From Supervisor to Mentor: Suggestive Possibilities

Pat Smith

Margaret Zeegers

School of Education

University of Ballarat

Abstract

An age characterised by the sort of 'manufactured uncertainty' identified by Giddens (1994) throws up for scrutiny any number of taken-for-granted assumptions regarding professional practice experience in the Education field. This paper explores the suggestive possibilities of discourses of pre-service teacher practica in terms of naming, positioning and examination of taken-for-granted aspects of teacher education as they present at a regional university in Victoria, Australia. The University of Ballarat has introduced a new P-10 teacher education course. In the second year of its progress, traditional aspects of paid supervisory and assessment roles of practising teachers in relation to student teachers have been the focus of attention and activity based on reconfigured foci on the roles of both practising teachers and undergraduate students. One such focus is on what Schön (1987) describes as 'indeterminate zones of practice', and the result has been a research program exploring those zones in terms of mentorship in relation to mandated supervision and assessment requirements for graduate registration. The project is action-research based, with teacher, student, academic and semi-academic/teacher roles considered in the light of suggestive possibilities of mentorship and reflective practices as transformative possibilities in relation to roles associated with these.

Introduction

Within the Western world scholars posit a post-modern world of accelerating change, intense compression of time and space, cultural diversity, technological complexity, national insecurity and scientific uncertainty . 'Manufactured uncertainty' is the way that Giddens , p. 2) describes the situation. As scholars question the relevance of what has become traditional discourses to inform their practice, such as Marxism on the Left of the political spectrum and various forms of discourses of the Right, they raise serious questions as well in reference to the ideological basis for academic boundaries that have become established (see for example Giddens, 1994). These have in effect structured the way in which we have been taught, the way we have engaged in learning, and in turn, the way we engage in our own practices of teaching and learning in our dealings with subject disciplines and knowledge formations. The suggestive possibilities of discourses of pre-service teacher practica in terms of naming, positioning and examination of taken-for-granted aspects of

teacher education present a fertile field for re-examinations of what has become established practice. The introduction in 2001 of the University of Ballarat's new P-10 teacher education course, now in its second year, has opened up new spaces for all those involved to question a number of traditional aspects, including paid supervisory and assessment roles of practising teachers in relation to student teachers. We have explored such roles and found them wanting as far as helping undergraduate Education students engage more than practical teaching capabilities and skills. These, we felt, belonged with models more appropriate to teacher training. As teacher educators, we were looking for understanding of teaching and learning processes, which implies that copying or inculcation of specified and/or enumerated teaching procedures won't cut it in this new century. This, of course, is not news to anyone. The supervisory and evaluatory position of the classroom teacher as supervisor of the neophyte has been under question for the last decade and more . With such questioning, the field is opened up as we search for possible answers.

We haven't been trying to find the right answers; we have been trying to explore possibilities for thought and action. We have developed a research program exploring the scope that questions to date developed for us: zones of indeterminate practice, zones of indeterminate roles (as in supervision and mentorship) and even zones of proximal development (as in student, student teacher and pre-service teacher, or PST). Indeed, one of our very first steps was to rename our students as PSTs, no longer referring to them as student teachers. It is a habit that they themselves have taken up. The possibilities for change associated with such naming, and the positioning of PSTs as a result, is being explored elsewhere (Ryan & Brandenburg, 2002). This paper is concerned with possible changes as far as the teachers in classrooms are concerned.

Communities of Practice

In terms of mentorship in relation to mandated supervision and assessment requirements for graduate registration, we had to have PSTs in classrooms under direct observation, guidance and evaluation by a registered teacher. That did not mean, though that the classroom teacher's role was restricted to these conditions alone, and could not be further informed than traditional practice of supervising and assessing student teacher classroom performance allowed. There are traditional forms of professional development for neophytes that go beyond the times and ways of Western knowing-of tribal, pastoral and pre-industrial societies that have their own ways of developing professional expertise. The term 'community of practice' is relatively recent, 'even though the phenomenon it refers to is age-old and social scientists have talked about it under various guises...[it] is a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavour and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them...' . The application of such an old concept to our newly constructed situation held some not inconsiderable attraction. We renamed the practicum as 'field experience', with the schools and classrooms 'sites' within which part of the total experience was to occur.

The communities of practice construct has been most salient in developing our program, for it is a pivotal notion in terms of roles that may be played out by the schoolteachers who have PSTs in their classrooms with them. It is in effect a setting for situated social practice, such as Lave describes, and taken further into realms of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) . LPP is more than verbal instruction that PSTs receive. It is an habituation to the practices of a group of skilled practitioners , and such a perspective generates suggestive possibilities for the roles of those skilled practitioners (see also Zeegers & Smith, 2002, in press). Centring a program within such communities, then, has opened up possibilities for a successful field experience program on a multiplicity of levels, an 'activity system about which the participants share understandings about what they're doing and what that means for their lives and for their communities' (Lave and Wenger, p. 98).

Thus, classroom teachers need not be limited to any one level, or excluded from any others, because of that multiplicity. One level that we proposed to teachers who volunteered to participate in the program was that of Mentor. The original Mentor was charged by Odysseus to look after and nurture the kingly qualities of his son, Telemachus, while he himself was absent at Troy . It was then, and still is, a role that transcends transmission of technical expertise. It goes into the realm of those things that Schön (1987, p. 6) might see as indeterminate zones of professional practice. We looked to this as a set of informing principles as well, and we asked the teachers what they thought of it. It was almost with relief that they expressed their approval of the role, arguing that it was what they had been doing all along under the guise of supervision of student teachers, but now allowing themselves openly to embrace as empowering for all concerned. The role of the Mentor within the communities of practice allows a multiplicity of levels from which to operate. The staged induction to the teaching profession suggested by LPP may be more immediately visible as far as PSTs are concerned; it is not quite as visible as far as teachers are concerned. Presumed to have a sort of mastery, that mastery in itself suggests an end point beyond which teachers will not progress. Within communities of practice, it is possible to embrace as well roles as learners, 'collaborative cultures' which 'consist of pervasive qualities, attitudes and behaviours' and carry within them 'a commitment to valuing people and the group to which people belong' . Thus, a space unfolds in which those attributes of professional practice that go beyond elements of lesson plans, teaching content, and classroom management (what we perceived as limitations to traditional relationships between student and classroom teachers) can be explored as learning contexts for all involved in these communities.

Members of the communities of practice

It is not a matter of a magic wand being waved, though. It is, as the project is called, a matter of *Building Partnerships*. It is a work under construction, in the present continuous tense rather than the present perfect. The members of the communities include, but are not limited to, individuals, pairs, groups and clusters of people involved in the program. There is a structure, designed to scaffold the experiences of PSTs as they develop and grow as professionals, certainly, but also to support others involved. There is each PST, linked to a buddy PST, who will work together within a single classroom within a single school for a single year. Starting with a one day per week commitment, the pair will develop a mutually supportive relationship with each other, and with the Mentor, the classroom teacher concerned. In each case, the time spent in classrooms will increase to blocks of time of two weeks as their Education degree progresses. It is anticipated that PSTs will gradually develop as members of each school community.

Each school community is linked to a number of others for the purposes of this program, forming a cluster of mentor schools. The number of schools in the cluster varies, depending on the number of PST pairs each has. Some schools are small and rural, taking perhaps only one pair. Others are larger and urban or suburban, taking perhaps four pairs of PSTs. Each cluster has a Community Coordinator (CC), a person who has an interest in education but who is not a member of the school or the academic program at the University. CCs, usually retired teachers or Education academics, form an interested and informed link between the schools and the University. They are in weekly contact with the schools, the Mentors and the PSTs, and follow up on each visit to the clusters with a visit or contact with the University Coordinator (UC). Each cluster also has a designated UC, a member of academic staff directly involved in the program. PSTs are grouped according the schools of their cluster, and meet weekly with their designated UC to reflect on progress, issues that may arise, and possibilities for further teaching and learning experiences. The whole program is designed to be supportive of PST learning in the schools; it is more than an evaluatory mechanism.

Reflection

'Indeterminate zones of practice' are those areas that lie beyond the measurable, conventional and predictable-where the real work of the professional is done in terms of decision making and problem solving in a given professional field. As Schön (1987, p. 13) says, 'The question of the relationship between practice competence and professional knowledge needs to be turned upside down. We should start not by asking how to make better use of research-based knowledge but by asking what we can learn from a careful examination of artistry, that is, the competence by which practitioners actually handle indeterminate zones of practice'. We already know from our own personal experiences as educators that we have not, as Schön (p. 22) points out, always been able to articulate what we know, what we do, what we know how to do, 'or even entertain in conscious thought the knowledge our actions reveal'. Schön suggests reflection, or reflective practice, as a means by which we access that tacit knowledge that professionals employ. Although Schön's suggestions here had no direct focus on the teaching profession, other work has made specific links between reflective practice and teaching .

As a set of informing principles, this means opening up spaces for further reflection. Bengtsson makes the point that the concept itself 'hides a variety of different ideas on the nature of reflections and its implications for the teaching profession and teacher education'. An interesting point to start when unpacking such a term is, as Bengtsson suggests, its etymology, from the Latin verb 'reflectere' (bend or turn backwards) (p. 26). It is used now not in terms of physical but human properties, where something is 'subjected to thorough consideration, that thought dwells a longer period of time on an object in order to get a better and deeper understanding of it' (Bengtsson, 1993, p. 27). Such consideration will not necessarily lead people to similar thoughts, however, so that the notion of right answers or right thinking is not a feature of reflective practice as we understand and turn to it to inform our practice within this project. Indeed it is a barrier to notions of one best way, or the best way, to teach. It is a barrier that we applaud as that idea of a 'best way' is something that we wish to avoid in our practice as teacher educators. When we looked to reflective practice in this program, we looked not to developing a definition that would bind participants to particular forms of reflection. We looked to it as 'a stance, a willingness to question our teaching' , p. 4).

Such a perspective actively embraces uncertainty, with questions raised to be carefully considered in the light of professional practice. Dewey , p. 6) advises 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that supports it, and the further conclusions to which it tends...'. This advice suggests professional action based on thoughtful considerations, not mimesis of classroom procedures, as far as a PST is concerned. Nevertheless, there arise possible tensions between the traditional forms of practica and the emergent forms incorporating reflective practice, largely derived from the perceived need to teaching skills as well as educational theory-practical knowledge as part of professional practice, in fact. Bengtsson , pp. 206-207) describes practical knowledge as tacit and implicit 'because it is not formulated in words and made explicit for the agent or other people'. Here, skill forms an integral part of practical knowledge, 'a kind of activity that can be repeated with the same precision without thinking and talking again and again' (p. 207). It may be seen as akin to the famous Nike slogan, 'Just Do It'. But, 'teacher education depends on explicit knowledge about teacher practice' (Bengtsson, 1993, p. 207). How to resolve such tensions, then, was part of the problem that we had manufactured for ourselves in opting for a different approach from what had traditionally been followed.

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Embracing change

This is a deliberate intervention on the part of the University, designed to change perceptions of roles of the people involved. It is a deliberate attempt to embrace the uncertainties suggested by change and engage these as a force for improving teacher education. There is no doubt of the importance of the classroom experience as far as developing teaching skills is concerned (Gardner, 1993), but there is explicit acknowledgment of a number and range of strategies that may be employed to effect this. In such an active embrace of change, it is possible to construct alternatives to traditional models of student teacher supervision that may modify and develop Mentor understandings of classroom teacher roles as they reflect upon and articulate them as far their PSTs are concerned. One such way is by confronting their own tacit knowledge as they make it explicit. It is, as Maynard and Furlong suggest, a complex and necessarily slow process, and the building is still only in its laying of foundations stage. However, as Lucas and True put it, 'Mentoring should not be seen as exclusively a one-way process in which the "expert" mentor guides the "inexpert" and "deficient" learner. Any learning that takes place should have a dimension of mutuality'.

To achieve such a mutuality, we proposed an action-research based project. We recognised that action research has 'a particularly enabling feature' in its 'presentation of opportunities to generate enquiry and discover implications for change and development by, with and for teachers within their own area(s) of interest' , p. 2). It also appealed to us because of its attempts to break down the dichotomy between the researchers and the researched, the subjects and the objects of knowledge production . Hall argues that people should not be excluded from research activities which will in all likelihood impact upon their lives.

We felt that this could be the case with teacher, student, academic and CC roles considered in the light of suggestive possibilities of mentorship and reflective practices. We were, after all, considering transformative possibilities, proceeding from a standpoint of recognition that classroom know-how is what Tomlinson p. 15) describes as 'strategic: a repertoire of ways of reading situations and acting within them, typically with a degree of anticipation, not just reaction'; of professional expertise that is more than teaching competence. Renaming a program, as we have done, is only part of the process. We submitted our proposal for this new way of thinking about structuring roles to the local teachers, who responded to calls for volunteers in the new program so enthusiastically we were able to place all First and Second Year PSTs with their new Mentors in very short time. That was a major step in building the partnerships that had been proposed. We could then take the necessary steps to build further. We conducted the first of what would be three Mentor Days at the University, where we explored a number of issues: what mentoring itself would mean for us; what reflection would mean for us; how to establish shared meanings within our communities of practice; how we would proceed to accommodate these meanings, and so on. We generated working definitions and descriptors that flowed from these; we refined and reworked suggestions as they came up; we proposed practices and protocols that would accommodate these; we discussed ways in which our new forms of practice might be limiting or liberating; we started our own journals related to this program.

There will be other meetings, scheduled as part of the program, where we anticipate that we will learn from all of our experiences as generators of change. Mentor roles as we define and refine them will provide an impetus to the processes involved, especially as we engage in more and more reflection on our professional practice in supporting PST development. Wilkin , p. 47) proposed: 'teachers of varied interests, experience and skill must necessarily become empowered to fully share in the training of students. The particular skill that they as mentors have to offer must be recognised and reflected in their status as truly equal partners in training who fully share in decision-making and whose views are not just to be respected

but also given institutional expression'. We are not engaged in a teacher training exercise. We are, however, engaged in a process of building partnerships where reflective practices deepen and extend understandings of mutuality of professional knowledge and understanding. How successful we will be has yet to be seen. Using the action research process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, we have embarked on a series of weekly cycles that will form themselves into a spiral as the project proceeds.

None of this is easy. Smith , p. 32) describes engaging reflective practice as 'a high-risk activity', arguing that this is nevertheless a necessary part of building true partnerships. The sorts of partnerships that we are building have just that sort of risk, perhaps a necessary concomitant of any change, and our communities of practice are in the process of engaging that risk.

References

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Contact Details:

Pat Smith:

Senior Lecturer

School of Education

University of Ballarat

pat.smith@ballarat.edu.au

Ph: 03 53 27 9344

Margaret Zeegers

Lecturer

School of Education

University of Ballarat

m.zeegers@ballarat.edu.au

Ph: 03 53 27 9344