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Title	Strengthening the partnership model: The use of e-mail to gain insight into preservice teachers' experiences during teaching practice
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Source	<i>MERA-ERA Joint Conference, Malacca, Malaysia, 1-3 December 1999</i>

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**STRENGTHENING THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL:  
THE USE OF E-MAIL TO GAIN INSIGHT INTO PRESERVICE TEACHERS'  
EXPERIENCES DURING TEACHING PRACTICE**

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Abstract: Chellappah, Chiew, and Gopinathan (1999) have outlined recent changes in postgraduate teacher preparation at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. Among the changes outlined was a revamp of teaching practice. The teaching practice was to be changed into a 'Partnership Model' where the schools would take more responsibility for developing the teachers. Also, in the new system the teaching practice supervisor was to be known as a NIE Supervision Coordinator (NSC), three classroom observations were to be reduced to one and the NSC would liaise with a School Coordinating Mentor (SCM). This paper gives an account of how one supervisor used electronic mail in order to communicate with one of the trainee teachers under his supervision. Results show that sustained dialogue via e-mail benefited both the supervisor and the teacher trainee.

**Introduction**

Chellappah, Chiew, and Gopinathan (1999) have outlined recent changes in postgraduate teacher preparation at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. Among the changes outlined was a revamp of teaching practice. The teaching practice was to be changed into a 'Partnership Model' where the schools would take more responsibility for developing the teachers. Also, in the new system the teaching practice supervisor was to be known as a NIE Supervision Coordinator (NSC), three classroom observations were to be reduced to one and the NSC would liaise with a School Coordinating Mentor (SCM). This paper gives an account of how one NSC used electronic mail in order to communicate with the trainee teachers under his supervision. The paper starts with a brief outline of the Partnership Model and next outlines a case study of the contents of an e-mail 'discussion' with one post-graduate diploma in Education (PGDE) secondary student in Singapore.

**The Partnership Model**

Chellappah, Chiew, and Gopinathan (1999) say that the Partnership Model involves more collaboration between NIE and the schools. The Model works as follows: the school principal is in overall charge of the trainee teachers in the school. The principal then appoints a school coordinating mentor (SCM) from the school who takes care of the NIE trainees in the school during their practicum. The SCM will appoint one or two cooperating teachers (CT) to guide each NIE trainee. The SCM also works closely with the NIE supervision coordinator (NSC). The NSC supervises all the trainee teachers (regardless of subject) in the school and acts as overall coordinator of the practicum. At the end of the practicum period a practicum panel meets to decide the grades of the trainee teachers. This panel is chaired by the school principal and is composed of the SCM and NSC (for a detailed discussion of the Partnership Model, see Chellappah, Chiew, and Gopinathan, 1999).

This author, acting as NSC, used electronic mail to correspond with student teachers under his supervision in order to gain insight into their experiences during the period of the practicum. A number of issues were raised and discussed that would have otherwise been ignored due to time constraints. What follows is an account of one case study (because of space limitations) of some e-

mail communications between one trainee teacher from the PGDE program. I report on this case study because the trainee teacher encountered some problems during his practicum period that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

### Case Study

Following the Partnership Model where each supervisor would be responsible for all the trainee teachers in one school, I had twelve trainee teachers under my supervision in three schools. These students were from different subject backgrounds from English Language teaching to History teaching. In order to keep up with what each trainee teacher was experiencing during his or her practice teaching, I asked the NIE students to keep up a dialogue with me on e-mail during the entire practicum period. The students were required to write as often as they had wanted and to use any format they felt comfortable with. What follows is an outline of e-mail 'discussions' I had with one NIE trainee teacher (Tan, a pseudonym) throughout his practicum period. This trainee teacher was teaching in a neighborhood secondary school in Singapore for six weeks as part of his practicum period. The case study starts with Tan's first entry in his e-mail 'journal' during the first week of his teaching. He wrote:

The first, and so far, only class I've had with the Sec 2 Normal Academic [subject] class was a minor disaster. At first, half the class went to the far side of the classroom, and disregarded me. Then the other more interested half got infected, and tuned out. It didn't help that one pupil would stroll up and down, talking to them.

But he was not too alarmed and was still ready to teach. He wrote:

Well, I'm not really disappointed, since I had expected this. The mischievous element are deliberately being provocative, and so far I've had to confiscate 2 rubber bands, some paper darts, a lighter, and a pencil case that was being used as a rugby ball.

He was also concerned about one pupil's behavior and this pupil was to be a constant challenge for him throughout his teaching practice. He wrote:

There is also one pupil who has psychopathic tendencies, and they tell me not to raise my voice at him. Even the other pupils leave him alone. In short, this situation is now completely beyond my classroom management capabilities, though I am undaunted in the aspect of content instruction. At least they still hand in their exercise books.

As I was going to visit the school to make my one observation under the Partnership Model, both Tan and I agreed (during a phone call) that I should observe this problem class as he said it might help him control them more. He obviously needed a confidence boost for teaching this class at this stage of his practicum. I agreed to visit this class. He wrote:

Could you make your entrance as surreptitiously as possible (i.e. by the back door), as they tend to be on their better behavior when someone new appears? That's what they did to me, the first time...Thanks for being so sympathetic and supportive on the phone that day!

I then visited the class and observed him teach. I sent him an e-mail after the observation in which I shared my concern about the disruptive nature of some of the students in the class; I also suggested he ask the SCM for more help:

I have been thinking a lot about your class and I am happy to have had a chance to see the disruptive nature of the students. I also worry about why you do not disclose your full frustrations [to the SCM] with the problems of this class (this is what I am here for too!). If you

don't at this stage (because you think you SHOULD be able to handle this?), you may become burned out too early in your teaching life!

Tan replied that he was still trying to figure out what to do with the class. He was especially interested in trying to help 'save' the students who wanted to study but were bullied by the other disruptive ones. He wrote:

Re the [problem] class, well, I'm still trying to work out a viable solution. My priority is still to save those I believe are interested in studying. So this Wednesday I have arranged to meet some of these pupils in the canteen after class hours.

Nevertheless, he felt frustrated at his inability to get through to the pupils and blamed himself for this problem. He wrote:

I am so furious, and defeated, by their [the pupils] apparent foolishness and shortsightedness. I wish I could wake them up somehow, but I don't know how. This goes beyond their academic performance; they are screwing up their lives, and that of their hapless and more conscientious classmates'.

I had suggested that Tan try to have a cooperating teacher in this classroom with him when he teaches. Additionally, I (as his supervisor) had informed the SCM about the problems Tan was having with this particular class. However, in this case, the SCM informed me that the original teacher was on sick leave and so another teacher would have to be taken from somewhere else to 'supervise' Tan while he was teaching.

Nevertheless, Tan told me that he was getting good support from all levels of teachers in the school. For example, regarding the role the SCM, the CT's and other teachers in the school played, Tan wrote that all were very helpful to him:

They [SCM, the CT's and other teachers] also have been most cooperative; my [subject] CT helped me get out of a mess (during one of her observations) when my pacing went way too fast. She gave me extra material to tide over the extra time. My mentor [SCM] has also observed me, and has given me tips regarding closure of lessons. Generally I've been given a lot of advice regarding both lesson planning and execution, and interaction with pupils.

## **Discussion**

The discipline problems in this class did not go away for Tan. However, he was not defeated by the experience. On the contrary, he learned a lot from the pupils' reactions or non-reactions and how to cope with such a disruptive class. Additionally, it should be noted that his other classes had gone very well. However, with this disruptive class, Tan was learning about the reality of teaching. His 'reality shock' (Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1985) was severe and as such it was important for me as supervisor to monitor and encourage the trainee teacher through the 'shock'. It was important to monitor this problem situation because as Zeichner and Tabachnick (1985) have said the 'reality shock' can destabilize already anxious teachers and have adverse effects beyond their practice teaching.

From a supervisor's point of view, I can say that I would probably not have known what was going on had I not kept up contact with Tan by electronic mail throughout the practicum. Electronic-mail communications enabled me to keep a close watch on what was developing during this trainee teacher's practicum. So, when I went to the final meeting arranged by the practicum panel, I was able to take part in the conversations about Tan's experiences with this problem class.

Tan also gained in this mode of communication. He wrote that the use of e-mail for him during the practicum was very reassuring, especially as he had one disruptive class. He wrote:

E-mailing supervisors as a means of keeping in contact, quite simply it's absolutely invaluable. It's far more convenient and versatile than leaving messages on answering machines. Probably the greatest advantage it has is the psychological reassurance it has on the trainee. It allows a 'conversation' to take place at both person's convenience, so it is reassuring to the trainee that he does not have to worry about catching the supervisor at the right time.

Even though communication via e-mail is convenient for both supervisor and trainee teacher, it must also be pointed out that these types of discussions are not without their problems. One such problem involves the issue of disclosure. Some teacher trainees may be reluctant to share their problems for fear that this would reflect negatively on their grades. Tan had such a worry that his failure to control a class (that other more experienced teachers could not control too) could have reflected negatively on his final grade. However, it is this teacher educator's opinion that the practicum should be a learning experience and that trainee teachers should not think that they have to display knowledge to the 'expert' supervisor (Farrell, 1996). On the contrary, trainee teachers should and do use the practicum to make mistakes for if they were not allowed to do this, what is the point of having a practicum. After all it is called teaching *practice*.

Consequently, I would suggest that supervisors working with the Partnership Model institute a similar system of communication with the trainee teachers under their supervision. By having trainee teachers communicating via e-mail, supervisors can monitor experiences closer than if such communications were carried out via the telephone. The trainee teachers under my supervision were given a choice about how frequently they could communicate via e-mail and consequently some trainee teachers did not communicate very much. Thus, supervisors have to insist that each trainee teacher communicate by e-mail at least once-a-week during the practicum period. If this communication is only to say "All is going well", at least the supervisor can be reasonably sure that the trainees are not experiencing the type of problems Tan experienced as reported in this paper.

### **Conclusion**

This case study of e-mail communications between a supervisor and a trainee teacher outlines the benefits of continual discussions throughout the practicum period. The results of this case study show that e-mail communication between the trainee teacher and the NIE supervisor provided support for the trainee teacher that would have otherwise been difficult to achieve (say over the telephone). The results of this study suggest that by establishing a stronger link between the NSC and the teacher trainees by way of electronic mail, supervisors can have opportunities to better understand the perceptions of trainee teachers in this new Partnership Model.

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