WALKING THE WALK AND TALKING THE TALK: ADEQUATE TEACHER PREPARATION IN THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES?

SORO2045

Reesa Sorin Mary Klein

James Cook University James Cook University

Cairns 4870 Cairns 4870

Abstract: Changing educational agendas in the twenty-first century make new and urgent demands on teacher education programs. The emphasis on the construction of robust intellectual knowledges and inquiring habits of mind in schools necessitates the implementation of innovative, inquiry-based teaching/learning relationships that have not been experienced by many preservice teachers nor teacher educators. The question arises as to the role that teacher education might play in preparing teachers for these new-ways-of-being an educator, of working with students in collaborative engagements where learners are authorised and encouraged to construct their own understandings in personally relevant and powerful ways.

This paper examines our attempts at promoting and sustaining an inquiry based culture in a teacher education program at a regional university. We believe that the ability and inclination to inquire is not only cognitive but constituted or produced in teaching/learning activities that actively foster participation and thinking “outside the square”. To this end, we attempt to position ourselves and the students as co-learners; we reflect on and analyse case studies of instructional practice, engage in role plays and participate in student-initiated support networks. This paper reflects on the possibilities and limitations of our practices in an era of uncertainty.

Introduction

We are living in uncertain times. No longer can we be assured that when we wake up in the morning, get dressed and set out for the day that the world we knew yesterday will be the same today. We were reminded of this last year on September 11, when one of us woke to a long distance telephone call from across the world alerting us to the tragedy that had occurred while we slept. Recent world events, including the September 11 terrorist attack, the suicide bombings in Israel and the school shootings in Germany are indicative of a world that has seen some of the worst catastrophes in history, yet has seemingly learned little from them (Britzman, 2000).

In some sense, all institutions should be held responsible for recent world events. Social institutions divide the "haves" from the "have nots", the acceptable from the unacceptable; religious institutions divide Catholics from Protestants, Muslims from Jews; and educational institutions divide black from white, privileged from underprivileged. Yet it is these same institutions that arguably hold the power to change the disequilibrium, to move forward and guide people through the rapidly changing world in which they live.

Education, in particular teacher education, has yet to actualise its role in change. Britzman (2000) notes that "teacher education has not yet grappled with a theory of knowledge that can analyse social fractures, profound social violence, decisions of disregard, and how from such devastations, psychological significance can be made" (p.200). While debate continues
over the roles and responsibilities of teacher education (Britzman, 2000; Gore, 2001; Rhodes and Bellamy, 1999) with regard to qualification, apprenticeship and the practicum (Gore, 2001), and attempts to address the increasingly multicultural classroom with increasingly more white teachers (Hodgkinson, 2002), its responsibilities in the very general sense of "world making" (Britzman, 2000) are rendered invisible and lost. Yet rapidly changing social and economic times require changes that reach far deeper into the heart of teacher education; there is a very real need to prepare future teachers and ultimately the students they will teach to function in the world as it exists today and will exist in the future. It is a world where a lifetime career will no longer be a guarantee, but multiple and varied career prospects almost a certainty. The set learning required in twentieth century schooling and career preparation is being replaced with broader based knowledges and skills that enable students to develop active citizenship within a social context. Teacher education must not only adapt to, but also invite new ways of knowing into its agenda.

Past agendas in teacher education have focused on disciplinary backgrounds, social justice and learning to teach through modelling as well as practice (Gore, 2001). They have been criticised for their deficits, including uninspired teaching methods, superficial curriculum and traditional views of schooling (Rhodes & Bellamy, 1999, p.17). This points to the need to renew teacher education, through modelling exemplary pedagogy in authentic and relevant ways that helps students to build and reflect upon their understandings of the nature and roles of teaching within the broader community.

Policy

In 1996, the Australian Teaching Council published the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching. Targetting teachers from Kindergarten to Year 12, this document differentiates competencies from performance behaviours, knowledge, values and dispositions where competencies are understood as “the ability to combine and apply relevant attributes to particular tasks in particular contexts” (National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning, 1996, p.11). In this document, areas of competence include using and developing professional knowledge and values; communicating, interacting and working with students and others; planning and managing the teaching and learning process and monitoring and assessing student progress and learning outcomes (National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning, 1996). While aimed at classroom teachers, it was suggested that the National Competencies could be used by teacher educators as a guide to content and pedagogy and to inform the knowledge base of teacher education programs (Australian Teaching Council, 1996). In its emphasis on competencies understood in this way, the document tends to entrench the maintenance role of teacher education rather than emphasise its role as a generative force and agent of social change.

The National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching (1996) was followed two years later by the Report of the National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education Project (1998). Beginning with guidelines for graduate standards, the document elaborates standards of teacher education programs and the institutions that deliver them, suggesting that teacher education institutions be monitored and accredited based on their delivery of coherent, integrated and relevant programs. High standards of adult course delivery, according to these guidelines, include developing students as active, lifelong learners where programs:

Encourage teacher education students to take an active role in their own learning and professional development, not only during the initial teacher education program, but also as they begin teaching and subsequently throughout their professional careers (p.24).
While this document clearly assumes a link between quality pedagogic interaction in teacher education and quality outcomes, the exact definition and realisation of quality is always problematic and frames our analysis in this paper. We have found that students' "taking an active role in their own learning" can at times support, and at other times suppress, their establishing themselves as competent and confident teaching professionals.

More recently, the state of Queensland has introduced "Productive Pedagogies" as part of a movement to upgrade pedagogy and learning in the state by the year 2010 (State of Queensland, 2002). Under four broad categories - intellectual quality (the depth of knowledge and understanding generated in the classroom), connectedness (how knowledge relates to students' own lives and life in general), supportive classroom environment (how students are engaged and supported within the learning process) and recognition of difference (issues of inclusivity and citizenship within the curriculum), twenty questions frame an evaluation of the depth and quality of pedagogic interactions. While written for teachers of the compulsory years of schooling, teacher educators committed to more productive engagements with students in teaching/learning interactions might subscribe to these emphases in practice as guidelines to frame their work, and that of their students (Gore, 2001).

**New Interactional Patterns in Teacher Education**

It was in looking at issues of connectedness (State of Queensland, 2002), which include background knowledge, knowledge integration, problem-based curriculum and connectedness to the world, that our original concerns about the role of teacher education in these uncertain times emerged. While much of our practice attempts to integrate disciplines and to present content based on students' previous knowledge and experience, we questioned whether learning in teacher education is presented as problem-based with authentic links to the world beyond the university lecture theatre. We felt challenged by the structures in which we work, in a small regional university in North-Eastern Australia. On the one hand there are the external structures of the program - a four-year, articulated undergraduate program and a two-year graduate program, both leading to Bachelor of Education degrees. Then, too, are our own already constituted knowledges of learning and teaching formed through many years of transmission type learning in school and in further education programs (Bandura in Santrock, 1998). While we have come through this process and are now in the position to guide others, the models from which we learned and the modelling expected of us by preservice teachers, who have come through similar systems, are in large part limited to teacher-directed, transmission-style pedagogies.

To challenge these notions, we believe we must implement and have students experience new models of interaction in teacher education. We value co-authored participation in a community of inquiry where ideas and experiences are shared and problems solved cooperatively. We feel that by modelling pedagogy and our willingness to reflect upon and examine our own practices, we may be helping to induct preservice teachers into new ways of being a teacher and a lifelong learner, as they build their own ways of learning and reflecting. Four features of an approach we've implemented to build these qualities in our students are: positioning ourselves and our students as co-learners; the use of case studies of "real life" teaching situations; role plays in which both students and lecturers participate; and the formation of a student network to take learning beyond the classroom and integrate the neophyte teachers into the teaching community. The possibilities and limitations of these interactive practices are discussed in the following sections of this paper.
Students as Co-learners

A consistent aim throughout our program is to position the preservice teachers as co-authors of knowledge and co-learners in a learning community. Based on constructivist and socio-cultural learning principles (O'Connor, 1998), we value student engagement and the active construction of knowledge as a personal sense-making process. This feature of our interaction with students arises in many different contexts and extends to their being encouraged to engage in dialogue with lecturers regarding any aspects of the program they consider to be of interest or concern.

One prong of a multi-centred approach to the preservice teachers’ active construction of themselves as competent professionals is to have them compile a teaching/learning portfolio in their fourth year. The idea is that they should come to know learning as a voyage of exploration, of reflecting on and experimenting with areas of personal interest in education. We believe that preservice teachers need to be involved in conducting their own inquiries as the professional teacher is one who continues to learn from reflection on the teaching/learning process. It is also assumed that preservice teachers who have experienced these new ways of being a teacher and learner will be better equipped to similarly engage the children they teach. As Goodlad states: "Teachers must learn not only the subject matter of the human conversation but also the pedagogy for immersing the young productively in the conversation" (cited in Roth, 1999, p. 8).

However, the students’ responses to the portfolio form of assessment were equivocal. It is clear that their previously constructed knowledge (which is (re)constructed to some extent at least in teacher education) about how teaching and learning are done weighs heavily on their engagement in the present. While many students stated that they valued the opportunity to follow up in depth an area of personal interest, many were not so sure:

It's scary for me because I'm used to structure, so being free to explore has not encouraged me to take off, but left me grounded in somewhat of a state of confusion.

Getting us to investigate was great! However, we are all still bound by the fact that you are going to mark our work. Although we are taught not to play the "guess what is in my head" game, it is something that is very real at University. The lecturers have something in their head and they are the ones to mark us, so we have to work out what they want.

And when the students are on professional experience teaching rounds, there is similarly an invisible force limiting engagement and learning in the schooling context:

It is a lucky dip whether your teaching style matches or runs consistently with the supervising teacher. In fourth year prac all I am trying to do is impress the supervising teacher. I have taken on her style of teaching which I do not believe in...I feel that I can not teach in the style I like, which is my strength as a teacher.

Case Studies

One of the concerns a number of students have about teacher education is its perceived theoretical distance from their everyday teaching practice (Sorin, 2002). Attempts to link theory with practice involve, for example, students spending part of their teacher education program within the primary or secondary school (Kiggins, 1999). Another way to link theory with practice is through case study. A case study is a 'real world' anecdote presented to
students for the purpose of making a point, or more importantly opening up an area of inquiry. Dockett (2002) has successfully used case studies to teach child development and suggests that this process encourages universal perspectives as students conceptualise and reconceptualise traditional and modern ways of knowing.

We began to use case studies as ways of illustrating concepts; encouraging students to investigate and respond to the case based on their understanding of theoretical constructs and their previous experience. While a number of case studies were taken from existing texts, others were based on personal observation and experience. One such case study was based on an observation of a fourth year practicum student two years before, whose keen attention to his teaching had precluded considering the learning environment. This resulted in some students leaving the room and reappearing through a storeroom window to taunt class members, all without the preservice teacher's notice. The observation was presented to the class, including a plan of the classroom layout, and they were asked to work through the scenario and discuss their reactions to it. They were not asked to come up with a set answer, but rather to discuss the issue and to suggest a variety of possible solutions to the problem. Case studies in lectures and tutorials were implemented to create a community of inquiry, in which students, as well as the lecturer, examined the situations and together developed understandings and possible solutions to them. There were no pre-determined responses; rather situations were chosen for their open-endedness and possibilities for multiple solutions.

Students' reactions to the use of case study as a teaching tool were very positive. One student noted that case studies "add a bit of reality into the lecture topics". The link between the theoretical and practical was mentioned by a number of students, who felt that concrete representations helped to illustrate concepts and develop deeper understanding:

I feel [case studies] make understanding concepts much easier. It is so much clearer if we can see how abstract theories and concepts can be used in practice, and case studies are the next best thing to being there to observe a situation.

Case studies also were reported to give relevance to the learning content. A student reported that the case study helps to demonstrate strategies that are "relevant to us as teachers; it gives us an example which we can critically analyse and discuss".

Role Plays

Similar to case studies, role plays ask participants to think and act in a situation different from the current one of a lecture or tutorial. Through active participation in the scenario, students are in a better position to reflect upon similarities to their own practices. For example, in one tutorial we set up two consecutive activities, one exemplifying a teacher dominated chalk-and-talk teaching of a mathematical algorithm, concentrating on lots of praise for correct behaviour and correct answers and the other an inquiry based investigation. The 'teacher' in the first case was extremely nurturing and supportive of all 'students' in the classroom although deferring to meritocratic notions of those who 'could' and 'could not' do the mathematics. When the preservice teachers scored this activity according to the previously mentioned Productive Pedagogy checklist (State of Queensland, 2002), they found the lesson lacking many of the preferred features. Later on the preservice teachers engaged in an inquiry oriented mathematics lesson and found many more of the stipulated aspects of a productive pedagogy in evidence. The students saw this as very useful in demonstrating what learner-centred teaching might mean, though in general they were equivocal about the usefulness of role play in teacher education:
I found it (role play) very useful particularly in terms of 'seeing' the difference (between investigative learning and teacher-centred instruction). I want the student centred lessons to comprise my practicum lessons. However, I am still finding it hard to do these types of lessons which include hands on activities.

(Role plays) are useful but we have only seen this once in four years at University.

Networks

Becoming a teacher means more than passing a set number of university subjects and participating in the required period of professional experience. Students need professional development in areas that may not be covered in the mandated curriculum and they need to build confidence and connections within the broader teaching profession. A student network was established in 2000 to extend in-class learning and offer student opportunities to meet and network with practicing teachers and professionals in related fields. Dubbed Megina Kazil, which in Torres Strait Creole means "little children", the group was formed by Early Childhood students and lecturers to include any interested preservice teacher (Sorin, 2002). While Megina Kazil began with strong lecturer support, over the two years of its existence this support was gradually withdrawn and the group functions quite independently to organise meetings, speakers and fundraising events.

Research into the effects of Megina Kazil (Sorin, 2002) on preservice teacher development illuminated benefits in the development of self, of relationships and of the profession. Personal benefits included confirmation of existing beliefs and and growth in levels of confidence, knowledge and skills.

[The network] enhances our degree, especially on a practical level. The university course is too heavily theory based...University does this huge, general thing, which is not enough.

Relationships and collaborative learning emerged as significant benefits of the network. Lave and Wenger (1991) saw the importance of a newcomer to a field having access to mature practitioners as a legitimate way of becoming part of the community. Through Megina Kazil, preservice teachers were able to form relationships with other preservice teachers, practicing teachers, community members and university lecturers. These relationships ranged from networking with others who had skills and knowledge useful to the student to mentoring to direct employment opportunities where students became apprentices to practicing teachers. One participant noted:

I have met teachers who are passionate about early childhood and about sharing quality teaching, and as a result of their coming to Megina Kazil, I have been able to go out into their classroom and see effective and kind teaching happening.

Participants felt that their involvement with the Megina Kazil network helped them to develop the profession by encouraging them to advocate for children and early childhood issues and raising the profile of the Early Childhood profession. They saw themselves not only as preservice teachers, but also as representatives of a profession that has community and social responsibilities. They also felt more empowered to input into the university curriculum and to work for changes where they considered it appropriate. One participant saw a role of the network as "making suggestions to the Head of Education, or just asking about it and wanting to have some input and get some feedback so we are informed. [The university should be] acting on feedback from graduate students about gaps in the degree".
Results of research into the Megina Kazil student network (Sorin, 2002) indicate that it is one avenue by which deeper understanding and connectedness to the world can be achieved within preservice teacher education. It positions the lecturer as scaffold, originally offering extensive support and gradually removing that support as students become independent, responsible learners. As one participant indicated "It helps us to walk the walk and talk the talk".

**Conclusion**

In implementing these changes to our program - positioning ourselves (to the extent we are able) as co-learners, using case studies and role plays, and supporting a student network - we attempt to revitalise our pedagogy and make explicit what it means to be reflective and generative in these uncertain times. A subtle belief that guides our work is that there is a powerful relationship between professional competence and the processes by which it is acquired and extended in and beyond teacher education. While the changes we have made are in the early stages, student reports and our observations tend to indicate that they are instrumental in developing depth and connectedness in students' learning.

However, we live and work in difficult and uncertain times. While we think and write in terms of 'talking the talk and walking the walk' are we, like many of our students, aspiring to redundant notions of what it means to teach and learn in the twenty-first century? Despite our efforts to present new models of collaborative inquiry, where we believe we are giving our students spaces to develop their own understanding, we wonder if we are really having an effect. Are students really telling us what they think, or what they think we want to hear? Are we talking the talk, but not yet able to walk the walk that leads them along uncharted paths as the educators of the future?

**References**


