

## LEARNING TO TEACH: A SNAPSHOT OF SECOND YEAR EDUCATION STUDENTS

Skepticism concerning the reality of integrated theory and practice continues to haunt teacher educators. Traditionally, the theoretical foundations of learning to teach have been taught within teacher education institutions which aim to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant for the task of teaching. Ideally, this learning provides a foundation which integrates with the practice component of the training. But do the Education students 'feel' the integration of their programme? Do the co-operating teachers who open their classrooms to the Education students feel a connection to the students' university learning? Are teacher educators confident that the substance of their on-campus teaching transfers to the practice classroom? What supports, and what gets in the way of a student teachers' learning? Given the political, economic, social and public pressures which are exerted on the education system, faculties of education must seek to find answers to these and other questions related to the content and quality of preparation programmes. Teacher educators must seek to maximize the learning opportunities of those entering the profession.

Students generally bring to their university experience preconceived notions about teaching. These perspectives or orientations reflect assumptions and expectations students have about the role as well as shape the students' learning. Nearly two decades ago, Lortie (1975) suggested that the orientations preservice teachers take to their training are drawn from their apprenticeship of observations as students. More recently, Calderhead (1988) proposed that images of practice often serve as a guide for students as they begin to develop their teaching practice. These images are subsequently influenced and shaped by the university and school-based experiences of the students' course. Collectively, these experiences contribute to the students' developing knowledge base and pedagogy. If we represent this development as a continuum, a series of snapshot views of growth can be captured. We take one such snapshot in this study in order to explore the understanding of teaching held by a sample of second year education students.

### PURPOSE

Our aim in this study is to characterize students' teaching practice experience by describing its content and context. The content of the practice pertains to what the students know and do. That is, what knowledge of content and pedagogy is demonstrated through their classroom practice at this stage of development? What do their actions

in the classroom tell us about their understanding of teaching? In addition to the specific actions of planning and executing lessons, the practice unfolds within a context. This context is defined by those elements and issues which support or inhibit the students' practice experience such as the nature of the placement and the expectations and constraints of the practice itself.

From our thinking about content and context the following research questions developed:

1. What knowledge of content and pedagogy is demonstrated through students' classroom practice?
2. What do their actions in the classroom tell us about their understanding of teaching?

We represent the frame of the study in figure 1.

#### CONTENTCONTEXT

Know and Do Supports and Restraints

Figure 1. Research Framework

#### METHODOLOGY

Twelve second year teacher education students comprise the sample. These students, engaged in their third professional practice experience, were a subset of the students assigned to us for supervision in 1993 and 1994.

We draw our data from observation of the students' work in the classroom, written feedback about the specifics of the lesson, and individual and group interviews focussed on general issues related to the practice. An interview schedule guided the interviews which were taped and transcribed verbatim.

Each student was observed teaching a lesson. The observation was followed by a feedback session where the student and the supervisor discussed aspects of the lesson planning and delivery as well as more general topics related to priorities of this practice. Student concerns and goals were also discussed. Each student received a written statement about the specifics of the lesson.

A more general discussion guided by the interview schedule sought to relate the lesson-focussed feedback to the students' awareness of their classroom practice and development, that is, their knowing and doing.

Observations about the classroom and the nature of the school, support, successes and objectives for the future lessons were raised and discussed.

A snapshot description of each student's practice was constructed from the lesson feedback, the general discussion and from the written report. The descriptions sought to capture the main characteristics of the student's teaching or 'classroom doing'. Each student had an opportunity to read and respond to their own snapshot. A written and verbal response was given by each student. At the completion of this process, all students agreed that the snapshots accurately described their practice.

We looked for patterns in the twelve snapshots; points of overlap, shared practice, themes and issues which were common across the data set. A number of the descriptors applied to a majority of the students. Students for example, had shared concerns with classroom management, focus on classroom activity, and issues related to workload. Themes emerged from the descriptors which fitted our general categories of knowing and doing.

As the analysis of data proceeded, so did refinement of our framework. The content-context framework evolved into the more detailed framework represented in figure 2. The data provided ways of being more specific about beginning teachers' knowing and doing. As shown in figure 2, the Know and Do aspects of content are further refined. Knowledge refers to knowledge about curriculum and about education studies, which we conceptualize as knowing about planning, child development, and theories of learning. A teacher's doing or pedagogy includes teaching strategies and instructional skills. The combination of content and context knowledge leads to a degree of understanding about teaching.

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Figure 2. Analysis Framework

## REPORTING the DATA

Five strong messages emerged from the data: the importance of planning, the nature of teaching, a concern with classroom management, a focus on

activity, and the importance of teacher guidance and support. We present and discuss each theme in turn and then draw some implications for our work as teacher educators.

## Planning

Achieving skills of planning and preparation is one of the key objectives under-pinning the practicum experience. The University guidelines clearly specify the need to demonstrate the ability to plan all lessons clearly and thoroughly and to provide for individual and group needs. Students are exposed to the required lesson planning format in lectures which emphasise planning, learning objectives, pre-lesson preparation and organization of resources .as key components of effective teaching.

Observations and interview data revealed that all students were conscious of the importance of planning. As Vicki summarized, "It is really important to be really well prepared the night before...You have to memorize it in your own mind, each step that you are going to do so that each lesson flows. You also have to work out the transition in between." Of the twelve students, six were assessed as good planners and showed evidence of being confident with planning. These students demonstrated an awareness of the need to find appropriate resources for lessons and to use their own ideas.

Teaching is a lot of preparation and if you want to motivate the children every single lesson and teach them you have got to have the right contacts to know where to get the material. You have got to do a lot of preparation to find out a lot more about the actual lesson than is presented to you on the piece of paper (from the teacher). You have to know about issues that you can bring into the lesson and so for every lesson if you really want to be prepared to take a lot of work to get a wide scope of what you are actually teaching to present to the children as best you can. (Danielle)

Only two students in the total sample commented on the significance of having sound content knowledge when planning. Half reported that the teacher became a source of content knowledge, suggestions and assistance upon which they drew heavily for purposes of planning.

For the remaining students, lesson plans were scripted and stilted and reflected mainly teacher-centred approaches. Most were not confident to digress from the plan either before or during the lesson to be taught. Generally, students were overwhelmed by the amount of work involved in lesson preparation and reported, "being fed up with planning" (Shaun) and "amazed at how much work is involved in teaching" (Sophia). Sarah talked about the amount of work necessary to prepare lessons and resources and the speed with which the students completed the task.

Taking the kids all day today and then having to go home and do all the work for tomorrow and it is just over so quickly. You feel like you've put in so much...you know thinking about what you are going to do and then planning it and then doing the activities and then getting in the classroom and doing it. The students finish it so quickly. It makes you think ooh - am I going to want to put all this effort in? (Sarah)

### Nature of Teaching

The practice sessions and education units taken during first year, emphasize the importance of lesson preparation and planning, the development of positive relationships with children, giving directions, lesson beginnings and conclusions, motivation, basic questioning techniques and basic evaluation of children and of self. The students' skills on this practice are consistent with the nature of their course to this point.

Classroom observation revealed that the students had developed basic teaching skills. They typically worked with the class as a whole and their practice was characterized by teacher-centered strategies. The students were able to manage routine tasks and coped satisfactorily with issues related to discipline. The students were disciplining to a plan; either their own or that of the class teacher. All made appropriate use of positive reinforcement. They showed an awareness of individual differences but did not act upon this awareness. The students demonstrated a degree of competence in basic skills. They were experiencing success in a limited range of teaching strategies.

The limited nature of their repertoire results, generally, in a style of teaching which is formal and planned. They employ their planning skills to develop a workable lesson plan and then they seek to 'stick' to their own plan. As Nina suggested, "Unless you have had a lot of experience in the classroom I find it hard to 'go with the flow' and diverge off the lesson plan." The lesson plan provides an element of security for the students; if they stay within the boundaries of their plan, they will survive. The structure provides the comfort zone referred to by Nerida: "I feel comfortable in lessons that are very structured because then you know that the children are expecting what to do and I don't even think about it." This adherence to the plan means that students rarely take advantage of teaching opportunities which arise during the course of the lesson.

The students' 'doing' is of a focussed and specific nature. They are concerned, at this point, with only a few pieces of the teaching-learning jigsaw; that is, they attend to the particulars and

not the 'big' picture of teaching. They plan the lesson and then aim to 'get through it' as planned. Whilst a number of the students recognise the value of hands-ons, active lessons, they seemed most comfortable in delivering lessons of a structured nature. Related to the comfort zone of structured lessons is a student's desire to be right. Students feel more comfortable when they 'know the answer'.

Kate indicated that,

I think I like teaching maths because there is a clear answer and it is either right or wrong. I like showing people how to get an answer - you get somewhere. Whereas in Social Studies sometimes you can be left in the air - it is a messier lesson.

### Discipline

The university education core unit scheduled for the third semester relates to classroom management and control and consequently these skills are a particular focus during the third professional practice. It is not surprising therefore, that this area is at the forefront of students' concerns and receives particular attention from students and supervisors in relation to the development of basic classroom management techniques.

Generally, students have the belief that control is the most important skill to be mastered whilst on practice as it is both a reflection and measure of their capability. Students share the view that, 'if you cannot control the children, you can not teach them'. Therefore, students recognize that good control is an indicator of their developing expertise. Vicki suggests that at this stage of her training; "I just know more. I have a better idea of how the lesson will go, I know more about the special ways to teach...to keep the children in control." Discussion during feedback sessions revealed that students' planning and methods of implementation were focussed on keeping children occupied, quiet and busy for the sake of order and control.

During individual interviews, four students indicated that they felt the school had dealt with discipline in such a way that they inherited well-managed classrooms with clear discipline policies. This enabled them to think about their teaching rather than being focussed on control; "It helps to have a well controlled classroom to practice in" (Shaun).

When prompted in discussion to reflect on areas of development for the present practicum, five students cited discipline as an area of

personal improvement. These students were able to make links between on-campus and off-campus learning in this area. Danielle, for example, indicated that "From university I have learnt a lot more (since the previous prac) like the ways of controlling a class" and "When you get up there, you suddenly think, there is quite a bit of skill in this."

### Focus on Activity

The students' teaching is characterized at this point by a strong desire to control the lesson. Their aim is to 'get through the lesson' and they see keeping the children busy as a way of accomplishing this. They equate activity with protection; protection from management problems and questions and events for which they may not be prepared. What the children are doing, therefore, takes precedence over what the children are learning.

For eight of the twelve students, planning and initiating the activity were the main components of their teaching process. Once the children were engaged in the activity, the beginning teachers moved about the

classroom but had limited teaching interaction with the children. They did interact with children to praise progress and behaviour or to intervene if student behaviour was inappropriate. They helped students 'do' the activity and employed management techniques but they missed opportunities to enhance learning. After the fact, Nerida realized that, "On the prac instead of being concerned with the lesson purpose, I was more worried about coming up with a great idea - which can take over" and Sophia vowed, "On my next prac I will focus more on overall learning as opposed to the activity alone. I can now see a correlation between the lessons and the purpose for them."

For the most part, the beginning teachers did not see the activity as a means to a learning end; it was a way to fill the lesson time. Part of Shaun's snapshot indicates that his focus, "is on the activity and what the children are doing rather than on the learning which is occurring."

Similarly, we described Nina and Vicki as being focussed on the activities the children do, rather than on the learning outcomes. The nature of their planning and teaching highlights the students' quest to 'teach a lesson' rather than to have the children learn. Hence, the teacher-centred strategies, adherence to the plan and reliance upon developed basic skills.

### Teacher Support and Guidance

Associated schools are asked to nominate teachers interested in having students placed in their classrooms. Co-operating teachers are selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the

practicum component of the course. Principals are regarded as the liaison person and therefore are in a position to discriminate as to the suitability of co-operating teachers. The university obtains a list of teachers and students are randomly allocated by computer to a school and grade level. Every effort is made to vary school and grade level for each practice to provide as wide a range of experiences as possible.

For the sample group of students, teacher support and guidance represented an area of intense anxiety. All students were dependent on the co-operating teachers in one form or another. "If there is one thing that could make or break your practice, I think it is the teacher you have on practice" (Simone). "It just helps so much when a teacher treats you like a human being, for one thing and just makes you feel relaxed" (Nina). Eight of the twelve students drew heavily on the teachers' strategies, suggestions and expertise in an attempt to build their personal repertoire of teaching skills. Students modelled the teachers' style and approach in areas ranging from styles of interaction with pupils to discipline techniques. Five students (Sophie, Catherine, Simone, Danielle and Kylie) reported a strong link between the teachers' positive encouragement and support and the development of their confidence in all aspects of the teaching role. "It makes a huge difference to your confidence if the teacher thinks you can't do it yourself" (Catherine). In all cases students highly valued teacher guidance, feedback, direction and personal support and nominated this feature of their practice as being crucial to the success or failure of their school-based experience.

This prac, I have had lots of help and encouragement. The teacher has told me what I have done wrong and what I should have done and that is fine but I have also liked the encouragement. Tracey is not really getting any (encouragement) and she doesn't know how she is going. Her teacher isn't giving any feedback at all. Part of that feedback has to be encouragement. If you always get negative feedback, you are not

going to have much self esteem and confidence in what you are doing.  
(Simone)

For three students, (Kylie, Kate, Nerida) the existing school practices, procedures and organization were constraints and boundaries over which they had no control and within which they had to work. They were conscious of the need to conform to the norms of the classroom. It was as though the classroom teacher became the life-line to survival for the duration of the practicum.

## DISCUSSION



A dominant issue of control and survival emerged from the themes of planning, nature of teaching, discipline and activity-focus. These themes are interconnected and subsequently influenced by aspects of teacher support and guidance. The students were seeking to survive the practice experience and a way of surviving was to control the situation as much as possible. Interpreting the students' practice from their perspective of survival and control unlocks reasons behind the knowing and doing of their teaching.

Since students are concerned with issues related to classroom management and discipline, they plan with the aim of keeping children occupied and to protect against unplanned classroom events. The plan, therefore, provides security or a safety net for the students. Given the effort they put into developing a lesson plan, they are keen to 'see the lesson out', that is, they are reluctant to deviate from their own plan. This has implications for the nature of the lesson as well as for the type of teaching strategies selected and implemented. They favour teacher-centered approaches as these provide minimal opportunities for children to take learning into their own hands thus reducing unexpected questions or situations. In addition, the students focus on the activity planned rather than on learning outcomes as they strive to maintain order and to emerge unscathed. Generally, this results in lessons which are limited in variation, spontaneity and incidental teaching. In dealing with these circumstances, students looked to their classroom teacher for support and guidance; co-operating teachers are deemed to be a significant resource.

From observations of lessons, follow-up discussions and interview data, it is evident that students understand teaching to be highly stressful. This is not to say that they do not value the practicum experience. Students readily acknowledge that this is an important part of their course and that they learn about teaching while on practice. They are absorbed in surviving the classroom experience and concerned with meeting the assessment requirements. To this end, students are reluctant to take risks which results in a conservative approach to teaching.

Data indicated that students valued a positive, working relationship with their co-operating teacher whilst on practice. Students consistently modelled teachers' approaches and instructional strategies and sought feedback on their progress. However, in some cases, what was modelled for students was inconsistent with university course content. This resulted in conflict for the student as they tried to 'serve two masters'.

A noticeable feature of the students' understanding of teaching is the difficulty they experience in linking theory and practice. Typically,

students can describe the activity planned for pupils but find it extremely difficult to make connections to theoretical principles, that is, answer the why questions. Consequently, students fail to articulate clearly the learning outcomes for pupils.

Students' classroom practice demonstrates a limited body of content knowledge. For the most part, students rely upon personal, practical knowledge to see them through the lesson. Co-operating teachers generally assume that their students possess adequate knowledge of a subject but if a deficit is evident, provide the necessary content. While it appears that students possess satisfactory subject specific methods, they lack substantial content knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

This project has investigated a sample of second year education students as they participated in a teaching practicum mid-way through their university course. The major focus has centred on specific questions related to what knowledge of content and pedagogy is demonstrated through student's classroom practice, and what their actions in the classroom tell us about their understanding of teaching.

The research highlights features of second year students' experience of learning to teach from which we draw implications for teacher education.

A number of issues emerge for students during the course of their two week placement and whilst the practice provides opportunities for them to develop beginning teaching skills, it does not allow sufficient time to deal with significant and complex issues. A strategy may be to 'stretch' the school experience of students from a two week placement to the full semester. Efforts to 'stretch' the practice will contribute to more successful integration of course components. Even though lectures and tutorials deal with content the students recognize as relevant, there is virtually no opportunity in the second year programme for students and faculty to ask serious questions about the practice experience; what to expect, how to plan, how they are feeling, what they are doing and seeing, and what sense they are able to make of it. There must be opportunities for students to think, reflect upon and become intellectually engaged in practice-related issues. Integration between school and campus components must be a focus of university teaching if students are to develop a sense of wholeness in their training experience.

A second feature relates to the degree of consistency between university teaching and expectations, and the reality of the classroom situation. The purpose of the practicum experience is to enable students to apply theory and to experiment with their own teaching in a coherent and integrated way. In order for this to occur, it is critical that students practice in classrooms where university

principles are shared and supported. That is, co-operating teachers advocate practice which is consistent with university programmes and provide a context for students' experimentation. This has implications for the relationship between schools and the university. A strategy may be to develop partnerships where teachers and teacher educators strive for a shared approach to the professional preparation of beginning teachers.

The snapshots have enabled us to better understand the tension, anxiety and concerns students have as they grapple with the task of learning to teach. Integration, although a priority of the university course structure is hard to achieve. This results in students' experiencing

difficulty making connections between theory and practice. Reality is that learning to teaching is a stressful and complex process. This research has reinforced the responsibility that we, as teacher educators, have to listen to the stories students tell about teaching and to help them make sense of their experience.

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