Abstract
The use of e-learning as a means of supporting music education students during professional experience (practice teaching) is an innovation at Sydney Conservatorium of Music (SCM), University of Sydney. There is well-documented evidence indicating beginning teachers have concerns with, amongst other issues, behaviour management, lesson planning and curriculum. A preliminary study in 2006, examining students' feelings and concerns about their perceived problems in professional experience (PE), identified students' feelings of isolation, lack of professional and personal support and concerns with classroom management. E-learning, in the form of WebCT, was identified as a means to address some of these concerns and provide much needed support from university lecturers through the discussion boards. The preliminary study also aimed to assess music education students' levels of understanding of WebCT and their desire to interact with this technology. SCM professional experience Co-ordinators believed that a WebCT site would be useful in addressing these issues and its inclusion in the three PE units of study was intended to encourage active learning in a collaborative learning environment for preservice teacher education students. To develop competence in students as e-Learners, it was vital to create opportunities for e-Learning to be integrated in a meaningful way into existing UOS. Three WebCT sites were designed in 2006, one for each practice teaching cohort of students, the main emphasis being to provide relatively immediate support for students during their professional experience, to respond to any teaching and learning concerns and to enable students to share their experiences with their fellow music education students. The blended learning environment was also viewed as a mechanism to further develop university lecturers' understanding of the concerns of music education students when on PE, and to evaluate WebCT as a medium of instruction and contact. This preliminary study indicated that students, who had the necessary technology skills to access the WebCT sites or were willing to engage in new technology, found that WebCT helped in alleviating anxiety, was useful for developing lesson plan ideas and provided critical support in dealing with discipline issues. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in this initial research project in an effort to further develop WebCT sites for 2007 and provide a greater understanding of the needs of pre-service music education students. The sites were further developed in 2007 with a greater emphasis on university PE supervisors to support students through discussion boards whilst on PE. This paper will report on the preliminary study and focus specifically on the follow up study in 2007 evaluating students' and supervisors' adaptability to WebCT discussion boards as a means of communication, exchange of teaching ideas and a reduction of anxiety between students and supervisors.