident and were able to perform their role more effectively.

It was the Experimental group who held conferences via MDVC that reaped the greater benefits from networking. This mode of conferencing allowed them to meet

weekly and enabled the participants to share experiences and materials in a timely manner, and these were readily disseminated to their cooperating teachers and trainee teachers. This almost instant multiplying effect was a distinct advantage enjoyed by MDVC. It was not surprising, therefore, that the Experimental group of SCMs when compared to the Control group were clearly much more satisfied with the experience. They were more confident and perceived themselves to be more effective in the performance of their SCM role.

Conclusion

The School Coordinating Mentor, a new position in the school created under the NIE-Schools Partnership Model introduced in 1999, plays a key role in the successful implementation of the PPM model. Teachers appointed as SCMs were given preparations for their role through seminars, workshops, and training courses. As there is only one SCM per school, teachers who take on this role have to work out the tasks and responsibilities in their respective schools on their own. Many may still be unsure about their role. This is where networking and collaboration among SCMs of different schools will prove very helpful.

In this study the SCMs collaborated through regular meetings either the conventional way or through MDVC. All the participants endorsed the positive impact of such networking on their confidence and effectiveness in the performance of the SCM role and on their own professional development in general. The findings also showed that the benefits were significantly greater for the group that had their sharing on-line using MDVC. The main reason was that MDVC made possible more frequent meetings as it required no travelling. It was also because of the convenience in sharing and exchange of experiences and materials, the time-saving advantage, and the focussed, professional dialogue during the meetings. These results are a clear demonstration of the importance of networking in facilitating the professional development of teachers, and the great potential there is in harnessing modern technological advances (in this case, MDVC) for improving teacher education and teacher professional development.