

New Teacher Academies: Building Digital Teacher Induction through Blogs and Social Media

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Abstract: The research on new teacher induction encourages educational preparation programs and school districts to create innovative, sustainable initiatives that support new teachers and increase teacher retention in the field. While mentoring programs and ongoing professional development have always been provided for new teachers, programs are beginning to experiment with digital induction tools including asynchronous (webinars) and synchronous (blogs, websites, social media, podcasts) as a means support new teachers. This work-in-progress paper details the initial steps, current findings, and future goals to establish a sustainable digital induction program that expands upon an existing one-day professional development session offered by the university. The New Teacher Academy digital induction site hosts a platform for educational leaders to share tips and research-based strategies geared towards new teachers in the form of a written blog and future online webinars. Content on the site is archived and shared via social media for easy access. Future research goals include studying how teachers use the blog to impact their teaching and how the content on the site affects teacher confidence in their classroom practice.

Introduction and Purpose of the Project

The recruitment and retention of high quality, diverse teachers, especially in shortage areas, continues to be a local, state, and national issue. The literature on teacher turnover and attrition is plentiful. It is well publicized that over 50% of beginning teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2009; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll, 2012). This statistic is not just a recent trend; Investigative studies from the last 30 years have confirmed that beginning teachers are indeed at a high risk for such levels of attrition (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Teacher education preparation programs around the country have engaged in the battle to curb high levels of teacher attrition among new teachers by restructuring and implementing innovative practices to better prepare 21st century teachers (Potter, Hollas, & Coyne, 2015).

Critical teacher shortage areas currently include positions in the science, technology, and math (STEM) fields, special education, and bilingual education (Cowan, et al., 2016). Furthermore, schools have difficulty filling middle and high school positions, especially in high-poverty and high minority schools (AACTE, 2013). Additionally, the student population continues to grow more ethnically and linguistically diverse, yet four out of five teachers are white (AACTE, 2013). In tandem, enrollment in Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) across the nation have continued to decline by approximately ten percent, despite the projected need for more than one-million new teachers over the next ten years (Barth, Dillon, Hull, & Higgins, 2016). As a result of this data, both school districts and university EPPs are urged to create sustainable initiatives to recruit and retain teachers to meet the needs of a diverse student population.

In a continued effort to support newly graduated teachers from our university EPP, a New Teacher Academy was formed. The New Teacher Academy (NTA) is a one-day professional development with small and large group sessions focused on topics to enhance beginning teachers' knowledge and skill set regarding how to best meet the needs of diverse learners in their classroom. However, research has well demonstrated that educator preparation programs and professional development needs must be ongoing and meaningful.

As a way to bridge this gap between the EPP, NTA, and a new teacher's classroom context, the New Teacher Academy digital induction site was created. This site serves as a digital induction community in which participants can learn, receive mentoring support and advice from veteran educators, exchange knowledge, ask questions, and receive ongoing professional development credit. Recent research by Zuidema (2012) found that through digital email exchanges, teachers adopted an inquiry stance while building digital community. In their review of the research on mentoring of beginning teachers, Ingersoll & Strong (2011) also suggested that mentoring and induction programs for beginning teachers positively impact teacher retention and student achievement.

Existing studies in new teacher digital induction programs focus on the use of digital means as a source of creating online community and reflective practice. New teachers in these studies frequently report positive benefits in the program such as the influence upon instructional practice, ability to provide support, and facilitation of reflection through wikis, discussion boards, and coaching support (Kileavy & Moloney, 2010; Taranto, 2011). However, a common critique of such programs is that reflective journaling and posting requirements often enhance rather than relieve concerns and time constraints of the new teacher (Hutchinson & Colwell, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2017). The purpose of the current digital induction project is to facilitate natural connections and support from the university partnership rather than to create added tasks and requirements. Thus, our program is implemented through written blogs and social media as a method to provide professional development extensions of the one-day NTA event and to create authentic professional conversations about teaching practice, specifically geared for the new teacher. Studies on the use of social media within professional development formats indicate that teachers view and use social media as tools to build a network of mentoring support, impact knowledge, and affect their current teaching practice (Risser, 2013; Trust, 2012).

The benefit of using social media to disseminate professional information is that it is readily accessible from a computer or personal device, almost everyone has it in some form, and school districts are now encouraging teacher use in the classroom as a way to showcase instructional quality and collaboration during professional development sessions. Thus, many of our teachers can use instructional breaks or personal time to locate and access information through social media posts. The New Teacher Academy site expands on such established perspectives in teacher induction while also focusing on an underused component of induction, that of using real-time or synchronous tools (webinars) and asynchronous offerings such as blogging, video media, and social media to foster digital community as an induction process. This entirely digital format helps to bridge the gaps of time, distance, and communication among our graduates who are unable to regularly utilize the support services that our university can provide.

Overall Project Design and Goals

The New Teacher Academy hosts teacher alumni and participants from partner institutions in each July following graduation from the program. Participants attend a one-day professional development workshop that includes topics relevant and meaningful to new teachers. Previously covered topics include classroom management,

working with students from diverse backgrounds, and integrating technology in the classroom. Approximately 75 graduates attended the most recent NTA offering at the university. However, because of the nature of new teachers and their lack of experience in the classroom, NTA administrators often received further request for information on classroom topics and support that a one-day session simply cannot provide.

Thus, NTA founders recognized the continued need for support and mentoring in the field through a digital means. The goals of this project are to:

1. Support new teachers in their first one to three years of teaching as an extension of the one-day New Teacher Academy by providing blogs, podcasts, and webinars on topics of particular interest to *new* teachers through the NTA digital induction site. The intent of the site is to establish an active partnership between the EPP and our surrounding school districts. Writers and contributors to the site are comprised of members among the university faculty, surrounding school district administrators and leaders, and university alumni actively working in the field.
2. Provide continuing support for current pre-service teacher education students by connecting active educational practitioners to educational leaders and alumni working in the field.
3. Serve as a recruitment tool for teachers to return to the university as they seek to advance their own professional development needs. Many of our graduates return to the university after entering the teaching profession to pursue graduate degrees in Educational Leadership, Special Education, or Curriculum and Instruction. The New Teacher Academy site provides all pertinent information about the various programs offered at the university. Current graduate students are also among the contributors who write for the blog.

Early Implementation: The Blog

The development of this project occurred in several early implementation stages. NTA administrators identified the existing need for more support and created the NTA site. Because the NTA site was established as a collaborative effort and not simply the voice of a few individuals, recruitment of writers and contributors was necessary. A blogging guideline document was crafted to provide several concrete tips on how to write an effective blog piece. For instance, the guideline sheet discussed how to write specifically for new practitioners in the field rather than for an academic research-based journal audience. NTA administrators actively recruited writers for the blog by sending out a call for contributors and blog posts among the various networks, by sharing the need at university faculty meetings, and by emailing university alumni and district partners. NTA compiled a pool of interested writers. The NTA site was constructed using Wordpress as a free web hosting platform: <https://twunewteachers.wordpress.com/>). Tabbed categories include the various components of the website. Specifically, the following pages were created:

- About Section – This section details the New Teacher Academy, founders, and purpose of the New Teacher Academy Site.
- Contributors – This tab hosts photographs and biographies for all contributors and writers. The blog recruitment document is also housed in this section as we continue to recruit writers and contributors.
- Graduate Degrees – Information about all university graduate degrees is posted on this page, including direct links to the official university page.
- Job Postings – The NTA and teacher education program frequently receive job postings of available opportunities in surrounding school districts. All job postings that we receive are posted here.
- Resources – This page hosts relevant links and resources that are available to our graduates and anyone accessing the website.
- Webinars – Links to webinars, including archived recordings are housed in this section.
- The blog section of the website is the home or static front page for anyone accessing the site and all content is archived by date and topic.

Before crafting and releasing blog posts, an informal survey was distributed to university alumni and NTA participants to discover topics of interest to new teachers. This information was used to compile a tentative list of subjects that was both relevant and timely to their practice in the classroom. For instance, some respondents marked that they would like more information on how to conduct a parent-teacher conference. Knowing that this is typically

an important hallmark in the early part of a school year, writers crafted a blog submission for release in the early part of the year rather than at the end.

The NTA site officially launched at the introduction of the 2017-2018 academic year with an introductory post explaining the purpose and features of the blog and future webinars. A new blog post is targeted for release every two-three weeks, eventually working up to one post released each week. NTA administrators worked on marketing the site to try and attract followers by sending several emails on a listserv of the most recent NTA attendees. Blog posts were also posted on social media sites such as the university department and college Facebook and Twitter accounts. The site is also available to the university's current pre-service teacher education and student teaching interns. Example topics that the blog has covered thus far include:

- Introduction & What to Expect *After* the First Day of School
- There and Back Again: A Teacher Educator's Journey Back to the Classroom
- Veteran Tips for Successful Parent-Teacher Conferences
- Classroom Management Essentials for the New Teacher
- To Spell or Not to Spell? Spelling Instruction with Relevance
- What is Checking for Understanding?
- New Teacher Goals for the New Year
- Sketchnoting as a Visual Learning Tool
- 5 Tips for Good Teaching (and A Good Teaching Evaluation)

Challenges as Future Goals

Previous work in the field of new teacher induction (Semingson, et. al., 2016) reports on the difficulties in maintaining and recruiting consistent participation in synchronous, real time professional development sessions such as webinars. Challenges arose in this type of induction offering since teachers were limited by time and preference to other face-to-face or digital offerings. Thus, the NTA decided to begin the digital induction program and NTA site by offering asynchronous options in the form of written articles (blog posts) that can be accessed more flexibly, do not require an extensive amount of time, and are easily accessible on mobile devices and social media accounts. Based upon initial statistics, the NTA blogs are being viewed by a consistent following of about 50-70 viewers. The site is open, so at this time, there is no way to know who the individuals are. However, it is assumed that current pre-service teachers, educational faculty, and NTA alumni are primarily responsible for viewing the content. A comments section is open for viewers to post responses to questions or their own ideas, but this feature has not been consistently used. One future goal of the project is to develop and implement a method for studying the impact of the blog and social media usage upon teaching practice. For instance, when and how do teachers access the information? Do they share the site with other colleagues? How do they implement the content in their teaching practice? Do teachers feel supported and more confident in their teaching practice after viewing the content? Questions such as these get to the heart and purpose of implementing such a project – positively influencing teaching practice and providing ongoing support.

A second need and future goal is to actually begin hosting webinars at least twice per year. In previous work by Semingson, et.al. (2016), webinars began as regular options during the year, with 3-4 offerings per semester. Attendance at the webinars was consistently reported much lower than content offering in the asynchronous formats, although many individuals accessed the content in recorded form later. The goal of the NTA project is to offer at least one synchronous webinar with a recorded option in conjunction with the university college of education. This option would be open to the broader university and education community as the department undergoes the requirements to be named as a continuing professional education credit provider certified by the state accrediting agency. Pre-service teacher candidates currently in the program would also be eligible to receive professional development credits by participating in webinars to fulfill requirements for their teacher education coursework required by the state. Webinars and recorded options make this requirement much easier for our distance and online education students.

Expanding upon digital teacher development and induction through digital means should always be a primary goal. While blogs are certainly meaningful tools to access information and can always be archived and

readily accessed, the NTA developers would like to continue exploring the use of additional asynchronous media tools such as podcasts and short videos. This requires a more extensive commitment in the form of digital and media editing capabilities, so we expect that recruiting and implementing this form of digital induction will take extensively more time and preparation.

Conclusion

This best-practices, work-in-progress paper provides a foundational understanding of the complexities of new teacher induction, specifically regarding digital induction programs as innovative ways to support new teachers. We discussed the specific implementation phases of the digital induction and reviewed both the early and current planning stages and behind-the-scenes work to recruit contributors, attract followers, and introduce quality, relevant content. A main challenge of getting the project up-and-running includes attracting and retaining followers, while also to measure the impact the blog has upon new teacher practice. We consider the project successful if our participants find the content meaningful toward positively impacting classroom practice, if they return to the site or share the site with other teachers who could potentially benefit, and if the site helps to recruit students to further their education through additional professional development opportunities, including returning to the institution for advanced degrees. Findings from initial implementation suggest that digital teacher induction is ongoing and continually changes to meet the needs of the various participants in the program. Some of the challenges and future goals of the project, include creation and delivery of professional development webinars and implementing strategies to build and maintain strategic partnerships for completing blog postings. Finally, we desire that our project continue the ongoing discussion on how to best meet the needs of supporting novice teachers in the field. We ask fellow teacher educators to ponder these questions:

- What are the needs of your program and new teacher graduates and what specific topics and themes would be of utmost importance?
- How can EPPs design and evaluate digital induction programs to ensure that they are actually helping our new teachers? What research strategies should be implemented?
- How can EPPs evaluate the lasting impact of a digital induction program upon teacher retention and development of practice in the classroom?

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