

Softening the rock and the hard place: first year education practicum and mentoring at the university of ballarat

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ABSTRACT

In 2001 the School of Education introduced a new P-10 Education course, and a major aspect in this was the introduction of practicum for First Year students within three weeks of starting their course. Evaluations of this have suggested that this is a move that has been enthusiastically embraced by students and in 2002 we have worked on what has been established to extend and develop the experience for First Years by means of systematic construction of a community of practice to support their development as emergent professionals. To build the sort of community of practice that we envisaged, we turned to Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), action research models, and reflective practice to inform our work to make the practicum as meaningful as possible to First Years as emergent professionals.

Background

The University of Ballarat is a regional university in a rural setting, based in the Western District of Victoria, Australia. Its student cohort is drawn mainly from rural areas, with less than 75% of students' parents having attended university themselves (University of Ballarat, 2002). In 2001 the School of Education introduced a new P-10 Education course, and a major aspect of the changes involved in this was the introduction of practicum for First Year students within three weeks of starting their course. This was one day per week for the first semester only, largely observational in nature, with no school experience of any kind in the second semester. 2001 reviews of the course recorded a great deal of student enthusiasm for this course, with most positive responses to the practicum component (Brandenburg & Ryan, 2001). In 2002, we have built on this early experience and what students have told us about it from their perspective, including and adapting elements from our own perspectives as educators. We have capitalised on what we saw as an opportunity to develop emerging communities of practice in a more systematic way than before, extending the experience to block placements in the second semester for all First Years in 2002.

Placement

In organising a practicum experience for any group of Education students, logistical considerations involve a number of technical problem-solving activities being mobilised in organising student placements. More is involved than management skills, however. Schön (1987) suggests that any professional practicum involves complementary acts of naming and framing, a form of world making (p. 4). The organisation of the first year Education practicum at the University of Ballarat presents an ontological circumstance that, as Schön suggests, 'selects things for attention and organises them, guided by an appreciation of the

situation that gives it coherence and sets a direction for action' (p. 4). Placement meant soliciting cooperation from a number of schools in any case, but with our changing perspectives, we required a lot more from our schools than we had before. To build the sort of community of practice that we envisaged, we needed to build in opportunities and mechanisms that would promote reflection on the observations of students, and on the activities undertaken by the teachers in schools in relation to our students in their classrooms. We needed not only to help students observe teaching and learning processes, but also how to make these observations meaningful to them as emergent professionals.

practicum

Practicum involves assumptions, beliefs, taken-for-granted concepts, unquestioned ideas about schools, classrooms, teaching, learning and knowledge and the constraints that such considerations are likely to have about what can actually be accomplished (Sergiovanni & Starrat, 1993, p. 230). When we were redesigning a practicum for our First Years, we had a number of possible models to inform our actions. We had, among others, the traditional apprenticeship model, with a history dating from the days of Aristotle; the competencies model; and the reflective model (Maynard & Furlong, 1993), each of which has its own merits and drawbacks. At the same time, we were concerned that we avoid pitfalls implied in uncritical acceptance or rejection of any of these as metanarratives, or myths of legitimation (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 9-10) that serve to totalise education practicum knowledge. The apprenticeship model has received some attention within educational and training fields (see for example Frankland, 1999; Hemming, 2000; Maynard & Furlong, 1993; Sergiovanni & Starrat, 1993; Zeegers & Barron, 2000), often with a view to its shortcomings as part of training programs. Competencies models have been given some pre-eminence within pushes to establish competency-based training within organisations and institutions designed to train skilled and semi-skilled trade and semi-professional and professional workers (see for example Australian National Training Authority, 1999). Reflective models have also been developed as possible alternatives to either of these, although Maynard and Furlong (1993) suggest that such a model is 'more a slogan than a model' (p. 81).

legitimate peripheral participation (lpp)

Furthermore, historical imperatives presented us with a taken-for-granted assumption of the importance of the relationship between the institutional basis for teacher education and the school-based training basis, something which we examined and accepted as a key element in the program we wanted to implement. The history of that relationship is not a straightforward matter, however, for the balance of the two elements has shifted over the last century or more (Gardner, 1993). Gardner points out that this happened 'with each shift leaving an image in professional and political consciousness which could be raised in support of further change in one direction or another' (p. 22). We decided to step outside of the parameters of this sort of debate, and turned to constructs of communities of practice in general, and constructs of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) (Lave & Wenger, 1994) in particular.

Lave and Wenger are not concerned with any sort of distillation of the apprenticeship models, but with a decentred view of such a model. In such circumstances mastery within a given field would lie not with the master but within the community of which the master formed a part. Thus, a specialist field would contain a number of specialists and specialisms, and at a number of levels. There would be, according to such constructs, the equivalents of the journeymen, the senior apprentices, the particularly adept newcomers, as well as the masters themselves who would be on their own way to even more refined skill and art. Thus, LPP is

concerned with the whole of the community that would develop in a given field where learning would be seen as access to practice, not just access to information or knowledge. The limitation of observation and mimicry is perhaps best seen in this context, as compared with concepts of communities of practice providing participation on a number of levels in the process of gaining full membership of such communities (Zeegers & Barron, 2000).

communities of practice

When we established the protocols for this First Year Education practicum we took deliberate steps beyond those normally associated with apprenticeships, competencies mentoring and/or shadowing within a community of academic endeavour. We looked to other work that had been done in the field. We had, for example, experience from another university's systematic attempts to build partnerships in learning (Eckersley *et al*, 2001). One of us had already developed and trialled an LPP program focussed on First Year students from across five faculties at yet another University, with a fair measure of success (Zeegers *et al*, 1999), and we had the experience of the previous year and its evaluations (Brandenburg & Ryan, 2001). We already had the elements of a community of practice. These comprised the First Year student group, academic staff committed to the notion of the practicum as an essential aspect of Education courses, as well as a number of principals and teachers in primary schools anxious to support the idea of the form of practicum that we were proposing.

It ought to be stressed, however, that all staff concerned undertook the program as a voluntary aspect of their own practice. The traditional form of the practicum in Australian schools has been a sort of loose alliance of teacher education institutions and schools, seen largely as part of professional duties or responsibilities of classroom teachers and having some small significance as to status and financial recompense (d'Arbon, 1993). All teaching staff took on the requirements of this program without any financial or other form of compensation, such as time release. What we designated as 'Community Liaison' positions did have some form of payment attached, more in the form of honoraria to reimburse travel costs than salary, another indication of this community's support for this form of practicum.

Lave and Wenger (1994) have taken the view of a community of practice as 'an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge' as it provides the very essence of what is necessary for members of that community to make sense not only of its existence but of the reasons for and the heritage associated with it. In that sense, 'participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning' (p. 98). We decided to build upon the set of conditions that existed, being quite specific about how to set about what it was that we wanted to achieve in the best interests of the membership of the community being established. We already had highly motivated students intensely involved in their own courses of study and an excellent teaching program provided by the University.

naming and positioning

The students were named as Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) rather than the customary 'Student Teachers'. What we were looking for was a way to establish each student's participation in a successful practicum program on a multiplicity of levels, an 'activity system about which the participants share understandings about what they're doing and what that means for their lives and for their communities' (Lave & Wenger, 1994, p. 98). Positioning the students as emergent professionals, as PSTs, was a first step in effecting the changes that we were wanting to implement. We did not want echoes of 'student teacher', and the Other of this,

‘supervisor’ to interfere with this program and sought to minimise such possibilities by naming and positioning players in the program differently. To this end, the ‘supervisor’ was cast in the role of ‘mentor’ as well.

community members

We did not expect these First Year PSTs to be on individual journeyman paths to masterpieces, however. A number of features of the program linked people in a number of ways. One of these was the pairing with a designated buddy to work with inside the community. These pairs were established through a self-selection process at the first general meeting of the First Years and would be one who shared similar educational backgrounds or views, or had a car (an important consideration given the distances of the schools from the university). The next link to be established was that of the University cluster coordinator (a number of schools was grouped within clusters according to direction and range of distance from the University). The role of this person was to act as a reference point for the mainly academic and strategic classroom concerns as far as students and their schools were concerned. It was another deliberate attempt to break perceived links with supervisory and assessment roles of institutional personnel. The Community Coordinators were to provide a link between the schools themselves, the First Year PSTs[#] and academic staff. The teachers and each student or student pair were a further link within the program, and the medium through which First Year PSTs would interact with the children in classrooms.

staged process

With LPP learners are habituated to the practices of a group of skilled practitioners and newcomers to this group move and are moved forward into their own full and legitimate participation over a period of time. This is done through a process that moves them through a series of activities based on knowledge imparted by those with expertise at various levels in the chosen field from the periphery through to centre stage activities with full and formal acknowledgment of skills and knowledge developed in the process. Lave and Wenger (1994) view the traditional apprenticeship systems of various cultures as manifesting the transformative possibilities of the newcomer to the master in a given field, but stress the importance of the development of the whole person rather than the transference of a body of knowledge from one person to another or others. They present the concept of peripherality as positive and dynamic (p. 37) in its being suggestive of access to sources of knowledge and understanding through growing involvement. We used this concept to inform our activities, allowing us therefore to concentrate on the more positive aspects of peripherality as a PST within established schools. It also allowed us to examine ways in which staged processes of peripheral to mainstream positions could be utilised as transformative processes in themselves.

early stages

The First Year students—with their own baggage of personal schools experience to inform initial contacts with classrooms (Claxton, 1984, as cited in Smith & Alred, 1993) as First Year PSTs; named as teachers from their first day of practicum; positioned as observers to become informed ‘kid-watchers’ (Education Victoria, 1997); linked with buddies and mentors to help make sense of the various elements of their teacher education activities; with the model of the

[#] We also introduced this structure for Second Year PSTs, the ones who had broken new ground in the previous year. Handled and implemented a little differently because of existing school experience from 2001, the concept of LPP nevertheless applies here as well.

classroom teacher before them as an ultimate goal of their practice—take their first steps on professional paths to independent practitionership. Maynard and Furlong (1993, p. 71) refer to these first stages as ‘early idealism’, and we built on this to engage their attention to the minutiae of classroom realities and practicalities. Maynard and Furlong go on to identify survival, recognition of difficulties, before what they call ‘hitting the plateau’, where they ‘focus on themselves as having found their style’ (p. 72). Anticipating such stages, we have set in place a number of support mechanisms to help First Year PSTs transcend any number of stages and move on and beyond limitations implied in transitional stages.

reflection

An important aspect of this progress is reflection. The idea is that this will enable First Year PSTs to switch their focus from on themselves in the classroom and onto children’s learning and how to make it more effective (Maynard & Furlong, 1993). It is not a reflective model that we are using here; it is a matter of incorporating reflection in the First Year PST experience. It is a group of first years in the early stages of the profession that we are dealing with, and we did not see reflective models as appropriate at this stage of their development. What we were looking was their moving beyond concerns with classroom routines and protocols to a deeper level of understanding of the teaching and learning processes. At this point they are in more of an observer-into-collaborative-teaching stage, in effect scaffolded by a number of more knowledgeable professionals. It is in future stages that they will be taking increasing responsibility for teaching, where a reflective model will come into its own. In their positions in the learning community being constructed, reflection is an essential ingredient. Smith (2002) argues:

Learning communities boost teacher reflection. We get together and talk about our ideas. We trust that idealistic aspirations will be treated seriously. We feel comfortable admitting that something is not turning out as well as we had imagined it would. This learning community connects the lives we lead in our workplaces, our personal groups, and the wider community of our profession...
(p. 31)

This goes beyond implications of apprenticeships as it involves ‘standing back and looking at the business of teaching and learning in a cooler and more reflective way than is possible in the middle of teaching itself’ (Smith & Alred, 1993).

mentoring

To enable effective reflection, however, access to experienced teachers and their knowledge of their craft is essential (McIntyre, Hagger, & Wilkin, 1993). The formation of strong, trusting relationships is a hallmark of mentoring (Ferro, 1993, p. 29). Tomlinson (1995) sees a number of functions and roles for mentors in teacher education, stressing those of understanding and intelligent awareness, not merely practical teaching capability and skills training (p. 11). This last aspect as far as First Year PSTs are concerned is no small matter, however, for strategic concerns within classrooms is no small matter for First Year PSTs. Incorporating mentoring suggests that anticipation and success in interpreting classroom situations allows proaction on the part of teachers concerned, including the PSTs. Thus, the First Year PSTs are informed observers initially, moving and being helped to move through a number of stages in their progress as professionals. Wilkin (1993) stresses the importance of the mentor in such a process: ‘teachers of varied interests, experience and skill, must necessarily become empowered to fully share in the training of students. The particular

expertise that they as mentors have to offer must be recognised and reflected in their status as truly equal partners in training who fully share in decision-making and whose views are not just to be respected but given institutional expression' (p. 47). The mentors as part of this program with this University do not receive, nor have they requested, financial payment. They do, however, share in University-sponsored 'Mentor Days' and receive credit towards their own academic studies as part of the community of practice being constructed.

conclusion

Sort of thinking underpinning the idea that it takes a village to raise a child resonates throughout this program, given the number of people involved with each First Year PST. PSTs, 'quite rightly' place a great deal of value on the authority of all of these people's voices (Featherstone, Munby, & Russell, 1997, p. 3). But the program is designed to help them to find their own voices, to articulate what they see and what they feel they are required to do. This voice has been described as the connection between reflection and action; between experience and authority (Featherstone *et al*, 1997, p. 2). We have adopted the view that the practice of teaching cannot be part of didactic exercises, that there is a 'tension between the personal validity of experience and the scientific validity of "accepted" knowledge' (Usher, 1985, p. 71). Reflective writing, often but not always capturing reflective moments, is one way to reconcile such tension. Not reflecting alone, not acting alone, not performing alone, but being inducted through such measures into a community of practice, helps in no small way to negotiate an otherwise impossible impasse. As Smith (2002) says, 'Reflective teachers know that compared to last year, "I am different"' (p. 34).

First Year students, then, as eager 'to teach' in their first days of their course as children in Prep are 'to read and write' on their first day of school, have been positioned as PSTs in a community of other PSTs, teachers, children, academic staff, community coordinators, academics, principals and parents. It should prove a rich resource for them to draw upon, and to contribute to. It should form a sound basis upon which to keep building and expanding a community of practice. We have taken elements from Action Research models (Zeegers, 2000) to inform our building and expansion, including mid-program reviews with our First Year PSTs and their mentors. Perhaps most importantly as far as First Year Education students are concerned, it should soften both the rock of the practicum and the hard place of their PST position.

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