

The mentoring model

The mentoring model in the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) at Charles Sturt University: Implications for professional development

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Abstract

In late 1994 the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) program at Charles Sturt University was restructured in consultation with teachers in schools and university students. The restructured course has now run for two years. This paper details outcomes from ongoing course evaluation processes and research carried out in the context of the restructured program. In 1995 course evaluation processes focused on the perspectives of students, university supervisors and mentor teachers involved in the program.¹ It also gave direction to research carried out this year focusing on the needs of associate teachers.² The literature on initial teacher education indicates that the voices of associate teachers are often not heard, or indeed, even considered, in processes of program evaluation. The paper describes the various processes of course review, reports on initial findings from the 1996 research - specifically, the professional development needs of associate teachers - and draws implications for future program directions.

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Background

During the first half of 1994 a plan was developed and implemented by lecturers at Charles Sturt University (CSU), teachers and teacher education students which radically restructured the delivery of the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) - GDE (Sec). The plan was to

locate significant components of the initial training of secondary teachers at CSU in high schools in the Central West region of NSW, Australia. In 1995, seven schools were involved in this restructured program and in 1996 this number rose to nine. For a detailed description of the development and implementation of the program see Gerard, Meyenn and Parker (1996) and Hastings, McFadden, Dunshea, Rae and Foley (1996)

The emphasis of the restructured program is on learning to teach (and understanding students' learning) rather than learning about teaching. This emphasis is a response to the criticism that teacher education has been unresponsive to students' and teachers' needs and divorced from the realities of schools and classrooms (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996). The program is built firmly on principles of partnership. In Australia, there has been a growing call for collaborative and collegiate attempts at providing school-based programs of teacher education where academics work in partnership with teachers in schools to encourage strategic thinking and the development of professional skills and capacities in their students (McFadden & Meyenn, 1996).

This renewed interest in Australia in the construction of partnership programs in teacher education is said to go 'beyond consultation'; that is, to actually involve teachers in genuine discussions about the form and content of teacher education programs (Deer, Groundwater-Smith, Meyenn & Parker, 1995: 48). We hoped that the restructured GDE (Sec) program would provide our students with challenging school-based experiences firmly situated in reflective discussions about teaching and learning (Dobbins, 1995). We hoped that the professional craft knowledge of teachers involved in the program would become accessible to our neophyte teachers (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996). As Burrow (1994) reminds us,

Underpinning ... partnership is the proposition that the knowledge and understandings derived from research, combined with the craft knowledge derived from practice, provide a more powerful basis for reform than

either body of expert knowledge considered in isolation (p. 5).

We enacted our program mindful of certain 'essential features of educational partnerships', said to be more likely to encourage genuine reciprocal relationships between the University and schools in the education of prospective teachers (Groundwater-Smith, Parker & Arthur, 1994). We took these essential features to be:

- a recognition of interdependence and the unique contribution various parties brought to the partnership
- constructive and imaginative problem solving
- a will to work to not only change but to improve practice
- a working relationship which permitted risk taking
- a tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty and dilemmas
- joint responsibility for the planning, implementation and evaluation of outcomes
- joint benefits of a commensurable kind
- organisational structures which facilitated the enactment of decisions
- appropriate resourcing, and
- intercultural understanding (Groundwater-Smith, Parker & Arthur, 1994: 10-11).

We were vitally interested then in the views of all parties to the restructuring about the implementation of the course and its outcomes. To this end, we instituted a range of evaluative procedures to inform our judgements about how successful we were in achieving course objectives. As the following section will make clear, reflecting on

the information gathered through course evaluation led us to the conclusion that we had to do more to communicate effectively our course intentions and expected outcomes. It became increasingly clear to us, as course evaluation progressed, that the associate teachers involved in the program were the most important factor in achieving successful student outcomes and yet were also the people most in need of our professional support.

Processes of course evaluation

In addition to ongoing reflective evaluation of the course within the workshop framework of subjects such as the Practice of Teaching 1 and 2, an evaluation meeting was held at the university midway through 1995 to evaluate aspects of the first practice teaching experience. The parties involved included lecturers who were involved in the joint delivery of EPT401, Practice of Teaching 1, a student representative, and all school mentors, or their representatives.

The participants negotiated a way to approach the task of evaluation and agreed to break into two focus groups. One group was made up of the student representative and the mentor teachers from schools and the

other group was made up of the university lecturers involved in delivering the course at both the university and in the schools. These groups worked independently at first and then together to list the strengths and weaknesses of the collaborative and collegiate approach taken to the first practicum. The two questions that were broadly posed were, 'What worked?' and 'What didn't?' Each group agreed they would list strengths and weaknesses on butcher's paper and display their product at a plenary where questions about the product could both be asked and addressed with a view to producing an agreed statement of the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

In addition to this process, at the end of the year, students finishing the course completed a detailed evaluation instrument. The instrument requested students to reflect on their initial expectations of the course and then to detail their perceptions of course outcomes in relation to these. Students were asked a series of questions about the success or otherwise of what were considered to be the most important elements of the restructured course. These included the:

- adoption of an integrated supported practicum experience to enable students to become inducted into the profession in a team environment
- extension of students' second practicum from four to six weeks to provide a more realistic teaching experience, and
- completion of an in-school project, negotiated and developed at school level, (the outcomes from which were shared at a GDE colloquium day).³

The following section of the paper details the outcomes of these processes of course evaluation.

Outcomes

While the outcomes of evaluation indicated that the program provided a much improved learning experience for students and a more satisfying professional experience for lecturers and teachers there were still crucial areas to address. One of the most intriguing, and we believe significant, outcomes of the evaluation process was that stated program expectations of a large number of students, related to what we might call the technocratic aspects of teaching - about skills, knowledge of content, and effective strategies - changed to perceived outcomes to do with their personal growth as reflective and critical professionals.

The agreed weaknesses of the program related to a number of specific areas:

- the need for clearer communication about the roles of the different personnel involved
- the need to address the perceived fragmented structure of the first

practicum experience, and

- the need to provide associate teachers with support so that they understood clearly their role.

What was most evident from student evaluation of the program was the uneven nature of communication about, and understanding of, the requirements of the program across the seven school sites (nine in 1996). The perception by students that there is uneven quality in the program is seen, by them, primarily as an equity issue as many students believe others get a 'better deal' from their associate teachers. This 'better deal' generally translates into a more worthwhile teaching experience and may lead to achieving a result which will enable better access to a teaching position in a 'tight' market.

Evaluation in 1996 has only confirmed that, even within the one site, there can be inconsistencies in approach to the program. This indicates the need for better communication with associate teachers. It also reinforces the need for associate teachers to be involved in professional development which helps to communicate the main features and guiding principles of the restructured program and which also models best practice. Evaluation by associate teachers in 1996 also indicates the need for further clarity about their roles and the expectations of the program. But it also indicates that, for many associates, their view of their own practice has been altered significantly as they reflect on the best way to describe their actions in the classroom and communicate this to their student teachers (see Hastings, McFadden, Dunshea, Rae & Foley, 1996).

The following section of the paper details the way in which course evaluation has led to research with associate teachers to determine their professional needs as associates. As Blocker and Swetnam (1995) remind us, 'although there is a growing trend to better prepare co-operating teachers, the reality remains that relatively few institutions require courses or inservice training for the co-operating teacher' (p. 26). While the teachers, universities and students may recognise the need to enhance the skills of the co-operating, or associate, teacher to ensure practicums are successful for all, the reality is that the process to facilitate this is haphazard.

Researching the needs of associate teachers

Research indicates that professional development programs for associate teachers can assist them to develop the skills they require to enhance field experience programs (Faire, 1994). Teachers involved in such programs of professional development are said to experience increased self confidence, enhanced supervisory ability, elevated status amongst their peers, professional growth and reduced sense of teacher isolation (Hulshof & Verloop, 1994). Hulshof and Verloop (1994) assert that

student teachers are also the beneficiaries of teacher professional development as they develop theoretical concepts of teaching more readily if their associate teacher has learnt the same concepts through some form of professional development.

Recent literature describes successful professional development models as those which address the needs of associate teachers in a systematic and integrated manner. The effective program is said to be one which is research-based, integrates theory and practice and provides the associate teacher with expertise to deal with the student teacher. The information to support teachers, though generated and informed by research, still accepts the importance of teachers' knowledge and skills derived from practice (Burrow, 1994; Cooper & McIntyre, 1996).

Further, Polacheck (1992) suggests if institutions recognise the skills of the associate teacher and use them to assist with the design of a professional development course, then teachers would be empowered as equal participants in the teacher education process. We believe that by making teachers active participants in the process of teacher education in this way there is the possibility of further significant program improvement (see also Adey & Speedy, 1993). Accordingly, our concerns about the need to involve associate teachers more closely in the further refinement and delivery of the GDE (Sec) and the need to ensure more equitable course outcomes across and within school sites led to research focused on the professional needs of associate teachers.

Twenty associate teachers involved in working with our students in their six week long second practicum experience have been interviewed twice within this time to discuss their initial and ongoing professional needs as an associate. The analysis of these interviews is very much at a preliminary stage but there are emerging themes and issues which focus on the practicum as a significant context for professional development. The following section of the paper reports, in general terms, on initial findings from this research.

Outcomes

The associate teachers involved in the GDE (Sec) believe that their work with our students benefits them because having a student teacher:

- gives them new teaching ideas
- encourages them to think about and reflect on their teaching
- is useful in helping them to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching, and
- might lead to improvements in their teaching.

These categories of benefit are very similar to those found by Tatel (1994) who explored the ways that experienced teachers changed after supervising student teachers. However, the benefits that teachers

believe they receive from this process are constrained. As Bernstein (1990) reminds us, individuals negotiate their world within existing practices.

To achieve change, teachers need to discover that their existing frame for understanding what happens in their classes is only one of several possible ones, and this, according to Schon, is likely to be achieved only when the teachers themselves reflect critically upon what they do and its results (Barnes, 1992, p. 17).

Importantly, the associate teachers in the GDE (Sec) program recognise they need access to experiences and resources which will change the way they see both the act of teaching and their own classroom. They believe that the university has both the material and professional resources to enable this to occur. Some want access to the lectures that the students have. Others want detailed information about the structure as well as the content of the program. They want to be involved in a process which encourages them to take a reflective and

reflexive approach to their own teaching and to their work with our students. Strategies to deal with the professional development challenges which the research is highlighting needs then to address the 'default' settings of associate teachers' daily professional lives (Barnes, 1992). The following section of the paper describes the strategies that we believe are possible to improve our program outcomes.

Addressing professional development challenges

It is anticipated that further analysis of the interviews will bring to light more clearly the range of needs of associate teachers and inform the development of a professional development package, including a video and interactive guide to supervision, targeting associate teachers. As part of a strategy to achieve this end, a grant application has been made for 1997 to the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT). It is envisaged that learning materials produced will provide practical models and strategies for implementing the course requirements in different schools to help ensure equitable course delivery. A video modelling best practice and practical process strategies will be supplemented by an attractively presented course booklet which will include jointly negotiated workshop tasks to consolidate and enhance student learning and reinforce mentors' and associates' understanding of the program.

A further strategy is perhaps the most exciting and, potentially, the most professionally beneficial. The Academic Senate of CSU has approved the Graduate Certificate in Professional Development (a four subject award), with two core subjects approved at Masters level. These core subjects will provide teachers with the opportunity to use

their workplace learning as the basis of an academic award. Such workplace learning could be that associated with the current partnership program, for instance, the work of mentors and associate teachers in the restructured GDE (Sec). For example, a workplace professional portfolio could contribute to the award and be structured as a stand alone component or be subsumed as a substantial component of one of the core subjects. Such a professional portfolio might document action research or the outcomes of a school project focused on the teaching/learning relationship between mentors/associates and our preservice teachers.

The possibility of Department of School Education support for this initiative is at present being negotiated. We believe that professional development delivered in this way has the potential to:

- provide a context for changing the culture of teaching and teacher education by establishing a clear focus on reflective professional practice and issues of professional development
- develop a learning community and address the learning continuum of initial teacher education, induction and ongoing professional education for teachers
- recognise and accredit teachers' workplace learning and provide credit transfer opportunities.

Conclusion

Processes of course evaluation when coupled with focused research activity have heightened our awareness of the need to work closely with all parties involved in the development and delivery of the restructured GDE (Sec). But, in particular, we are convinced of the crucial need to both establish and maintain professional partnership links with the associate teachers who work with our students in a range

of school sites. We are also convinced of the need to ensure that our associate teachers are supported in such a way that quality outcomes can be achieved for our students. We believe that the research conducted with associate teachers in 1996 will contribute to enabling us to construct relevant and appropriate professional development in the context of the GDE (Sec) school experiences. We hope that the strategies we have described for addressing the professional development challenges of a mentoring model of initial teacher education come to fruition. We also hope that further evaluation of our efforts will indicate associate teachers feel more supported in, and better able to contribute to, our collaborative effort to produce teachers who are both confident and competent practitioners.

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- 1 There is one mentor teacher in each school who co-ordinates the restructured program at school level.
- 2 Associate teachers are often referred to as co-operating teachers in the literature on the practicum. They have the responsibility for working in the school setting with preservice teacher education students.
- 3 In 1996, these evaluative procedures have been supplemented by a series of associate teacher and student surveys focusing on the strategies used at school level to achieve stated course outcomes.