

FINDING THE SWEET SPOT: CONNECTING PERSONAL, CLASSROOM, AND FIELD-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES THROUGH THE USE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PLANS

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how teacher candidates in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program are using a professional learning plan to document and demonstrate their achievement by digitally connecting their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences. Findings suggest that teacher candidates use the professional learning plan to digitally connect their learning by: having all their program competency artifacts in one place to connect, critique, and reflect upon; being able to document their professional growth; journaling in each of their courses; and peer mentoring and collaboration.

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how teacher candidates (TCs) in a Canadian Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program were using a professional learning plan (ePortfolio) to document their achievement of the knowledge, skills, and attributes (KSA's) related to the Alberta Education Interim Teaching Certification by digitally connecting their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences.

The TCs use digital applications such as Google Sites to create their professional learning plans, which currently consist of the components described in Table 1.

Table 1

Key Components of the Professional Learning Plan

Page	Description
Home	Introduction and overview to personal teaching goals and aspirations
Resume	Documenting personal experience related to the K to 6 teaching profession
Teaching Evaluations	Evaluations by mentor teachers from K to 6 school placement and practicum experiences
Teaching Philosophy	Ongoing development of a personal teaching philosophy
Journal	Link to course and practicum journals in Google Docs
Course Reflections	A brief summary of the courses that students have taken at MRU. These include a link to the MRU course description and key "learning take-aways" from each course.
Teaching Competency	Planning, facilitation, assessment, environment, professional roles & responsibilities, with related artifacts, reflections, goals, and strategies

All teacher candidates (TCs) in this program are currently required to design, develop, and maintain a professional learning plan (PLP) throughout the four years of the program. The purpose of this learning plan is for students to document and articulate professional growth and development related to the B.Ed. program competencies: planning, facilitation, assessment, environment, and professional responsibilities. This is the space for TCs to develop and communicate self-understanding and create learning goals and strategies that will allow them to be most successful in their future teaching practice (Johnsen, 2012).

The questions that guided this research study were:

1. How is the professional learning plan process (PLP) helping teacher candidates digitally connect their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences?
2. What challenges are the TCs encountering with the PLP process?
3. Recommendations for improving the PLP process?

Guiding Frameworks

The Alberta Education Interim KSAs, the Leader in Me, and professional learning plan frameworks from local school districts and other post-secondary institutions were used to guide this study. There are seventeen Interim KSAs, which have been grouped into the following five categories (Government of Alberta, 2012):

1. Planning
2. Facilitation
3. Assessment
4. Environment
5. Professional responsibilities

These five categories were used to develop the learning outcomes and associated assessment activities for each of the courses and field-based experiences in the B.Ed. program (<http://tinyurl.com/bedcompetenices>). TCs maintain a Google Docs journal (<http://tinyurl.com/bedjournal>) to reflect on their learning experiences and develop a professional learning plan in Google Sites to document how they are achieving the Interim KSAs (<http://tinyurl.com/bedplp>).

The Leader in Me framework was developed by Sean Covey (Covey, Summers, & Hatch, 2014) and is based on *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 2004) created by his father Stephen. The rationale for using these seven habits is to help the TCs use their PLPs to develop a “growth mindset” where they are taking responsibility for their learning and collaboratively supporting their peers in the program. Table 2 provides a description of the seven habits associated with this framework.

Table 2

Seven Habits of Happy Kids (Covey, 2008)

Habit	Description
<i>1. Be proactive – you’re in charge</i>	Take charge of your own life and stop playing the victim
<i>2. Begin with the end in mind – have a plan</i>	A goal not written is only a wish
<i>3. Put first things first – work first, then play</i>	Do what you have to do so you can do what you want to do?
<i>4. Think win-win – everyone can win</i>	TEAM – together everyone achieves more
<i>5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood – listen before you talk</i>	Listening – less than 10 percent of communication is contained in the words we use
<i>6. Synergize - Together is better</i>	Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much
<i>7. Sharpen the saw – balance feels best</i>	Let us never be too busy sawing to take time to sharpen the saw

A number of school districts and postsecondary institutions have already developed guidelines for professional learning plans, and Table 3 demonstrates the five frameworks that were used to inform this study.

Table 3

Professional Learning Plan (ePortfolio) Frameworks

Institution	Framework focus
Calgary Board of Education	Student learning plan - documenting and articulating personal learning processes (see http://habaneroconsulting.com/customer-portals)
University of Victoria	Personal growth (Hopper & Sanford, 2010)
University of Houston	Storytelling (see http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/)
Alverno College	Competency and curriculum mapping (Ehley, 2006)
University of Auckland	Sense of wonder and inquiry (Lee & Pohio, 2012)

Our hope was that these guiding frameworks would empower the teacher candidates to use their PLPs to document how they were achieving the required teaching competencies by digitally connecting their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences. Conversely, we also wanted to study how these frameworks were creating challenges for the TCs. Finally, we wanted to gain insight and recommendations from the TCs with regards to improving the PLP process.

Methods of Investigation

An action research approach was used to direct this study. Gilmore, Krantz and Ramirez (1986) define action research as:

Aim(ing) to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process. (p.161)

In addition, Stringer (2014) indicates that action research is a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as a part of a *community of inquiry* to improve the way they address issues and solve problems. This research approach should result in some practical outcome related to the lives or work of the participants, which in this case is the effective digital integration of personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences in a B.Ed. program.

We utilized this research approach as we wanted the TCs to be *active* rather than *passive* participants in the study. Our hope is that by actively participating in this research process the TCs will now have the insight and confidence to facilitate a PLP process for their own K to 6 students in the future.

Data Collection

A mixture of quantitative (i.e., student surveys) and qualitative (i.e., faculty interviews) were collected. During the fall 2015 semester, the co-investigators conducted semi-structured interviews with faculty members in the B.Ed. program, which were digitally recorded and transcribed (n=9). All teacher candidates enrolled in the four year B.Ed. program (n=187) were invited to complete an online survey during the final week of the Fall 2015 semester by the two undergraduate student research assistants (USRA). The purpose of this survey was to collect data about how students had connected their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences to document and demonstrate how they were achieving the Interim KSAs. The SurveyMonkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.net>) application was used to administer this online survey. The studies two USRAs and the co-investigators collated the survey results and posted them to an editable google document. During the month of December 2015, students and faculty were invited to add comments and recommendations to this google doc.

Data analysis

A constant comparative approach was used to identify patterns, themes, and categories of analysis related to the three research questions that “emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1990, p. 390). Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were calculated for the online survey items using MS Excel. Comments and recommendations from the faculty interviews and student focus group were added directly to the google document.

Findings

The findings and key themes for this study are reported for each of the three research questions:

1. How is the professional learning plan process (PLP) helping teacher candidates digitally connect their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences?
2. What challenges are the TCs encountering with the PLP process?
3. Recommendations for improving the PLP process?

Digital connections

The faculty interview and TC survey results indicate the teacher education candidates perceive that the professional learning plan process helps them digitally connect their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences by:

1. Having all my learning artifacts in one place to connect, critique, and reflect upon;
2. Documenting professional growth;
3. Journaling in each education course; and
4. Peer mentoring and collaboration.

In terms of having all of the learning artifacts in one place, TCs commented that “I think the professional learning plan really brings together all the components of the program, as well as weaving in our personal experiences” (TC survey participant 17) and “It has for sure helped me connect because I’ve had to think more about the things that I was noticing in the elementary school classrooms and having to connect it with the Education course content” (TC survey participant 44).

With regards to documenting professional growth, one student stated that the learning plan process “forced me to see the connections and relevance between personal and professional life” (TC survey participant 23), and another student explained that “It allows me to display what I am learning while being able to go back and reflect on what I have learnt. As well it allows me to build on my prior knowledge and to create a stronger professional learning plan” (TC survey participant 33).

Another student commented about the relationship between her course journals and the professional learning plan “I have been able to include artifacts and pictures from my experiences in my learning plan that I have first documented in my field journals” (TC survey participant 6).

And, finally, a number of students emphasized the importance of the peer mentoring and collaboration that was involved in the construction of their professional learning plans, “I found that when I created my learning plan I was able to input all my experiences into one space and other people were able to see them and provide me with feedback, this made our class stay connected and become a community of learners” (TC survey participant 39) and “It has helped me to become more creative by seeing how the other students in my class think and learning from each of them” (TC survey participant 29).

Challenges

Findings obtained from the faculty interviews suggest that there is currently a tension with the professional learning plan process between being a surface versus a deep learning experience for the B.Ed. students. Faculty perceive that many TCs view the learning plan simply as a “check-list” or “set of hoops to jump through” in order to demonstrate their achievement of the Interim KSAs.

In addition, the teacher candidates identified a series of challenges, which have been categorized into the following three themes:

1. Clarity of purpose;
2. Time; and
3. Digital technology support.

The survey results demonstrated that the teacher candidates are increasingly less clear about the purpose of the professional learning plan as they progress through the program (Table 4).

Table 4

Clarity on the Purpose of the Professional Learning Plan

Program Year	Percentage of TCs clear or very clear on the purpose
One	78%
Two	70%
Three	58%
Four	46%

The TCs indicate this downward trend is because the PLP is not being applied to any of the core 3rd and 4th year education courses. “You only work on the portfolio in 1st or 2nd and there is no opportunity to work on it in 3rd year classes or 4th” (TC survey participant 132) and “It would be have been more useful if the PLP was implemented correctly in every course. Some professors emphasized its importance more than others, and, therefore, there were large gaps in between updates and various inconsistencies that we were required to fix on our own” (TC survey participant 87).

TCs from each year of the program also commented on the challenge of finding the time to work on their PLPs. In the first year, “It does take up a lot of time but overall, I found it useful” (TC survey participant 14) while in the second year, “The least useful part of the professional learning plan process is that it requires time and a lot of thinking to plot information down on each page” (TC survey participant 53). These comments were echoed in the third year, “Unfortunately, time is always an issue. I felt as if I may not have had enough time to include insightful artifacts to my PLP” (TC survey participant 114) and emphasized in the fourth year, “Learning plans are mentioned, but we never focus on them or given time to work on them in 4th year. They seem to always be an afterthought, and now I feel like I will be scrambling” (TC survey participant 156).

In addition, the TCs, especially in the 1st and 2nd years, emphasized the need for more digital technology support for the creation and maintenance of their PLPs. In the first year, “The least helpful part was having to figure out Google Sites on my own after only one workshop. I feel we didn't spend enough time in creating it in class with our peers” (TC survey participant 27) and in the second year, “I am still not 100% comfortable with how Google Sites works. I think it would be really helpful to have a workshop to remind us of the things we learned in year one on how to create and maintain our professional learning plan” (TC survey participant 63).

Recommendations

In terms of creating a deeper learning experience for the TCs, the faculty members recommended that this process should be revised in order to allow TCs to “tell their stories about how they are developing their professional teaching identities through the digital connection of their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences” (Faculty interview 3). In order to achieve this outcome we have begun to examine the digital storytelling research literature (Barrett, 2006; Ehiyazaryan-White, 2012; Jenkins & Lonsdale, 2007; Johnsen, 2012; Robin, 2005; Schank, 2012).

The teacher candidates who participated in this research study provided a number of ideas and suggestions for improving the professional learning process. The research team has distilled this “wish list” into four key recommendation themes:

1. Designated PLP course for each semester of the B.Ed. program;
2. Goal setting versus scrapbooking approach;
3. Peer mentorship support; and
4. Mentor teacher involvement.

One of the key challenges identified by the TCs was the lack of consistent focus and use of the PLP throughout the entire B.Ed. program. In order to remedy this issue, the research team recommends that each semester a core education course be designated for the PLP. This would involve creating an assignment for each of these courses that would provide TCs with a rationale and dedicated time to work on their PLPs along with assessment feedback to help direct their growth and development. Table 5 provides an overview to the proposed designated PLP course framework.

Table 5

Designated PLP Education Course Framework for the B.Ed. Program

Year	Fall Semester	Winter Semester
One	EDUC 1231: The teacher: Professional dimensions I	EDUC 1233: The teacher: Professional dimensions II
Two	EDUC 2325: Understanding current and emerging pedagogical technologies	EDUC 3323: Effective assessment - measurement and evaluation
Three	EDUC 3010: Practicum I	EDUC 3361: Exceptional students, special needs, and inclusive schooling
Four	EDUC 4107: Program of studies and curriculum instruction in teaching social studies	EDUC 4201: Integrating ideas, values and praxis

In many of the faculty interviews, concerns were expressed that the TCs approach the PLP as a “check-list” or “set of hoops to jump through”. A superficial scrapbooking process rather than a deep and meaningful learning experience. Chen, Grocott, and Kehoe (2016) emphasize that we need to move our pedagogical and technological approaches from “one of checking off boxes to one of connecting the dots” (p.1). Learning artifacts presented in the PLP should be used to “trigger” growth and development goals and action plans as illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6

Teaching Competency Documentation and Planning

Component	Description
Artifacts	Representations of achievement of specific teaching competencies
Reflections	What I learned in the process of achieving this competency
Goals	What future growth and development do I want to achieve for this competency?
Strategies (Action Plan)	What are my plans and strategies for achieving this future growth and development?

The TCs, especially in the 1st and 2nd years of the program, indicated that they would like to have more support for the PLP process. Joubert (1842) is credited with coining the term “to teach is to learn twice,” and in a related study Vaughan, Clampitt, and Park (2016) recommend the development of a peer mentoring circle for the B.Ed. program.

In this circular approach, fourth year TCs could receive peer mentor support for their PLPs from recent graduates. Third year TCs could be supported by fourth year peer mentors in their first practicum experience. Second year TCs could receive third year peer mentor support in their assessment course, and first year TCs could receive second year peer mentor support in their introductory courses. The development of this peer mentoring circle would provide all TCs with “first hand” mentoring experience to help them become effective teachers and learners. Friesen (2009) has developed a teaching effectiveness framework that emphasizes “teachers improve their practice in the company of their peers” (p. 6) and a recent Alberta Education (2014) report advocates that an effective teacher “collaborates to enhance teaching and learning” (p.29).

Currently, conversations about the PLP process are limited to the faculty members and TCs in the B.Ed. program and as the African proverb suggests “it takes a village to raise a child.” Several of the TCs in the online survey recommended that the mentor teachers for field placements and practicums should be more involved in these conversations. In the first year, the TCs recommend that mentor teachers should be made more aware of the B.Ed. teaching competency framework (planning, facilitation, assessment, environment, professional roles and responsibilities) so that they can provide advice and guidance related to these key outcomes. In the second year, they suggest that this conversation should be broadened to include topics such as inquiry, digital technology integration, literacy acquisition, lesson planning, and assessment. And, finally in the

third and fourth years, they stress that there should be a much greater emphasis on conversations with mentor teachers about unit planning, diversity, and inclusive education.

Next Steps

Based on an analysis of the findings and recommendations, from the faculty interviews and TC online surveys, the research team has begun to develop a guiding document and “roadmaps” for the B.Ed. program’s professional learning plan. The guiding document contains the framework, template, examples, and resources for the PLP process (<http://tinyurl.com/bedplp>). Given the complexity of the PLP process, the research team has begun to create two maps; one for year one and two of the program (<http://tinyurl.com/plpyear1and2>) and one for year three and four of the program (<http://tinyurl.com/plpyear3and4>). Each map consists of the core education courses designated for the PLP process with suggestions for artifacts, reflections, goals, and action plans.

The research team speculates that a growing number of Bachelor of Education programs are using a professional learning plan or ePortfolio process to document and assess teacher candidates’ growth and development. They hope that other researchers will be able to use and build upon the results of this study in order to help teacher candidates digitally connect their personal, classroom, and field-based learning experiences in order to document and demonstrate how they are achieving their B.Ed. program outcomes.

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