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The Teaching and Learning Consortium: a field based model for preservice teacher education

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Abstract

The Teaching and Learning Consortium (TLC) was initiated in 1996 on the Strathfield campus (NSW) at Australian Catholic University in partnership with nine primary schools in the diocese of Parramatta, Sydney. The program continues to the present with an expansion to over 40 primary schools in the Sydney metropolitan and outer metropolitan areas across four catholic dioceses and several independent schools. Students involved are in Year 2 pre-graduate primary teacher education. The main focus of the learning is to align theory with practice. This is achieved by providing:

- a research based theoretical component involving lectures and tutorials at university;
- a practical component involving action learning on site in a school setting; and
- the integration of curriculum units with professional studies.

This paper explains the TLC model of preservice teacher education through the collaboration of schools, teachers and the University.

Introduction

The Teaching and Learning Consortium (TLC) has been in operation since 1997 when it first began in the Parramatta Diocese of Sydney. It has been expanded to involve up to 160 students, eleven academic staff and more than 40 schools in four Catholic dioceses and other Independent schools in the Sydney and outer metropolitan areas over the last ten years. It is now firmly established as a beneficial program within the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course on the Mt St Mary campus at the Australian Catholic University. Evaluations have taken place over the ten years of its operation with data collection through questionnaires distributed to the main stakeholders. This paper explains the TLC model of preservice education through the collaboration of schools, teachers and the University.

Context

Effective teacher education programs are critical in the development of teachers and as such must demonstrate clearly their ability to meet the needs of beginning teachers. Ramsey (2000, p.9) notes “We must be confident that our systems of teacher education equip teachers with knowledge and skills relevant to the needs of young people preparing for the transition to work and

participation in an ever-changing world.” More specifically, there is much evidence to suggest that the closer teacher education institutions, employers and teachers work together in the training of teachers the better the outcomes for all (Brock, 1999).

However, whilst these factors are considered important and universities make efforts to pursue such goals the outcomes are not always what was intended. As Ramsey (2000, p.207) argues “In general, and in spite of the best efforts of some universities, teacher educators, employers and teachers, it is apparent that teacher education and schools are insufficiently connected. In too many instances they are out of step, marching to a different drum. As with models of preparation in many other professions, the initial education of teachers must occur to a greater extent in the workplace and be accepted more widely as a professional responsibility, consistent with what it means to be a member of a profession.” The demand for effective teacher education field-based partnerships has grown over the last decade and many universities and teacher employer bodies are embarking upon ventures that will improve collaborative efforts in teacher training. The Teaching and Learning Consortium (TLC) is but one of them and, according to previous evaluations, has created opportunities for all stakeholders to ‘march to the same drum beat’.

In 2005 the NSW Institute of Teachers implemented a set of Professional Teaching Standards for all graduates, beginning teachers and more experienced teachers to use as a benchmark for their knowledge, skills and attitudes as a teaching professional. The three key domains of Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice, and Professional Commitment consist of seven elements and these are applied across four stages in a teacher’s career (see Table 1).

Table 1: NSW Institute of Teachers – Stages in a teacher’s career.

Stages	Description of Teacher
<i>Graduate Teacher</i>	A beginning teacher who has undertaken an approved teacher education course
<i>Professional Competence</i>	A teacher with at least 2 years experience and has demonstrated successful teaching knowledge, practice and commitment
Professional Accomplishment	A teacher who has been recognized by other teachers as having in depth subject knowledge, pedagogy and commitment to the profession
Professional Leadership	A teacher who has a record of outstanding teaching, is a committed educator and can articulate a vision of education

Note: Italics indicate compulsory stage that every teacher must attain

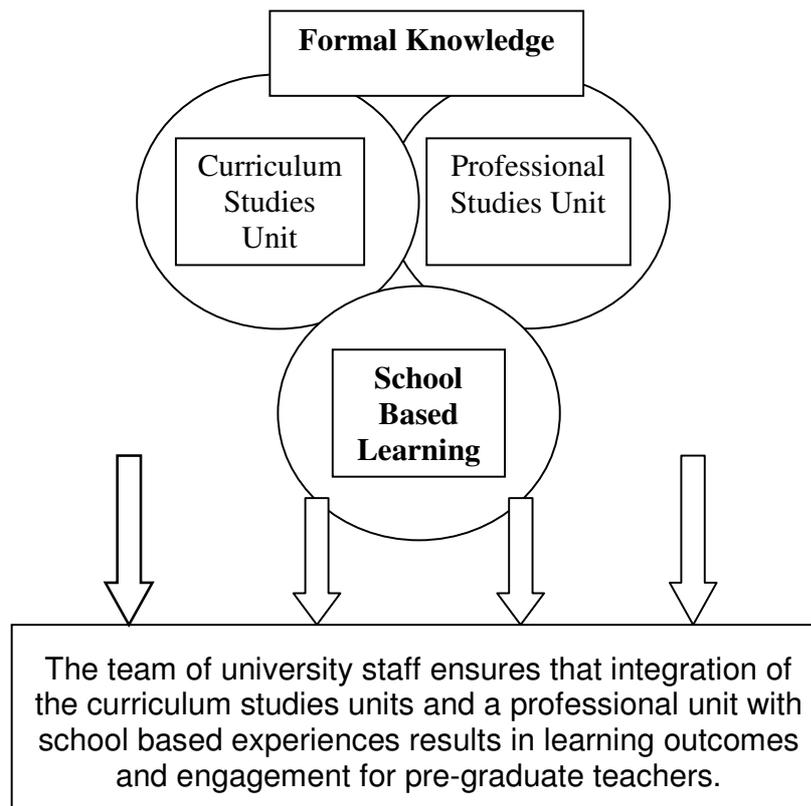
Since the beginning of 2005 all Teacher Education institutions in NSW must clearly demonstrate how the graduates from their course have sufficiently covered the three domains at the first level of ‘Graduate Teacher’. As such the TLC program is ideally situated to address these standards and therefore comply to the domains and key elements contained within them because of its structure and model of implementation. Even though the TLC predates the NSW Institute of Teachers the principles underpinning the program are consistent with the Professional Standards. The program immerses students in a whole school context where they have opportunities to broaden their understanding of the school culture and the total operation of the school as they are assigned to a school and not an individual class teacher. Therefore students are exposed to various elements

contained within these domains through observations and practical experiences in a variety of classes and whole school activities during their TLC program.

Implementation of the program

The TLC was planned and designed as an innovative educational program to address the integration of curriculum units with professional studies which placed the student teacher at the heart of the learning process. The current TLC program has challenged students to take responsibility for their own learning in three units: Mathematics Education, Religious Education and Teaching and Classroom Management. The students work in teams of approximately 4 people at University and in the school context where they spend fifty percent of tutorial time in classrooms across Kindergarten to Year 6, which equates to twelve days spent in the school community. During this time the student teams observe and reflect on teaching practice, are integrated into school staffs, work with teachers in the delivery of the curriculum and design and trial school based initiatives for the benefit of their own learning and for the benefit of staff and children at the school. University facilitators visit the schools on these weeks and further assist the students. Figure 1 summarises the model.

Figure 1: Integration of curriculum, professional studies and school based learning through the TLC model



The main focus of the learning is to align theory with practice. This is achieved by providing:

- a research based theoretical component involving lectures and tutorials at university
- a practical component involving action learning on site in a school setting; and
- the integration of curriculum units with professional studies.

The TLC learning paradigm has been consistently designed, delivered, implemented and reviewed over the past ten years. As a result, a strongly embedded program has evolved where benefits in student learning are evidenced in team assignment work and in the professional interactions with school staff and school students. Analysing, critiquing and connecting the practice observed and experienced with the theory and more formal knowledge delivered at university is made possible through weekly lectures and the remaining days during semester on campus.

The TLC program is dynamic, as it is continually evolving and consistently responding to the needs of the stakeholders. As noted by Beck, Howard and Moran (1997) this allowed for opportunities for the development of genuine learning communities which were focused on enhanced student learning outcomes. Thus the TLC has been modified through recommendations made by Catholic Education Offices, staff, university students and schools in evaluations conducted over the years. For instance, feedback from students and schools alerted us to the need for the TLC to provide greater benefit to the schools through students 'giving something back'. The idea of a school project designed in collaboration between the principal, teachers, university staff and students was developed in the late 1990s. Since then the project has gone from strength to strength and remains a key strategy for providing mutual benefit to schools and university students. The diversity of school projects further shows how we respond to school needs. School projects have ranged from child behaviour based initiatives such as developing social skills programs for the playground or assisting staff with the implementation of anti-bullying strategies, to more resource-based projects developing software tools for the tracking and recording of student progress. The students have learned about key issues, resources, and, most importantly, the nature of teachers' work outside the classroom. As university staff, we have improved our own knowledge about the changing nature and demands of schools as we have worked to assist students and schools. For the schools they have, in many cases gained a valuable resource that has saved them time: *"Their [student teachers] team effort to produce a Stage 2 Athletics Awareness Program was excellent. This term, both Year 3 teachers will be using this program and we will give the student teachers feedback on the use of it at the end of the term."*[2004 Evaluation].

The development of the TLC video which actively demonstrates and explains the program is another example of a modification made to the delivery of the TLC to enhance communication between the university, students and the schools. It is used annually to brief the students and schools new to the program. The video addressed the need for new stakeholders in the program to 'see' the program in action and to relate to the different roles that school and university staff and the university students undertake.

Outcomes of the TLC that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn

The outcome of the TLC experience is a nexus between theory and practice which influences student learning about the professional role of teachers. This is due largely to the structure of the program which results in a unique opportunity to see the reality of teaching on a day-to-day basis within specific curriculum and professional units delivered through lectures, tutorials and readings. In past evaluations students have commented in open-ended questions about such learning: *“I saw how theory linked with practice.”* [2001 evaluation] and *“The program was a beneficial experience which really helped me to link theory and practice,”* [2004 evaluation].

Student teachers learn about the nature of teachers’ work as they observe the broad view of teaching across the whole school and are motivated to pursue their choice of career. *“It confirmed my want to be a teacher and really opened my eyes to the reality of teaching”* [2001 evaluation]. Furthermore, the outcome of a doctoral thesis by White (awarded by the University of Technology, Sydney in 2002) asserted that this model developed student teachers’ understandings of teachers’ work. She states that the students gained understandings about:

- the complexity of the teacher’s role,
- the political world of the teacher and
- the importance of community and collegiality within the school context.

As a result, this model better prepares and motivates student teachers for the profession than models that solely utilise the traditional practicum structures (White, 2002). This assertion is affirmed by the following comment made in the 2004 evaluation: *“The whole program was beneficial and I gained more knowledge than I would have if I wasn’t in this sort of teaching program.”* In this same evaluation 77% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the TLC enabled them to gain important knowledge about the teaching profession that a traditional practicum would otherwise not have facilitated.

Time in schools observing and working with a range of teachers and classes across Kindergarten to Year 6 realizes opportunities for the students to compare and contrast different teaching and classroom management strategies. Seeing teachers ‘in action’ and watching different styles and techniques assists students to recognize that there are many ways that teachers teach effectively and it motivates and inspires them to adopt some of these techniques in the practicum that follows the TLC experience. This is evidenced by the following two comments given in response to a question about benefits of the program: *“I have learnt new ways to manage classes. I have a real view of what works in the classroom and how a school operates.”* [2001 evaluation] and in comparison with the traditional practicum where students are placed with only one teacher: *“TLC was worthwhile as we were able to see a broader spectrum of years, teachers and styles.”*

Additionally, in both the 2001 and 2004 evaluations students strongly agreed or agreed that they valued the program as motivating them to learn.

Year of Evaluation	Percentage of Students in Agreement
2001	77
2004	75

Student motivation is enhanced through the provision of opportunities for students to be responsible for themselves and their team as learners in their chosen profession. The students' work is supported in schools by weekly visits from university staff to facilitate their direction and reflections. This support promotes students taking responsibility for their own learning. Three hours each 'in school' week is given for the teams of students to:

- negotiate and develop the school project
- reflect on professional learning based on structured materials from the three units embedded within the program.

The student teachers are encouraged to negotiate the specific objectives of the project with the school themselves, thus promoting independent learning and engagement. As one Assistant Principal stated in the 2004 evaluation: *"The TLC Program has been a wonderful initiative. The students were self-directed, motivated and eager to provide a resource for the school."*

Finally, the TLC inspires students to engage with teachers and learn from their skills and abilities. In the 2003 evaluation students commented on a range of benefits they experienced as a result of the program:

- getting to know staff personally,
- gaining an understanding of how to be a successful teacher and
- observing 'inspirational lessons' and 'wonderful teaching'.

The following statement from the 2004 evaluation provides a clear understanding of the effect the TLC can have on motivating and inspiring student teachers to learn: *"I feel the program is fantastic and absolutely necessary for future teachers. It gives us an idea of the school as a whole and the way the staff operates where normal practicum only focuses on one teacher and one class. It was great to be able to compare different teaching styles and strategies. Our university facilitator was fantastic, supportive and helpful and being at [name of school] that was very important to me. Thanks a million."*

Respect and support for the development of students as individuals

Respect for the individual and support for students are foundational principles of the Mission Statement of Australian Catholic University. This respect is evident in that students are given the professional distance to initiate, develop and interact in a collegial manner with academic and school staff. The teaching staff in their interactions with students respect this 'experienced – novice' relationship through the manner in which issues are negotiated, knowledge shared and consultation is given to address individual circumstances.

Prime responsibility rests with the TLC students for:

- planning, implementing and completing learning tasks in the school site;
- group based time management strategies in meeting stated deadlines for required submission of work;
- enhancing students' individual, interpersonal relationships through professional interactions with school staff and children;
- being professional in their presentation;
- providing purposeful feedback to academic and school staff.

The completion of these tasks ensures that students develop in the professional skills required of teachers in their work.

Teaching and Learning Consortium as a field based model

The TLC students are learning in the field and as a cohort they are learning across more than 40 school sites in the given semester. Individual experiences are also shared back at university. This raises varied learning experiences, significantly different to the traditional teacher education mass lecture-tutorial input, that support the professional reality of teaching and the learning needs of student teachers.

The TLC introduces students to the cultural and social elements within a specified school site and the unique teaching-learning aspects of that site. At times, these aspects will give rise to issues of personal anxiety in that students will encounter new situations at quite an early stage of their teaching development. Consequently, staffing is deliberately organized so that the university facilitators at schools have the same teams of students in tutorials when on campus. The fact that staff and student teams work together in school and at university provides support for the students within these more challenging contexts and assists in the development of their own understandings about culturally and socially diverse settings. Hence, our work with the student teams provides pastoral support that demonstrates the Mission and values of ACU National and the Faculty of Education. We therefore effectively role model an essential attribute that we anticipate our graduates will imitate when they become teachers.

Such a collaborative approach from the staff cultivates the students' sense of others. While very little of the work required in this program can be undertaken individually, it still requires the individual interpersonal skills of negotiation and communication to assist in classrooms with school teachers, work with the student team developing the school based tasks, and in critiquing the work of teachers with the university staff team.

In 2004, 99% said they had demonstrated initiative and willingly offered assistance where required.

In 2004, 75% of students strongly agreed or agreed that the TLC experience was a worthwhile appropriate learning structure for the individual development of student teachers.

Our team began with three staff working together in 1996 and was enlarged in 1998 to up to eleven staff to meet the demand of forty schools when the program expanded. Commitment from the core university team has ensured continued stability and growth through the last ten years. Students in the 2006 program now benefit from working with teachers who have themselves participated in the TLC experience, have worked with us as mentors and clearly understand the benefits that such an experience will bring the student teachers. As reported by Howard (1999, p. 1) "Through the application of a school based context, student teachers had multiple opportunities for integrating educational theory and practice as well as reflect on their own practice as emerging teachers. Concurrently, teachers in schools had the opportunity for mentoring and professional support through the range of interactions provided in this genuine learning situation."

The School of Education (NSW) has also committed itself to this contribution to student learning by appointing an academic coordinator. This is an important administrative structure as it provides

support to the TLC university team and allows the University coordinator to address and reduce barriers, plus respond to school needs as they arise during planning and implementation phases. This structure and associated travel for staff involve additional costs to the University.

Challenges

As with any innovative, complex program, there are a number of issues that have needed resolution over the years. Firstly, every school site is slightly different from others and every group of students works in a somewhat different manner to others. Thus, the TLC requires flexibility on the part of the university staff working within these varied contexts. Over the time of the program open discussions with all parties present has resulted in the resolving of tensions.

Secondly, as each new school is adopted into the program the University TLC Coordinator briefs the staff concerning the key features of the program and its essential differences with a traditional practicum. However, school staff change from year to year and as new staff become involved with the program there is sometimes misunderstanding about some salient points such as the difference between TLC and the traditional practicum. To address this issue the university team prepare the students for the delivery of a briefing at their first morning tea at the school. This has achieved a great deal in terms of communication about the program and its principle aims.

The third and fourth challenges have been more difficult to resolve and have required an ongoing awareness on the part of the university staff. First of all, because a range of schools are utilised we have a number of single stream schools (one class per grade) involved. These schools offer a more limited range of classes and teachers sometimes resulting in students believing that they have “seen it all” in a few days. In these situations, the university facilitator has to spend more time on site assisting the students in uncovering the deeper layers of the classes they see rather than simply drawing more superficial comparisons between a large range of classes. The final challenge is commonly found in most educational settings where group work is set as an assessment task. In some instances, groups of students who are randomly placed in schools strike problems with working together. As in all team situations, people differ in their approaches to work and work ethic and this has caused considerable tension for some groups every year. The university staff has always played a key role in assisting the students to diffuse these concerns and anxieties with the result that many students learn valuable lifelong skills in compromise and acceptance of each other. A basic contract drawn up between the school and the students with divisions of work clearly outlined at the start has gone a long way in nipping some of the issues in the bud.

Conclusion

The TLC has been an important initiative for ACU over the past decade. It is raised in professional dialogue across the teacher education sector as a model of university-school partnerships that successfully engages student teachers in their understanding of the profession and the development of their own personal teacher identity. These benefits have not been limited to just the students. As one school TLC Coordinator stated in the 2004 evaluation: *“The TLC has created a wonderful exchange of learning between the university, [school] staff and [university] students.”*

The TLC has contributed to student learning, engagement and the overall student experience. The evidence presented demonstrates that primary teacher education students learn about the teaching profession through learning experiences which integrate curriculum, professional studies and school-based experience. This integration emphasises the important link between theory and practice while giving students authentic experiences about the professional issues of teaching. The integration thus provides students with an immersed and holistic experience. As one principal noted “*I have eventually welcomed several student teachers back to our school as full time class teachers. These young, new graduate teachers have all made a wonderful contribution to our school community.*” Social, academic and emotional aspects of the learner are stimulated and thoroughly engaged as students learn in supported contexts by the staff in the TLC program. They learn about more than just teaching. They learn about working with others, negotiation and compromise, reflective practices and how theory and practice make sense in the ‘real world’.

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