

Reasons for Participation: Experiences from a Student Teacher Web Forum

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ABSTRACT

A web case forum was built to encourage experience sharing of student teachers during the internship. Web tracking logs, observation, and questionnaires were used to assess levels of participating. Student teachers were divided into two groups of active and not-so-active participants according to their log-in times. Their patterns of participation and reasons for participation were analyzed. It was found that for more active participants, their perception of the web case forum were more positive. Constraints and benefits were analyzed to understand the reasons for participation.

1: INTRODUCTION

Student teaching is one of the most stressful experiences in teacher training. Student teachers have to face challenges from a variety of aspects of teaching. Although those problem situations present great opportunities for learning, they could, however, become source for anxiety, stress, and lack of confidence for student teachers [6]. Without proper support, student teachers or beginning teachers could feel desperate and even want to quit [1]. Teacher attrition studies found that the most of teachers quit within 2- 5 years of their career [7] [9]. The support areas that student teachers need included not only knowledge, skills, but also emotions. Their source of support comes from both formal and informal relations [9]. Although most of the teacher training institutions provided support personnel such as supervising teachers and cooperative teachers, student teachers still seek out a lot of support from other teachers the same school, peer student teachers, or friends and family for practical and emotional support [4].

Internet enhanced communications or computer mediated communications (CMC) have provided additional support for student teachers during internship [2][8]. As the Internet technology becomes more accessible and popular in the home and school settings, it has become a more viable means to support student teachers using technology. The issues in designing such support systems have involved more than technology. Social and personal issues could be as important if not more important than technical issues of using technology [5].

CaseForum is a web-based discussion forum for student teachers to exchange and discuss their real-life problem cases during the internship. In a 2004 study,

where a qualitative approach including analyzing interviews and transcripts of the web discussion, the results found that student teachers could receive instructional knowledge, problem-solving strategies, emotional support, and professional commitment from the web discussion [3]. This study attempts to find from a more quantitative approach, if there is a difference in the perception of participants and non-participants about the helpfulness of CaseForum in developing their reflectivity and problem-solving ability.

2: METHOD

Thirty volunteers from a cohort of 88 student teachers to participate in CaseForum during September 2005 to January 2006. Each of them was asked to write three cases during the five months period. They also were asked to write at least 3 comments each month to other's cases. The CaseForum was password protected. Only those 30 student teachers who volunteered to participate have access to it. All cases were written by those participating student teachers, with suggestions and revisions from the research team. After cases were written and revised, pseudonyms were used for posted cases.

A web-tracking system was installed to record all the actions from student teachers. Their log in time and frequencies were saved in a database. The web log tracking data was used to evaluate the level of participation of student teachers. According to the logged-on time on reading the cases, the participants were divided into two groups—about the average and below the average—Group A was more active participants and Group B was less active participants. The result matched the observation of the participants. Group A were those who come to meetings on line, submit cases on time, and talked more during the focused group. Group B, on the other hand, often showed up late during the meetings, and only submitted cases after many phone calls of reminders.

A questionnaire was developed to assess student teacher's satisfaction towards the use of the CaseForum and their reasons for dissatisfaction. The questionnaire was distributed at the end of the study, and it contained two parts. Part I was the positive aspects of the CaseForum and Part II was the problems of the CaseForum. The results of the questionnaire was analyzed and compared for two groups.

In addition, two focused interviewed were conducted during the five-month periods for more detail questions.

3: RESULTS

Thirty questionnaires were distributed and 29 valid ones were received. The result shows that Group A has more positive views, and less negative views about their experiences of using CaseForum (see Table 3). Table 1 shows the mean scores for every item in part I of the positive views. Group A student teachers felt that through reading the cases, they were not feeling as lonely, and were able to find solutions to their problems. Both reading and writing cases have helped them to become more reflective on their own problems.

Table 1. Positive views about using CaseForum

	Group A	Group B
1. Reading other's cases was helpful to me.	4.2	3.9
2. The comments from experienced teachers are more in-depth.	4.1	3.7
3. I don't feel as lonely when I see cases that are similar to my situation.	4.5*	3.9
4. I feel lucky when I realize my situation is not as bad as some others.	3.8	4.0
5. Reading other's cases helped me to reflect on my own problems.	4.3*	3.7
6. I am able to look at my own problem with different aspects after reading other's comments on my cases.	4.3	4.1
7. Other's comments have changed my opinions and ways of doing things.	4.0	3.5
8. Other's comments have provided solution to my problems.	3.9*	3.2
9. I often use web to search and download information.	4.3	4.0
10. I often participate in web discussion forum.	3.7*	2.7
11. I am good at expressing myself with written text	3.9	3.3
12. I can reflect on my own problems when I am writing a case.	4.4*	3.7
13. I feel better after I can write down my problems.	4.2	3.6
14. I feel a sense of achievement when I comment on other's cases.	3.8	3.2
15. I feel that it was meaningful to help others by commenting on their cases.	4.1	4.0
16. If I want find a reference to my own problem, I will log on to CaseForum.	3.3	3.1
Mean	4.05*	3.61

Note: 1=Strongly disagree; 5=Strongly agree

Table 2 shows that student teachers in Group B, as compared to those in Group A, were more likely to feel that they don't have time to read cases, and the cases posted on CaseForum have little to do with their problems, and have hard time to find things to write about as cases. The mean score of each item also shows that both Group A and Group B have some similarities. For example, everyone seemed to have no problem in accessing computers and the Internet (#18), and after they have adjusted to the school environment they were in, they felt that they have less need to view other's cases.

Table 2. Negative views about using CaseForum

	Group A	Group B
17. I can't seem to find time to use CaseForum.	2.3	3.3*
18. I don't have proper Internet connection on my computer.	1.7	2.1
19. I feel that the cases posted on the web have nothing to do with me.	1.9	2.9*
20. I don't have similar problems as those posted on the CaseForum.	1.9	2.9*
21. I feel there should be richer content on the CaseForum.	2.9	3.0
22. After reading the comments on my cases, I still don't think I need to change anything.	3.1	3.4
23. I think many problems in student teaching are not appropriate for open discussion.	2.3	2.4
24. I am afraid I'll expose my identity during the case discussion.	2.7	2.4
25. I rarely find solutions to my problems through the cases.	2.7	3.1
26. I don't know what to write.	2.7	3.7*
27. After I have adjusted to my environment, I no longer need to write or discuss about cases as much.	3.7	3.9
Mean	2.54	3.01*

Note: 1=Strongly disagree; 5=Strongly agree

Overall, although Group A and Group B agreed on some surface benefits of reading and writing cases (for example, #6 & #15), they differ in several aspects of realization of the benefits to their own student teaching, especially to reflect on the problems and to find solutions. The combined results in Table 3 showed that whether the people actually using the web or not makes differences in their perceptions of the tool at the end.

Table 3: Mean comparison for Group A and Group B

	n	Positive views		Negative views	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Group A	15	4.05	0.67	2.54	0.96
Group B	14	3.61	0.77	3.01	0.95
t-test		0.0212		0.0166	

4: DISCUSSION

The result of this study confirms that level of participation in a web discussion forum could make differences at the end about how helpful was the forum to them. Several interesting findings can be summarized about the constraints to participating in a web forum for student teachers, and the benefits of such experiences.

4.1: TECHNOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

Access to computer and Internet could be a potential constraint for student teachers to participate in a web-based discussion forum. In the past, universities often need to supply student teachers laptop computers in order to encourage them to stay connected with their home university. With the advance in technological infrastructure at schools, especially in Taiwan, the access to a computer with Internet connection did not seem to be problem for student teachers. All student teachers in this study indicated that they often use web to search and download information (Table 1, #9). Having access to technology, however, does not guarantee technological proficiency for a user. This study found that student teachers who were more active participants of CaseForum (Group A) also had more experiences in participating in other web discussion forums. Problems such a not knowing what to write could also be associated with writing proficiency on the web (Table 2, #26). If student teachers could be more accustomed to the web forum environment and protocol, they may have more ease in using it for learning.

4.2: TIME CONSTRAINTS

Student teachers are going through an intensive period of learning. Their responsibilities were overloading, and their tasks were overwhelming. Lack of time has been a major issue in the lives of student teachers. If time were a fixed factor, one should see it as an equal barrier for the student teacher to participate in the CaseForum. In this study, however, it showed that lack of time is not equally cited for two groups of participants as barrier to use CaseForum (Table 2, #17). It suggested that if the student teachers felt they could learn from the case reading and writing, they would value the experiences and thus willing to spend more time on it. The other explanation would be, if the student teachers were willing to spend more time on writing and reading cases, they may have better chance to discover its value and benefit.

4.3: FINDING PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

One of the main purposes of CasForum was to help student teachers to broaden their views and find solutions to their problems. Finding solutions to a problems involves reflecting on the problem, examining it with different perspectives, and forming workable

solutions. Fro the results of the study, Group A seemed to be able to do all of the above (Table 1, #5, #8, #12). Table 2, on the other hand, showed a more conservative picture of having changed ideas or found practical solutions. It therefore may be too optimistic to say that CaseForum would provide definite solutions to all the case problems, but it has the potential to present different ideas, stimulate thinking, and come up with a solution one day.

4.4: FINDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

One of the strengths of web discussion forum was its ability to provide emotional support for the participants. The same benefit was presented in CasForum. Student teachers often worked alone and without proper social support could feel desperate when encountering problems. CaseForum helped student teachers, at least for more active participants, to feel not so lonely, simply by seeing others having similar cases (Table 1, #3). Although this questionnaire did not ask specific items about wanting to quit, there were ample evidences about how prolonged difficult emotions such as loneliness could damage a person's confidence. If the student teachers by reading cases can improve their emotional states with a healthier outlook about themselves, in a long run, perhaps it could reduce teacher drop-out rate.

4.5: ADJUSTMENT IN STUDENT TEACHER LIFE

CaseForum provided a collection of real cases in student teaching. At the beginning of the internship, student teachers faces difficult decisions in new environment and did not know what to do. After a while, however, student teachers would get used to the environment, and fall in a routine. At that time, previous problems many have been solved, suppressed, ignored, or no longer exist. Therefore, the sense of problems or the need for solutions can be reduced, as in the case of this study (Table 2, #27). When the participation declined after 4-5 months of participation, it may be a good sign for the student teachers.

This study shows that participation in a technology-enhanced environment is a complicated issue. It involved technical, social, practical, and time factors. It was important to ask explore those detailed issues within the participating groups, in order to understand the patterns and further provide services to the right participants at the right time.

5: REFERENCES

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