It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time:
The Difference Between Planning, and Planning to Teach:
A Constructivist Approach

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Abstract

The Joondalup Edith Cowan University Bachelor of Education: Kindergarten through Primary program is designed to prepare teachers to educate children across the kindergarten, pre-primary, and primary years of education. The course enacts a new type of teacher education program in several aspects of its intent and design. The collaborative processes and structures within the university and the partnership with the Joondalup Education District have facilitated relationships and a sense of learning community that enables coherence and connection between content, people and pedagogies. Collaborative planning, professional development and reflection between the team of university staff involved in the program is fundamental to developing responsive teaching and learning.

Our planning processes thus far have revealed the difference between generalised, overarching planning and the specific planning to engage students in constructivist learning. Although we are committed to a belief that most of our students knowledge is not acquired ready formed, by some sort of direct perception or absorption but is constructed, developing a shared understanding of operationalising our beliefs requires a different level of reflection and discussion. The paper will explore processes involved in developing constructivist teaching and is intended to promote dialogue about collaborative planning in a university setting.

Introduction

Working in teacher education, in a university setting, offers unique opportunities and challenges to model teaching and learning that is congruent with espoused beliefs about knowledge and how it is constructed. If a social constructivist position is espoused, what does this mean for the ways planning, teaching and learning should occur? This paper will explore the processes involved in planning for constructivist learning within a new teacher education course.
**The context**

The Joondalup Kindergarten through Primary course outline states that the program is designed to prepare teachers to educate children across the kindergarten, preprimary, early and primary years of education. The course enacts a new type of teacher education program in several aspects of its intent and design. The collaborative processes and structures within the university and the partnership with the Joondalup District are intended to facilitate relationships and a sense of learning community, that enables coherence and connection between content, people and pedagogies. Collaborative planning, professional development and reflection between the team of university staff involved in the program, staff from the pool of collaborating schools/centres, and a defined cohort of students, is an essential aspect of the program. This paper focuses on the collaborative work of the university team involved in one first year unit in this course.

The course is unique in the way it prepares teachers to develop the broad philosophical and pedagogical base necessary for educating children across the early and middle childhood years. All units of the course are framed from this base to include knowledge of children’s development and learning in varied educational settings.

Course delivery involves a mix of university-based, centre and school-based study and practice. In both settings, the model of delivery involves online and interactive technologies and models the underlying principles of the course. The program is delivered through an appropriate mix of tutorials, workshops, lectures, on-site seminars and the use of on-line library materials and other materials that support interaction between staff, students, centres and schools.

The nature of the program is characterised by the manner of delivery, rather than the written content of units. The distinctive features of the program include:

- collaboration with schools/centres in program design and delivery;
- a small number of full time staff with responsibility to ensure that links are made between different aspects of the program located at the university and in schools/centres;
- the formation of a learning community made up of students, key staff, school/centre personnel and parents;
- associated sessional staff committed to the principles/philosophy of the program, working as part of the teaching team, actively involved with the 'on campus' and 'in school/centre' components of the program;
- management of teaching practices by the program teams to provide links between content, curriculum and teaching knowledge and the art of teaching;
- focus on reflection, critical analysis, research and informed judgement;
- focus on the development of knowledge based and intellectually challenging teaching approaches that support the integration of curriculum where appropriate.
Underpinning Principles

The following principles drive the coherence and connectedness between the varied components of the course. They represent the collective responsibility shared by all members of the learning community, as they pursue learning that achieves quality intellectual, social and ethical outcomes.

- The course models engaged pedagogy of the form that we would wish to see enacted in future centres/classrooms. This includes active, independent and reflective learning involving ongoing dialogue about important ideas, connected with prior knowledge and experience that sustains dispositions for learning.
- The program delivers higher order thinking and understanding of the central ideas of the disciplines/learning areas in order to achieve high intellectual quality.
- The interrelationship of content, curriculum, pedagogy, cultural and child development knowledge forms the foundation for the development of practice that is knowledge based.
- The relationship and connections between research, practice and theory is modelled and made explicit. As a result graduates will be capable of making professional judgements and acting on those judgements in the interest of the children in their care.
- Diverse cultural knowledge of race, gender, ethnicity, socio economic position, community and disability, are valued to ensure that learning is connected to experience. Processes that develop an understanding of identity, a sense of belonging, collective responsibility and collaboration are modelled.
- The development of relationships based on trust, integrity and respect, and equity are fundamental to the program. The course models and practices collaboration among teaching staff on campus and in partnership with cooperating schools and centres.
- Reflective processes are modelled and practised. Students are supported to understand how teachers operate in the evolving education system, in a socially dynamic world, they are encouraged to consider how things could be different, and the possibilities for change.
- The potential of Information Communication Technologies is recognised and used to enhance learning in all aspects of the program. The selection and application of appropriate technology supports the development of confidence, knowledge and skills in using it more effectively as a tool for learning.

What are the assumptions underpinning these principles?

Constructivism

The reflective processes outlined in the course principles support the construction and reconstruction of views of teaching, education, community and self. It is through these processes of research, reflection and reconstruction, that our personal philosophies of teaching and learning are being developed and sustained. Critical to any discussion about learning, is the consideration of beliefs about how knowledge (epistomology) is produced. Crotty (1998) summarises the three main positions succinctly when he states that:

- 'objectivist epistemology holds that meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such, apart from the operation of any consciousness....
constructionism has a different view of human knowledge, and holds that there is no
objective truth waiting to be 'discovered', but that meaning 'comes into existence in
and out of our engagement with' our world.
Subjectivism, the third epistemological position, sees meaning as being 'imposed on
the object, by the subject.'

We have taken a constructivist view of learning, that is, we believe that learning occurs
primarily from reconstructing our own mental conceptions of our worlds, and that knowledge
is constructed through interactions with our environments, not by receiving and copying
information or impressions. Social constructivists would agree that meaning is largely
internally constructed, but Lucas, (2000) also stresses that shared meanings - socially
constructed and negotiated are necessary for human communication. When these concepts
are applied to working collaboratively, as a staff team, to develop and construct learning
activities for students, the importance of establishing shared meanings and understandings
is paramount.

Constructivism is central to many debates about teaching and learning and indeed it is
important to ask, "what does it mean for our students?" Prosser and Trigwell (in Biggs, 1999)
discuss how teacher's theories of teaching are ordered into three levels of increasing
complexity and based on two main conceptions:

- teaching as transmitting knowledge (level one and two)
- teaching as facilitating learning (level three).

The first level focuses on "what the student is" and assumes a teacher centred, transmission
model, where the teacher is the knower, with the responsibility to pass knowledge on to the
learner. Level two is also based on a transmission model and focuses on "what the teacher
does" seeing learning outcomes as a function of teaching competencies. The third level
focuses not on the teacher, but on the teaching that leads to learning, that is "what the
student does".

The assumption that "the students do the learning" requires an aligning of teaching methods,
assessments and classroom climate to support students acquiring the skills and
understandings we want them to acquire (Biggs, 1999). This principle of alignment, Biggs
argues, is not new, but what is new is placing it within learning theory, in this case
constructivism, and the need for operationalising and applying it at institutional level (Biggs,
1999). This is the challenge the team has taken up.

Constructivist teaching therefore is that which facilitates learning by engaging the students in
meaningful learning activities that achieve desired outcomes through the active behaviour of
the student. Barr and Tagg (in Angelo, 2000) identify a need for a paradigm shift, "a
transformation from a faculty-and teaching centred model to a student-and learning centred
model by shifting the focus from a means (teaching) to the intended end (learning).

Similarly, Brooks (in Buchanan & Smith, 1998) agree that constructivist teaching is designed
to help students demonstrate comprehension (rather than memorise facts), imaginatively
solve problems (rather than follow procedures), and probe complex issues (rather than recite
culturally accepted beliefs). Fardouly (1998) discusses a cognitive (constructivist) model as
opposed to a behaviourist, (instructivist) model of teaching. The constructivist approach
places the emphasis on learning as an individual and social process (as opposed to being a
result of instruction) and student's personal involvement in what they learn (as opposed to
regular structured teaching episodes). In a constructivist model the students construct
knowledge for themselves as a result of their own activities and interactions and with the
subject matter, making connections to prior knowledge so it makes personal sense to them.
The critical assumption in this model is that knowledge is constructed by the learner, not in isolation, but through collaboration with others, is dependent on and connected with, existing and prior knowledge.

Collaboration

If we believe like Angelo (2000) that our students construct knowledge and understanding for themselves, through interaction and negotiation with the world and others such as staff, other students, and authors both living and dead, then constructing them as our active partners in learning is essential. Similarly we as a staff must model and engage in constructing, adapting new, shared, contextually relevant understandings.

This reflective work requires effective communication in order to develop and sustain collaborative, professional relationships. Time needs to be set aside not only for planning and jointly constructing understandings of what we want the students to learn, but also time for reflection both individually and as a group. Similar levels of professional commitment are required by all team members for this to be effective. To sustain the same quality and level of commitment is a difficult process for the leadership of any collaborative project.

In addition to developing common understanding about teaching and learning processes, through collaborative planning, we have experienced even more difficulties in developing agreement on evaluation processes. Cruz and Zaragoza (1998) emphasise the fact that agreement on assessment is important, stating "an educator's approach to evaluation is a window into his or her entire educational philosophy." Underlying the evaluation process is the basic constructivist principle of "what kind of knowledge counts?" or "what do we want the students to learn?" It is therefore critical that in any collaborative effort agreement on the forms of assessment and the evaluation processes is paramount.

Reflections; what are the implications for planning and planning to teach?

Student perspective

In the unit described in this paper, the staff have attempted to apply ideas of working with students in new ways to critically analyse and construct knowledge, by using Buchanan and Smith's (1998) principles of "grounding the course in the students' beliefs and experiences" and working in ways that help students to "develop their own perceptions about the knowledge and ideas they are engaging with, and then "making the connections between these and current scholarly thinking in the area" and "finally applying the reconstructed understanding of the main concepts to current understandings".

The unit plan document states that 'the teaching and learning processes in the unit are designed to construct your knowledge about learning and development by drawing on your current understanding and experience and connecting these to relevant reading and the text. In this context what does effective evaluation and assessment look like? Underlying the evaluation process is the basic constructivist principle of "what kind of knowledge counts?" or "what do we want the students to learn?"

Part of the evaluation process involved an assessment described as a "Tutorial Presentation", designed by the unit coordinator as a collaborative task. The task involved a team of two students organising an oral 10 minute tutorial presentation on the topic 'Learning about learning'. The students were asked to reflect on their own learning, and describe interviews with a range of people regarding how each person perceived their learning. The presentation included an analysis of the similarities and differences between the learners' perceptions and how these connected with theoretical positions.
This assessment presented students with the opportunity to explore and connect with their own experience and extend their understandings of the ways people learn. This involved two types of processes. Firstly, engaging with the thinking within the group by listening to each presentation and collaboratively providing feedback to each student. Secondly, engaging with wider thinking and research by drawing on lectures, on line and library research to inform their conceptual understanding.

Heath (2001) stresses the need for new ways of working within teacher education in order to ensure that the teachers of the future are prepared to deal with rapid, unpredictable change and 'different ways of knowing'. He goes on to state that teachers will have to become expert in understanding the processes of knowledge production and use. University staff, at one end of the 'knowledge chain' will connect their students with the sources of knowledge production and at the other with users of knowledge. In this context, their expert critical reflexive capacity will be essential in the connecting process... teacher education will have to encompass the role of the 'knowledge worker' both as the 'teacher researcher' and the 'teacher practitioner'. (p6)

Although at the time of writing, the unit is still in progress, some of the student comments regarding this assignment indicate some significant outcomes of the constructivist approach to the task. Student comments gave insight to the perceived benefits of this assignment. These related to the research requirement of the assignment, the connections with their own interests and experience, the shared, collaborative feedback received from their peers and the role the assignment played in developing a supportive learning environment and included:

- we had to find the information ourselves, made us research theorists
- encouraged us to link scenarios to theories
- we displayed our understanding in a different way, oral presentation: a varied form of assessment
- gave a lot of different perspective's, styles, and so many different ways of presenting them
- allowed us to learn about theorists better as we could relate them to individual learning
- collaboration of ideas was great
- modelled good teaching
- great to see how other presentations are structured and to use those ideas to improve for next time
- good reminder and reinforcer of what we learned in the lectures and readings
- good because you got to hear everyone and gave us a chance to learn something about someone, good for getting to know people
- we need practice speaking in front of a group
- good ice-breaking working in groups
- feedback from peers was good to find out what peers think of our views and hear others' views
- getting and giving peer feedback was helpful and useful, it allowed us to improve

Students also offered suggestions for improvement and change. Their responses focussed on the amount of tutorial time involved in the presentations and feedback processes, which reduced time for exploration of the concepts and content presented in the lectures. The following comment indicates the common perceptions related to the time issue, "in retrospect, more opportunity for reflection on ideas raised in the lectures would help clarify our own ideas". This comment, while a suggestion for improvement, surfaces the shift in discourse described by Schratz (1995) where teaching has moved from a model exploring 'simple questions and answers' to one marked by more complex questions. This type of
Teaching requires students to invest personal energy into a process where spaces are opened, in which they are able to link 'their own opinions, insights and experiences' to theory and practice. The nature of the feedback indicates that students recognise and value opportunity for deeper exploration of significant ideas.

Tutor perspective

As a new staff member working in a team to construct and develop learning activities and assessment procedures, the importance of establishing shared meanings and understandings is critical. Our challenge was to begin Biggs (1999) "constructive alignment" of teaching, learning and assessment processes. This construction involved developing a better understanding of the assumptions underpinning the descriptions in the unit handbook. An example of this process is illustrated by a closer look at the intellectual work involved in developing a common understanding of one assessment. Although the assignment as described previously in this paper was fully documented in the unit plan, the difference between the documented unit plan outline of the assessment, and the points that needed clarification and modification, became evident as the group 'unpacked' what each aspect meant. Several modifications were made. These included changing the collaborative nature of the task from a joint to individual presentation, with any collaboration occurring at the planning stages, and not being assessed. The second major modification was in relation to collaboratively developed peer feedback, given to each presenter at the conclusion of their presentation.

These changes indicate a constructivist paradigm at work. This is only possible where staff are operating in a supportive environment where procedures and collegial atmosphere are developed and sustained. The literature abounds with examples of supportive teaching cultures which are identified by aspects such as a "sense of ownership" through involvement in planning, frequent interaction and collaboration between staff, a sense of community created among staff and teaching based on continued reflection and self assessment (Paulsen and Feldman, 1995) and on a focus on teaching that leads to learning (Biggs, 1999). This latter statement has its' focus in the challenge of what we want the students to learn so that the teaching and learning activities and the assessment procedures selected, contribute to these outcomes.

Cruz and Zaragoza (1998) suggest that successful collaboration requires the establishment of mutual respect and trust. The development of relationships based on trust, integrity, respect and equity is an underpinning principle of the course and as staff we are committed to model and practice these collaborative principles. Effective communication is a big part of developing this relationship, with positive and regular dialogue facilitating the construction of shared understandings. This however takes time, requiring regular meetings. Collaborative endeavours require an enormous amount of emotional, intellectual and physical energy from all involved (Cruz and Zaragoza 1998). From a tutor's perspective the personal investment has been professionally and personally rewarding. We have been engaged in a process which Schratz (1995) describes as one moving beneath an imaginary 'waterline' marking the difference between interactions based on behaviour, action and competence (the 'how' questions) to those that require us to expose our judgements, beliefs, values and identities (the 'why' questions). This is only possible in a supportive, non-judgemental environment where the relationships are built on trust, respect and integrity.

Unit coordinator perspective

To infuse constructivist practice into a higher education course, Buchanan and Smith (1998) believe it is important to firstly ground the course in the students'beliefs and experiences, help the students to develop their own perceptions about the course and then make the
connections between these and current scholarly thinking in the area, finally applying the reconstructed understanding of the main concepts to current understandings. These principles operate at many different levels and are just as applicable at a staff level. Working within a constructivist paradigm demands that the principles outlined above, underpin and inform the planning and teaching done by the staff working within the unit. In order to enact these principles of social constructivist teaching and learning in a university setting, it seems that many changes are necessary.

This section of the paper explores the possibility that to work in a constructivist way at a staff level, demands a different model of leadership than that presented by many existing models. The paper explores the challenge associated with changing perceived beliefs about leadership, from the perspective of the unit coordinator, responsible for ensuring that the unit is achieving the intended outcomes.

In the collaborative work described in this paper, one of the challenges that has emerged, (particularly in relation to planning for teaching) concerns the dominant beliefs about leadership that characterise many educational institutions. Research studies investigating leadership, such as Heifetz and Sinder (in Kegan, 1994), identify two types of talents demonstrated by successful leaders in many different fields. These talents cluster around firstly, an ability to conceive and communicate a vision or mission, and secondly to use exceptional interpersonal skills to recruit people to "take out membership, in, ownership of, or identification with that vision, mission, or purpose."

This discourse of the highly competent communicator, able to convince, engage and inspire the team has been powerful in constructing a particular type of leader. Such descriptions of effective leaders may be perceived as more progressive than the authoritative, controlling models of leadership that characterised many traditional hierarchies. They may also seem preferable to the 'laissez fare' leader who delegates easily without sustaining a sense of cohesion or community. However, my experience as a school principal, and now as a university course coordinator, have contributed to a different conceptualisation of leadership than those offered by these two extremes.

The description of the leader as someone who is able to engage and inspire others with their vision, still assumes that the 'vision' has been developed prior to engaging the 'followers'. Heifetz and Sinder (in Kegan 1994) describe this process as one where the leader is delivering the 'goods' the 'gift' that show that she has the right stuff to be a leader. My experience has been that where people can work together to 'co-construct' the vision, the process and outcomes are quite different. In this type of community, my role as leader is about sustaining a 'context' where people are partners in this co-construction of meaning and knowledge. Much of the literature on collaboration focuses on inter-disciplinary collaboration. Whilst we had other faculty members teaching into the course, the focus of this paper is the intra-disciplinary collaborative process (based on constructivist principles) that developed between the unit co-ordinator and the teaching and tutoring staff in one particular Learning and Development unit. That being said, the teaching staff in this unit while all from within the School of Education included, a educational psychologist, a physical education specialist, an early childhood specialist and the unit coordinator who was a recent school principal.

In the university setting, the task of facilitating collaboration is daunting. Firstly, assumptions regarding university leadership are directly related to beliefs about knowledge. A model of leadership based on 'objectivist' epistemology where knowledge is seen as absolute, fixed and unchanging, where the individual is involved in a process of 'discovering' fixed 'truths' about the world, values leaders who have demonstrated that they have discovered these truths, and 'know' more than the people who they work with. Their leadership legitimacy is
directly related to their demonstrated knowledge. At the unit coordinator level, in the university setting, it is assumed that leaders will transmit their 'expert' knowledge to the tutors working in the unit and to students. The weekly mass lecture is seen as the coordinator's responsibility. Planning the tutorial organisation, assessments and preparation of teaching resources is articulated in the coordinator's role statement.

It is obvious that epistemological beliefs have far reaching effects in educational practice. These implications are too often centred around the 'how to' questions, without addressing the much deeper philosophical 'what for' and 'why' questions. It is my belief that engaging staff with the 'why' questions is fundamental to sustaining professional learning and energy. What opportunity is there, within the university context, to enact leadership that is congruent with espoused beliefs about knowledge that recognises the interactive and significant role of culture, language and subjectivity in interpreting the world? What is the role of the leader working with staff in a constructivist framework?

It has been stated that the leader's role in supporting co-constructed understandings of purpose and intent is directly related to creating and sustaining a context for this co-construction to occur. What does this involve? I believe part of the context demands examination of how power circulates within the group, how decisions are made, and a re-positioning of myself as the leader, from a position that is dominant and authoritative, to a position as an equal. It demands that as a group, we examine the negotiables and non-negotiables at each stage of the co-construction. The non-negotiables are centred in the principles and deeply held values that we hold, and as leader, my values have equal place in this discussion. The principles underpinning the Kindergarten through Primary course describe value positions, and in this context, much of the group work is concerned with 'unpacking' what those principles mean in the construction of each teaching and learning situation within the unit. The group is engaged in a process of exploring the difference between the broad planning as stated in the unit outline, and actually planning to teach a group of 30 individual students next week! Our experience in this process this year, has revealed that many assumptions that are made about teaching and learning are problematic, and often unexplored. Working collaboratively, as individual staff members, teaching within the same unit, has provided the opportunity to explore many of these assumptions.

In this constructivist process, the most important cluster of values, for me as leader working with staff, centre around relationships that are based on respect, trust, integrity, equality and diversity. These values relate to whether I really respect the knowledge and unique experience that each individual staff member brings to the discussion, how the group ensures that each voice has equal weight, and how diversity will be explored. The challenge for me as leader is to sustain a context where ideas can be treated equally, connected, explored, clarified and modified in ways that support the construction of knowledge within the group. My role is one of clarifying, connecting and supporting the group to explore 'difference' in a constructive way, for I believe that is at the edges of 'difference' that most of our learning occurs.

In this process, I share the responsibility to make connections between the knowledge created within the group, with current scholarly thinking in the area and to use this knowledge to critically analyse the outcomes of the discussions.

**Conclusion**

Schratz (1995) states that 'contemporary academic work is marked by social reconstruction'. The opportunity to engage in such a reconstruction presented itself to some staff working in the new teacher education course described in this paper. The process has required a reworking of relationships between university staff, and between staff and students. The
'reworking' has involved a reduction in the organisational 'distance' that is endemic within the structure of universities in order to work together to 'construct' new knowledge. Working collaboratively requires time, commitment and energy. However, this work is sustained by a shared commitment to student learning with a focus on equitable learning outcomes. This commitment has required a willingness to explore difference, work with ambiguity, incompleteness in an ongoing, unfinished process of knowledge construction. Our collaborative work has enabled staff to engage in processes where 'our retreat to jargon is cut off, our claims to independence have to be earned, and our ability to teach is consequent on our ability to learn' (Shratz, 1995 p151).

References


