From Supervising Practica to Mentoring Professional Experience: Possibilities for Education Students at the University of Ballarat

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the possibilities presented in examining taken-for-granted aspects of pre-service teacher practicum practices, especially in terms of naming and positioning within teacher education, as they present at a regional university in Ballarat, Australia. The University Ballarat has introduced a new P-10 teacher education course which is about to enter its fourth year. The course has focussed some of its attention on traditional aspects of paid supervisory and assessment roles of practising teachers in relation to student teachers. As a result, changes have been made, with reconfigured foci on the roles of both practising teachers and undergraduate students, as well as those of other staff who support the new program. One such focus is on what Schön (1987) describes as 'indeterminate zones of practice', and the result has been a research program exploring those zones as part of mentorship in relation to mandated supervision and assessment requirements for graduate registration. Examination of data provided by transcripts of focus groups conducted with the students, mentors, community coordinators and university teachers involved in the programs suggests possibilities that may serve to inform efforts to meet a major part of the challenge to prepare pre-service teachers better in finding innovative and relevant ways to improve practicum experience from the outset of undergraduate Education. Those of us involved in the program at the University of Ballarat have examined assumptions underlying participants' roles in relation to partnerships within communities of practice in relation to the roles of university and educators in the field, as well as critically examining concepts of mentoring that guide reflection on practice and scaffold student learning. Such considerations go beyond concerns of individual pre-service teacher classroom performances, focussing on the generalisability of pre-service teacher experience in relation to the profession as a whole.

Introduction

As lecturers and tutors in the new course, we have identified traditional models of supervision and practica as models more appropriate to teacher training in previous centuries, not teacher education in this new century. There is, however, no question as far as we are concerned as to the importance of classroom skills and competencies to be developed by our pre-service teachers, in particular with regard to identified problems of the great variability in the competence of beginning teachers as they emerge from their teacher preparation programs (Commonwealth Government, 1998). Neither is there any question of working with experienced teachers in classroom contexts being an essential feature of skills and competencies in pre-service teacher development. What we have questioned is the limitations of traditional professional practice relationships as developing the potential that exists for exploration, examination and acquisition of what an expert teacher has to offer a newcomer to the profession in instructional skills and knowledge of the science, art and craft of teaching. We have identified a further dimension of an expert teacher's qualities in that of making appropriate decisions in a given teaching and learning situation, a dimension that we would have pre-service teachers experience and develop for

themselves. Thus, as teacher educators, we have been looking for understanding by our pre-service teachers of teaching and learning processes, which implies that copying or inculcation of specified and/or enumerated teaching procedures won't cut it in the twenty-first century. Even the single element of the supervisory and evaluatory position of the classroom teacher as supervisor of the neophyte has been under question for the last decade and more (see for example Gardner, 1993; Laurillard, 2002). With such sorts of questioning has come a widening scope for conceptualisations of professional practice programs for Education students, opening up new areas for us in our search for possible answers. Indeed, one of our very first steps has been to rename our students as pre-service teachers, no longer referring to them as student teachers; it is a habit that they themselves have taken up.

Our own continuing research has provided encouraging evidence of success in changing foci on various components of the programs, including changes in roles of the mentors and of the integration of professional experience with units in the Bachelor of Education degree delivered at the university, and to achieve a seamless program in the process. This needs some exposition here, as all the activities associated with university delivery of the course are underpinned by theory and practice of curriculum and pedagogy by means of the introductory Education (or Curriculum and Pedagogy) unit. This unit is based on Kemmis, Cole & Suggett's (1983) suggestions of three orientations to curriculum and pedagogy embodied in Traditionalism, Progressivism and Critical Approaches, which has allowed as the Education lecturer to introduce such theorists as Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Gardner (see for example Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2003) in some sort of logical progression to work with concepts and practices related to scaffolding and Zones of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) in designing classroom teaching and learning. Underpinning all of these is Stenhouse's (1975) idea of Teacher-as-Researcher, where pre-service teachers are introduced to not only the theory but also the pedagogies related to reflection as generating personal professional knowledge, basing this on the work of such scholars as Schön (1987; 1990) and Korthagen (2001). Teachers of this course are committed to the notion of good theory being closely connected to good practice, and blend this into the Professional Experience program that has been designed, structuring it around Lave and Wenger's (1994) notion of Legitimate Peripheral Practice (LPP), and always being mindful of Laurillard's (2002) rider as to the highly abstracted nature of theoretical engagement by university students.

Complex Context

The university in which this research is set is notable for its attraction of students from outside of the mainstream cohorts. The University of Ballarat's pre-service teacher cohort is drawn mainly from rural areas, with more than 75% of students being the first of their family to attend university (University of Ballarat, 2002). This is remarkable even in the context of students at universities in Australia in general coming from a range of ethnicities, cultures, localities and economic levels (Skilbeck, 1993), each presenting as a potential successful pre-service teacher to be accommodated within frameworks of regulations and curriculum set by the various authoritative bodies (see for example Department of Education and Training, 2001). In such a context, all framework factors are subject to different, not necessarily compatible, interpretations—personal and professional needs and academic development of learners (see for example Dunn, 1996; Gardner, 1999); construction

of a more productive economy (Marginson, 1993)—each associated with ideas about education that may sit uneasily with administrative and social practices: a complex and dynamic context requiring flexible learning and teaching, in fact (Zeegers, Russell & Smith, 2004).

As teachers in this course we would argue, however, that it is not enough to say that fewer of our students come from middle-class backgrounds and therefore arrive without mastery of the sorts of university-based discourses that facilitate their taking up of the language, protocols and practices of Education at tertiary levels. We would rather suggest that the programs are designed to take this into account as a major feature to be addressed in the programs, allowing for student engagement with the complex and sophisticated sets of educational conceptualisations that are so necessary for effective teaching and learning. We have grappled with situated learning, a dimension of pre-professional or pre-service training as part of a Vygotskian approach to learning, where all learning is a social act (Vygotsky, 1978), and which presumes a mentoring-cum-apprenticeship relationship between practising professionals and novices. It is a development in university education that involves experience in a work site that goes beyond theory engaged at university. Laurillard (2002) suggests that this is simply not enough; part of everyday learning, certainly, but divorced from theory; that academic knowledge as an abstracted form of knowledge formally represented enables generalisation and is therefore more generally useful to students.

Laurillard (2002) canvasses a number of possibilities for teaching and learning, focussing, as we have, on situated learning based on the work of Lave and Wenger (1994). She examines two possible aims of university teaching, an elitist one of lecturer imparting specialized knowledge to students who may or may not be capable of receiving it; and a Ramsden (2003) one of making student learning possible. The former constructs lecturers as capable of imparting their acquired knowledge with the implicit understanding that no teaching qualification is required and that the student is responsible for the success or otherwise of the transfer, thereby invoking deficit models of learners and learning. Taking Ramsden's (2003) position has quite a different impact, suggesting mediation in the teaching and learning experience, with more responsibility on the part of the academic staff. Laurillard (2002) suggests that it is this second sort of perspective that has superseded the elitist one, and it is a position that we have taken up in our own research undertakings. The issues raised by Laurillard (2002) are ones that academics in Education have been grappling with for a number of years in their professional work, in particular in relation to student teachers (our pre-service teachers) and their placement in schools as part of regulatory requirements for their employment upon graduation. Having embraced the principles as well as the practice of situated learning, Education academics have nevertheless to consider tensions emerging from the roles of theory and practica in their work, and the levels of abstraction and generalisability required to prepare future professionals in the field. The academic program associated with the professional experience has specifically focussed on just those levels of abstraction that Laurillard (2002) has identified (again, see Zeegers, Russell & Smith, 2004).

Using Legitimate Peripheral Participation

We have been quite explicit in our taking up of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Lave & Wenger, 1994) in our design of the Professional Practice feature of our

programs. We have used the concept as part of a dynamic process of inducting our students through a series of staged processes, starting from outsider positioning and moving through to being positioned as professionals at the centre of a community of practice (for more detailed discussions of Legitimate Peripheral Participation see Zeegers, 1999; Zeegers, 2000; Zeegers & Barron, 2000). The following diagram illustrates our use of Legitimate Peripheral Participation:

Figure 1: Staged processes of professional integration

Briefly, the model that we have developed is a professional practice model, designed to enable pre-service teachers to become increasingly integral members of communities of teaching and learning practice, supported by a number of mechanisms and staff at appropriate points. Pre-service teachers engage teaching and learning theory and teaching and learning strategies units at their University site, at the same time as they engage professional experience in a classroom with the support of a pre-service teacher Buddy, both working with a classroom teacher who acts as mentor to their activities. They start slowly, with one day per week in that classroom, and four days at the University. Each of their days in classrooms is supported by the formation of school clusters, providing a network of buddies, mentors, academics, Education Department consultants and Community Coordinators upon whom individual pre-service teachers may expect to rely in their introduction to communities of practice. Gradually the time spent in schools becomes longer—two, then three, then four, then seven weeks over the four years of their course—where pre-service teachers take greater and greater responsibility for planning, initiating, conducting and evaluating classroom activities.

We now have a refocussed and renamed professional experience system with constantly monitored and changing roles with supervisor becoming mentors, a buddy system as an immediate mutual support mechanism for each pre-service teacher, teaching and learning academic units that provide academic support to classroom professional practice by pre-service teachers, a series of weekly professional practice

meetings for briefing and debriefing sessions specifically related to individual professional classroom practice by pre-service teachers, presentations by Education Department regional consultants and senior teachers and school principals, and a group of Community Coordinators that visit each school and thus pairs of buddies weekly.

Indeed, the Community Coordinators, who act as a link between the University and the school and school cluster, are a vital feature of the program. They constitute a major innovation in the program, something which makes our type of program different from other mentoring programs being developed in teacher education (Smith, Zeegers, Walta & Eckersley, 2004). Community Coordinators are from as varied backgrounds as those of the pre-service teacher cohorts: retired school teachers, principals and regional consultants, sessional tutors, fractional appointees to schools, and so on. As such, they are especially able to contribute to pre-service teachers' development while enhancing the mentor contribution, by offering comparative knowledge from their own experience and knowledge from a comprehensive understanding of the various sites with which they are involved. They provide a real link between the intended outcomes for the teaching units and expectations of pre-service teacher experience at the sites in the ways that their interactions with mentors help shape the mentors' reflections about what works in teaching and why. At the same time, in discussions with mentors regarding their particular pre-service teachers, mentors, in quite subtle ways, use the Community Coordinators as a vehicle for articulating things about their teaching. The following comments are derived from transcripts of focus group sessions with Community Coordinators:

The role is to [help to] make visible the intangible. It is about interpreting [teaching and learning] behaviour that is not overt. Often the mentor is unaware of this also, and it is part of my role to help them to articulate this.

Having the Community Coordinator [as part of the] partnership gives the mentor some instant input from a neutral source. The Community Coordinator really has to capture the teachable moment or window of opportunity for the partnership; to answer or a question or create a discussion about a matter as yet unvoiced sometimes.

My work is to represent the program and the belief that the mentor partnership allows [pre-service teachers] to learn how best to teach for themselves rather than following instructions. I allow the mentor and the [pre-service teacher] to express this process (Smith et al, 2004).

In this aspect of their roles, the Community Coordinators are essential in the identification of slippage between the sorts of highly abstracted but generalisable forms of education of university tutorial and lecture rooms knowledge and the sorts of concrete but particularised forms of school classroom knowledge:

It is really great that my work requires me to debrief with the University Coordinator because it triangulates what I am thinking about.

The [pre-service teacher] becomes more responsible and the mentor, University Coordinator and Community Coordinator scaffold their learning

(Smith et al, 2004).

Perspectives for teaching

We haven't been trying to find the right answers; we have been trying to explore possibilities for thought and action. We have developed a research program exploring the scope that questions to date developed for us: zones of indeterminate practice, zones of indeterminate roles (as in supervision and mentorship) and even zones of proximal development (as in student, student teacher and pre-service teacher). The broader framework of teacher education and teaching within which we work is part of a complex profession to be engaged, making many and varied demands on academics. Central to each of our programs is the learner, based on Ramsden's (2003) notion, 'to make student learning possible' (p. 7), but in doing so, we have made major decisions that impact on that learning when it comes to the Professional Experience that each student engages. One of the models that we have each made conscious efforts to avoid is suggested by lecturer/tutor-centred, authoritarian perspectives of knowing academics shaping ignorant learners to replicate models of teacher educators in what may be termed Traditionalism (Bantok, 1975). We have looked rather towards a learner-centred, Progressive perspective of learners developing as discoverers of what is needed to be known in and of the world in which they are to engage their profession (of the sort described by Darling & Nordenbo, 2003). A third possible approach is that of a reflective engagement perspective. Such a perspective implies that personal and professional interaction with the world of their future employment through informed observation and practice and the possibilities for teaching and learning that this raises leads learners to construct their own knowledge of what is meaningful for them (see for example Korthagen, 2001; Schön, 1987; 1990). Such perspectives also give rise to multiple practices as to pedagogy, discipline and as Loughran (1997) suggests, multiple assessment and evaluation processes and practices.

Reflection

It is not a matter of a magic wand being waved, though. It is, as the project is called, a matter of *Building Partnerships*. It is a work under construction, in the present continuous tense rather than the present perfect tense. The members of the communities include, but are not limited to, individuals, pairs, groups and clusters of people involved in the program. There is a structure, designed to scaffold the experiences of pre-service teachers as they develop and grow as professionals, certainly, but also to support others involved. The whole program is designed to be supportive of pre-service teacher learning in the schools; it is more than an evaluatory mechanism. It enables exploration of 'indeterminate zones of practice', those areas that lie beyond the measurable, conventional and predictable—where the real work of the professional is done in terms of decision making and problem solving in a given professional field. As Schön (1987) says:

The question of the relationship between practice competence and professional knowledge needs to be turned upside down. We should start not by asking how to make better use of research-based knowledge but by asking what we can learn from a careful examination of artistry, that is, the competence by which practitioners actually handle indeterminate zones of practice (p. 13).

We already know even from our own personal experiences as educators that we have not, as Schön (1987) points out, always been able to articulate what we know, what we do, what we know how to do, 'or even entertain in conscious thought the

knowledge our actions reveal' (p. 22). Schön (1987) suggests reflection, or reflective practice, as a means by which we access that tacit knowledge that professionals employ. Although the suggestions here had no direct focus on the teaching profession, in other work he has made specific links between reflective practice and teaching (Schön, 1990). The program that we have put in place has taken up issues to be carefully considered in the light of professional practice; it suggests professional action based on thoughtful considerations, not mimesis of classroom procedures as far as a pre-service teacher is concerned. Nevertheless, there arise possible tensions between the traditional forms of practice and emergent forms incorporating reflective practice, largely derived from the perceived need to balance foci of teaching skills and educational theory—practical knowledge as part of professional practice, in fact. How to resolve the tensions that may emerge in attempting a balance, then, has been part of the problem that we had manufactured for ourselves in opting for a different approach from what had traditionally been adopted.

Teacher education developments that have eschewed Traditionalism in favour of more Progressive reflective practices have had pre-service teachers take greater responsibility for the shaping of their own learning, acknowledging the expertise of the novice as well as the experienced teacher. All of this is happening in the context of an ageing teacher workforce, national economic imperatives that represent the changes of the twenty-first century as challenges to educators all over the world (see for example Cheng, 2000). These factors and more have given a certain impetus to moves towards productive partnerships between teacher education and situated practice. Our concern has been to improve on an existing conventional program to make sure that our graduates would be well prepared to engage in high quality teaching and learning. What we have wanted to implement is a seamless weaving of the sorts of abstract theoretical perspectives that inform effective teaching and learning, and the implementation of theory in the classrooms in which our students participate as part of their progress to independent professionalism. We have been working under the dictum that only if teachers are well prepared to implement research based practices and have professional knowledge and skill to choose between various, and sometimes inappropriate, practices will they be truly competent. The data from focus group transcripts further confirm our assumption:

We reinforce what is professional behaviour; we have a responsibility to be aware of the level of professional activity that is happening by raising awareness of it with both the mentors and the [pre-service teachers]. Because the program sets the standard and we represent the program then we must monitor professional standards as being set and met (Smith et al, 2004).

A pre-service teacher perspective provides a particular apt illustration:

Q: Did you learn anything today or did you just make yourself useful?

Pre-service teacher: Oh, I accepted challenge, appreciated beauty, anticipated and solved a problem...coped with failure, developed a relationship, managed the demands of the environment, communicated more effectively with peers, practised tolerance and co-operation, shared with my buddy—you know, just the usual (Smith et al, 2004).

Just the usual, indeed! Given all of this, and our continuing research into our own practice, we can with some confidence assert that we have made major inroads in

bridging that gap identified by Laurillard (2002) between academic activities on site at university and those of professional experience on site in schools and their classrooms. Given also the dynamic nature of Legitimate Peripheral Participation and its possibilities for situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1994) we see the scope for teaching and learning and relationships developed within communities of practice as constantly evolving. We can only go so far in laying claim to having established the final form of the models used to inform our practice as teacher educators. We anticipate that our own professional practice as teacher educators will develop new and unique forms as it is geared towards being responsive to individual pre-service teacher, mentor, Community Coordinator, University Coordinator, school, Departmental and university needs.

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