

‘My teacher exclaims, “That’s stupid!” and rolls her eyes’: The risks and dilemmas of student teachers working in two communities of practice

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Particular communities of practice tend to have their own context-specific ways of thinking, values, histories and artefacts or tools that they use (Flear & Robbins, 2003). Traditionally within early childhood education, a developmental approach to observing, documenting and planning for the learning and development of young children has been the most commonly used tool or ‘way of doing things’. Increasingly, though, sociocultural theory has become influential for informing early childhood educational theory. However, translating theory into practice has been slow and there is still a great deal to learn about the dynamics of this process. This paper will report on a study of 75 early childhood pre-service student teachers as they moved through the participatory appropriation of sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 1995, 1998). As student teachers engaged in new ways of thinking and were able to make informed analyses and decisions about planning and teaching, risks and dilemmas were often encountered when they entered practical teaching situations where participants continued to recycle traditional constructivist-developmental approaches.

Keywords: Sociocultural, early childhood education, teacher education, communities of practice, apprenticeship, appropriation, professional experience, practicum.

INTRODUCTION

The complexities of educational research have been fore-grounded in recent years, with some questioning past practices and approaches to enquiry (Fasoli, 2003; Robbins, 2003a, 2003b). Sociocultural theory has played an important role in moving thinking forward. For instance, Rogoff (1995) has suggested that too often research has examined

...how adults teach children or how children construct reality, with an emphasis on either separate individuals or independent environmental elements as the basic unit of analysis. Even when both the individual and the environment are considered, they are often regarded as separate entities rather than mutually defined and interdependent in ways that preclude their separation as units or elements... (Rogoff, 1995: 139-140).

One of Vygotsky’s important contributions to education has been the mutuality of the individual and the sociocultural environment. In preserving the essence of the whole,

rather than separating out an event into elements, researchers have looked closely to sociocultural theory to realise this new perspective in research.

Rogoff (1995) has argued that in examining the complexity of the whole, at times it is important to tease out the constituting element. She has suggested that the elements all hold an equal place, but one is brought into focus, whilst the other elements are held in the background giving important context to what is being scrutinised.

Rogoff (1995) has discussed three mutually constituting processes in her research approach: apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation. This theoretical framework has been used in the present study to examine the way in which student teachers appropriated sociocultural theory in the university and applied this perspective to their practicum. This paper presents a discussion of the theoretical model, followed by details of the study design and the findings. The implications of the findings are discussed in relation to building a new model for professional experience – one that goes beyond an apprenticeship model.

The theoretical perspective

In building upon earlier work (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990), Rogoff (1995) has put forward a perspective on realising a sociocultural approach to research, involving apprenticeship, guided participation and appropriation. She has argued that in order to understand each, it is important to acknowledge that one requires the involvement of the other – and therefore they should be seen as mutually constituted. They are distinguished here only to assist with clarifying each term.

Apprenticeship

We take issue with a narrow reading of apprenticeship as if it were always and everywhere organized in the same ways...we emphasize the diversity of historical forms, cultural traditions, and modes of production in which apprenticeship is found... (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 62-23).

Lave and Wenger (1991) have shown through their close examination of approaches to apprenticeship across cultures and contexts that a diversity of models exist. The term apprenticeship creates a useful metaphor to explain the way in which individuals participate in collaboration with others in culturally organized ways for the purposes of acquiring knowledge and skills from more senior or proficient members of the community. Rogoff (1995) argues that this working definition extends the traditional craft apprenticeship model to other areas, such as schools and families. Lave and Wenger (1991) have argued that for some communities, the apprenticeship term occurs long after individuals have participated in extended everyday activities (e.g. Yucatec midwives), whilst for others a formal contract is agreed before the individual may join the community (e.g. Via masters).

In taking a broader view of apprenticeship, Lave and Wenger (1991) have shown that the authority of the master and ‘their involvement in apprenticeship varies dramatically across communities...’ (p. 94). Traditional perspectives on apprenticeship sees ‘...apprentices... supposed to acquire the “specifics: of practice through “observation and imitation”...(Lave and Wenger, 1991: 94). The focus of attention is on the newcomer – how they are appropriating the skills and knowledge.

Rogoff (1995) argues that the 'concept goes far beyond expert-novice dyads; it focuses on a system of interpersonal involvements and arrangements in which people engage in culturally organised activity in which apprentices become more responsible participants (p 143). In essence, the apprentice is 'both absorbing and being absorbed in – the "culture of practice"...' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 94). For students undertaking practicum experiences this view of apprenticeship, absorbing and being absorbed in the community of practice within the school setting, is a view commonly held by many supervising teachers.

Guided participation

Guided participation concentrates upon the interpersonal activities (Rogoff, 1995) that take place within a particular community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Rogoff (1995) discusses the importance of noting the mutual involvement of people within the collective activity and examining the system of interpersonal engagement and arrangements. A defining feature is the way in which individuals seek to build common knowledge or work towards a common task within the culturally constituted activity in which they find themselves. Guided participation also draws attention to the active nature of student teachers' own efforts to participate and observe the skilled activities of their community (Rogoff, 1995: 148-149).

Participatory appropriation

'...through participation, people change and in the process become prepared to engage in subsequent similar activities' (Rogoff, 1995: 150). In this process student-teachers and practising teachers are interdependent. Their 'roles are active and dynamically changing, and ...the focus is on the active changes involved in an unfolding event or activity in which people participate' (Rogoff, 1995: 151). Learning through participation means that knowledge creation, maintenance, legitimation, and transmission occur through social interaction. Guided participation and participatory appropriation provide a distinct perspective on an apprenticeship model for learning in an existing community.

However, this suite of theoretical ideas does not provide a working model for explaining how existing practices can be transformed by the newcomer (i.e. student teacher) or how indeed the newcomer can work within a University community of practice and a school based community of practice with two different theoretical perspectives.

New theories within existing communities of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) have argued that 'knowledge-in-practice' is not properly understood (p. 94). In the context of the present study, the existing apprenticeship model for inducting a student teacher into the profession is called into question. Even with the decentering of the master-apprentice model to a student-school community model, difficulties arise:

...to take a decentered view of master-apprentice relations leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is part: The master as the locus of authority (in several senses) is, after all, as much a product of the conventional, centered theory of learning as is the

individual learner. Similarly, a decentered view of the master as pedagogue moves the focus of analysis away from teaching and onto the intricate structuring of a community's learning resources (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 94).

Wenger (1998) has discussed the ways in which a *community of practice* forms, maintains and renews itself. He argues that communities of practice develop their own routines, practices, symbols, rituals, conventions, stories, artefacts, symbols and histories. As such, working theories evolve about how 'to be' in a particular community of practice.

These theories are very practical because they frame not just the ways we act, but also – and perhaps most importantly when design involves social systems – the ways we justify our actions to ourselves and to each other. In an institutional context, it is difficult to act without justifying your actions in the discourse of the institution (Wenger, 1998: 10-11).

However, little is known about how individuals or groups operate when they are expected to work across two distinct communities of practice at the same time. When two communities of practice intersect what happens to the newcomer or the novice?

This study draws upon the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Rogoff (1995) on apprenticeships, situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation and Wenger's (1998) communities of practice in order to better understand how student teachers take new theory into traditional practice.

THE STUDY DESIGN

The research question

The study sought to map the transformation of theory and practice by student teachers as they participated in professional experience within early childhood settings over one full semester in their fourth year of study. In particular, two communities of practice were evident – the university community which introduced the students to sociocultural theory, and the teaching community which espoused developmental theory and practice.

The sample

Seventy-five final year students studying for a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (4 year degree course) participated in the study (a cohort of 40 in 2002 and a cohort of 35 in 2003). The student participants were all female, and mostly of white Anglo-Saxon origin living in an urban community from the Eastern part of Australia. The supervising teachers with whom they worked on their practicum were themselves mostly female, of white Anglo-Saxon origin, with a minimum of three years teaching experience. Though there was a cohort of relatively new graduates, the majority were aged in their forties and fifties.

The method

During the fourth year of their studies within the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education program, students examined a sociocultural approach to observing and planning for the learning and development of children. In particular, they were introduced to the ideas of Barbara Rogoff and her notion of using three planes of analysis (1995, 1998). Within the first of these planes an analytical lens focuses on personal factors within observation and planning. In the second the focus shifts to interpersonal factors, and can include an examination of aspects such as the mutual involvement, communication and coordination of individuals and their partners, as well as the guidance and support of others, either face-to-face or more distally (Rogoff, 1995). The third, or community/contextual plane of analysis, can highlight factors such as the tools or artefacts provided (or not) and used (and how they are used), and other less visual but important factors such as codes of behaviour, the ways of learning emphasised, silences, privileges, values, philosophies and so on. This approach to observation and planning contrasted greatly with the constructivist, developmental domains method commonly used by most of the teachers with whom the students worked during their practicum.

The study mapped the participatory appropriation of theory rather than a static boundary crossing process (Rogoff, 1995) for moving from a constructivist-developmental theoretical orientation to a sociocultural approach. In examining the activities of the two communities of practice it was deemed important to consider student thinking as a process of active transformation as they participated in all aspects of professional experience and university studies.

The documentation of participatory appropriation of this 'new-to-the-students' theory took place during one university semester (approximately thirteen weeks) in 2002 and again in 2003 with the second cohort. The data gathering included weekly tutorial tasks and reflections (2 hours weekly, plus poster display and presentation), assignments (reflective essay and folio of observations and analyses), surveys (Week 2 and Week 7 in 2002, and Weeks 4, 8 and 12 in 2003), and follow-up interviews, as well as a preschool practicum placement of one day per week culminating in a four week block. Practising teachers also completed a survey and participated in one two hour practicum briefing session in which they were invited to help change the model for professional experience. During this session, practising teachers were provided with an overview and some of the findings of the research that had been taking place since 2002.

The analysis

The 2002 data were analysed to gain insight into the participatory appropriation of sociocultural theory and it was noted in the overall findings (see Fler and Robbins, 2003) that student teachers experienced two distinct communities of practice – developmental and sociocultural. As a result of this preliminary work, the study design was replicated in 2003 with another cohort of 35 student teachers. The analysis that was undertaken with both data sets also made use of Wenger's (1998) community of practice and Lave and Wenger's (1991) participatory appropriation. However, Rogoff's (1994, 1995) model of participatory appropriation was used to examine the point of interface between the student teachers and the practising teachers as they brought together two distinct theoretical approaches to education.

THE FINDINGS

The study found that there were two communities of practice (each with their own context-specific ways of thinking, values, histories and artefacts or tools) that students join when learning to become a teacher. In moving between these two communities of practice, as they are currently constructed and sanctioned, student teachers shoulder the main responsibility for introducing new theories into practice. The characteristics of these two communities of practice, the desire to interrupt 'fossilised' forms of behaviour, alongside of the risks and dilemmas of taking a leadership role in professional renewal is discussed in turn.

Characteristics of the community of practice existing within the preschools

For many of the students a tension existed between the pedagogical framework being used at the university, and that being implemented within their preschool practicum placements.

When surveyed the majority of teachers described their approach to programming as 'child-centred', 'play-based' and drawing on 'children's interests'. Many also added that it is 'open-ended', following constructivist, 'developmentally appropriate practices' to enhance 'individual needs'. A few run 'thematic' or 'structured' programs, and one portrayed hers as 'happy' and 'fun'. A small number described their programs as being influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach.

Many of the students spoke of their teachers' programs in similar terms. However half described it first and foremost as domains-based. A fifth stated their teachers applied very structured themes or topics, and one used Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences as a framework. A few identified that there was a mismatch between the way the teacher portrayed her or his approach to programming and what actually was being implemented.

Other descriptions of the programming included:

Currently my teacher just lists the activities she is going to use. Briefly observes children in domains approach.

And another:

My teacher uses the domains based approach. I have never seen her take an ob(ervation), but she sits once a week with (the) assistant and chooses the three 'worst' children that week and then plans for them, based on their weaknesses

Some, unfortunately, like the following example provided very poor role models in terms of programming, but these were very rare.

I would call her approach the 'lazy approach'. She has not changed the outdoor area since I have been attending (3 months), few indoor activities have been changed and they are still singing the same songs as they were at the start. She spends most of her time cleaning.

It could be said that, for the majority of the students, there is a philosophical divide between the two communities of practice in terms of what each considers 'appropriate' programming. Further, there was an anticipation held by many of the supervising teachers that the students would adopt an apprenticeship model of engagement within the practicum, particularly in relation to planning. The expectation was that the student would plan a program similar to their own, be developmentally appropriate, meet individual needs and develop the interests of the children. This contrasted with the framework being suggested by the university, that is, using a sociocultural approach.

Other expectations held were that the student would work as a member of a team, 'manage' the centre, 'supervise' and 'take on the role of the teacher in all aspects'. One reported that she hoped the student would gain an 'understanding of the extra demands placed on teachers, rather than focus on programming'. While a small number conveyed that they hoped the student would use initiative, only two specifically stated that they expected the student to introduce a different method of planning (one of these adding that this should 'fit into the program presented'). None explicitly suggested that they envisaged the student would meet any university requirements. Thus it could be assumed that few of the teachers saw the practicum as an opportunity for co-construction of new theoretical tools.

In relation to *their own role* when working with the students most teachers used terms such as support, model, assist, guide and advise. Again this reflects an apprenticeship view that teachers have of the practical experience – where less experienced individuals are actively guided and supported in their involvement in contextually relevant activities towards mature participation in that community of practice (Rogoff, 1995). Less frequently used descriptions included supervision, providing ideas, demonstration, 'sounding post', listening, directing, and 'correcting'. Only one described the role as being that of a mentor.

When the *students* were asked how they believed the teacher saw the student role, a quarter mentioned that they considered it was as a team member, staff member, a professional or colleague. However a significant number also mentioned an assistant, someone learning how to teach, a cleaner or an 'extra pair of hands'. Another described her perceived role thus:

I don't have much of a role. Once the assistant was busy and the teacher was on the phone so I started singing with children to calm them down, but she didn't see it as using my initiative. She saw it as taking over where I shouldn't have been. She never asks me to do anything. I offer and offer but they work around me.

Yet another said:

She watches me like a hawk and contradicts everything that I do. She may believe she is being helpful...She sees herself as all-knowing, all-powerful, and me as a fool.

Others though were more positive, and reflected a guided participation view (Rogoff, 1995) of the practicum, as discussed earlier:

I am already supervising sessions. She sees me as a professional and a teacher (anon)

(She sees me)...as one of the staff. I take end of day group time, assist in all areas. I feel part of the team (R.)

We have a relatively equal role. She asks for my opinions and advice, as I do of her. We collaborate to provide experiences and she allows me freedom to set up activities and play an active role in the kindergarten environment. I am happy with our relationship.

Students, when asked how they believed their teacher saw her or his role in working with student teachers, again provided a variety of responses. The most frequent (given by just over a quarter) was that of support. Other terms such as giving feedback, help, advice or suggestions, and as a resource person or guide were also relatively common responses, again reflecting the notion of guided participation.

She sees it as her role to support, give constructive feedback, and allow student-teachers to give it a go (anon)

*As a supporter, standing back and allowing me to take full control (anon).
I feel she believes she's there to help us, support us and as a resource person.
She often discusses issues with me openly and includes me in everything possible (anon)*

Others stated that they believed their teachers saw their role as being an instructor.

An example to me, an instructor, a guide, and an assessor (anon)

Small numbers of the 2003 cohort described the role as encouragement, 'helping me achieve university requirements', 'directing my attention to something', 'The Boss', the dominant person, to produce 'clones', and to 'teach me how to do things we aren't taught at uni'. Only one mentioned that she believed the teacher saw her role as a mentor, and one other as a co-learner. Two stated that their teacher very infrequently had time to speak with them and thus they were uncertain of how these teachers saw their role.

Despite these responses, when asked if they expected the student teacher to introduce new theories and practices into the centre, overwhelmingly the teachers were in agreement (over 80%). Less than a fifth of the teachers stated that they believed the student should learn in much the same way as an apprentice does - some of these indicating that they expected the student both to introduce new theories *and* also act an apprentice.

The risks and dilemmas of identifying and interrupting fossilised forms of behaviour

Wertsch (1998) has spoken of "fossilised forms of behaviour", stating that they are ever present in all interactions. These 'ways of behaving' are often part of the historical 'baggage' that is passed down from one generation to another within specific communities of practice, particularly when apprenticeship models are

adopted. However, through student conceptual appropriation and active implementation of sociocultural theory, the profession can be introduced to new ways of thinking about their practice. Not only is this an exciting development for sanctioning other world views, but it has had the effect of watering down the impact of what has in some circles been referred to as 'the early childhood police' (Raban, personal communication, 2002) - where traditional early childhood values, theory and history have reproduced themselves throughout history. 'Category maintenance' by the establishment ensures that anyone who dares to step outside of the 'accepted voice' is sharply reprimanded.

Not all of the teachers were eager to embrace sociocultural theory as a framework for the students' work. Typical of the 'category maintenance' reactions from some of the supervising teachers are given below. They serve to illustrate the tensions and pain that can occur for students when working within two different communities of practice.

My teacher has never heard of it and from what I tell her she exclaims 'That's stupid' and rolls her eyes (K)

One challenge was describing the theory to the teacher – she thinks it's all rubbish – so she has her own strong philosophy (A)

No time to even discuss it with my supervising teacher – and I don't feel confident because my understanding is not yet clear. The expectation is very much that I will 'do things' as my teacher does and most of her practice is teacher directed and domain-based thematic planning (anon)

Not very interested – would like to see it work in 'the real world' (E)

Despite these reactions from a few teachers, many students indicated that they intended to 'break the cycle' of practice and attempt to implement their newly-acquired theory while on practicum. They were, in fact, demonstrating one of the key principles of implementing a sociocultural perspective outlined by Edwards (2000:186) that '...in order to develop practice, practitioners need to be able to distinguish between cultural capital, which can be usefully used, and cultural baggage, which inhibits the development of practice'.

I plan to use this approach during my prac – not only because it is a requirement but because I find it valuable and worthwhile to my own professional growth (anon)

I will endeavour to use it as much as I can. I prefer the sociocultural theory as it takes in the whole learning context/environment. I feel it is a much more accurate and appropriate method than using domains based teaching and planning (anon)

I know I am already using it when doing my observations and I know that I will take it into account with planning, e.g.: using 2nd and 3rd lenses to think more about the types of artefacts I will include, seating, grouping, time allocation, silences and privileges etc... (anon)

This last example above indicates some of the richness or depth of thinking that can arise when students use Rogoff's (1998) three lenses to analyse their practice, as opposed to the adoption of a fairly surface-level domains-based approach. Further, some students were able to recognise that the theory had practical applications outside of teaching contexts.

I understand it more clearly and find I use the approach more easily and in everyday – I've begun linking it to my own experiences (anon)

I have found this approach to be most useful. Not only in terms of how I observe and reflect upon my obs of the children and centre practices – but also to define my own beliefs and why I subconsciously do as I do (anon)

Moving between these two communities of practice produces pain and tensions for student teachers, but many are able to identify the benefits of opposing the existing culture, in order to bring about change. As Edwards (2002a) argues cultures can both shape our thought and actions, but also be shaped by them. '...if ways of being (i.e. thinking and acting) are to be changed cultures need to be disrupted and new meanings inserted' (Edwards, 2002a: 1).

These extracts serve to illustrate that while students had engaged in new ways of thinking and were able to make informed analyses and decisions about their planning and teaching there were, at the same time, numerous risks and dilemmas for them. Rogoff (1998) sees participating in sociocultural activities as a creative process. It does not require the copying of what is already invented or available in the thinking of the participating individuals (Rogoff, 1998). However, in the case of the student teachers, this meant using methods of planning that were unfamiliar to, and in some instances disparaged by, the supervising teachers. This takes courage on the part of student teachers, particularly when the supervising teachers are assessing their performance while on the practicum.

...wonder if this will affect how I will be marked (T)

She still wants a domains based approach! Doesn't see how it would work (F)

She would prefer me to use her method of planning (anon)

Another dilemma that arose for some was not feeling able to discuss the implementation of sociocultural theory within the practicum setting.

She has never looked at my folder or asked what I'm doing. I know not to ask her advice on sociocultural matters because she's not interested and doesn't know... (N)

She hasn't read any of the articles attached to the prac outline. I think she needs to know more about it.

I was actually very disappointed that my teacher was not more open to learning something new herself. Because of her attitude I have really struggled to get through this semester... (T)

I believe she has an interest – but the ‘business’ of day-to-day kinder happenings takes all our time and conversation. Time to reflect doesn’t seem available. I think it’s a ‘taken for granted’ practice that she knows it all and I’m just there to follow in her footsteps. PS. She really is a great teacher and the kids love kinder but ‘if it’s not broken, don’t fix it’ is the attitude (anon)

Many preschool teachers work within isolated settings (usually one, though occasionally two, qualified teachers working alongside one or two unqualified ‘assistants’) with infrequent opportunities to come together as a collegial group outside of their individual settings. As a result the chance to engage in debate about philosophical and pedagogical issues is often lacking. Thus for many teachers there are many taken-for-granted practices and implicit ways of thinking and acting that are perpetuated. Gauvain (1998) points out the values of cultures or communities of practice often contain tacit understandings about what are considered appropriate ways of thinking and behaving, and that such beliefs are often unspoken and in many cases may be unconscious. This invisibility of pedagogy means that it is underrated (Edwards, 2001).

It’s hard because my teacher uses domains and has done so for 30 years. I don’t think she likes it. (N)

She thinks it’s xxxx (you can quote that!!!) I have given her readings and she says that’s what she’s already doing, but she definitely isn’t (anon)

I sense she is not big on change (anon)

We possess the capacity to work within a number of communities of practice at a time, and through this establish various relationships within those different communities. ‘...what matters most is our *ability to engage* in these relationships in order to enhance our interpretations of the objects of our actions and the resources that might support those actions’ (Edwards, 2002b: 5). For these students the dilemma was that they were unable to engage in relationships with their teachers that were mutually beneficial in terms of collaborating over theory.

Instead they had to rely on the support and encouragement they received from their peers and lecturers when back at university.

Good when we do ‘peer help’ like today. (M).

S and I sat down on Tuesday to go over our observations for one focus child, and we sat and looked at each and applied the 3 lenses. This was good for hearing another person’s ideas and views and opened my eyes up to new understandings. (L)

This working towards shared goals and accompanying peer support that students were able to give each other was very important as the semester progressed, and was built in and fore-grounded during the four week practicum for the 2003 cohort of students.

It is arguably the case that engaging with the motives of others, and in Bruner's terms (Bruner, 1996) considering how those relate to cultural "proprieties" that one develops the social capital within activity systems which in terms supports and challenges us as learners (Edwards, 2002b: 4)

Despite the risks and dilemmas many students spoke very positively of the challenge and excitement they felt through using the sociocultural approach in their observations and planning.

I really like learning about this approach. It can be challenging to put theory into practice, but knowing that you can't be 'wrong' is a big help. I like the concept of a learning journey and not being expected to know it all. (M).

Bit of a challenge – my obs have totally changed – they are now mainly conversations held between small groups rather than looking at the skills of individual children – I don't think I could tell you if my focus children are showing hand preference or holding a pen in pincer grip, but I know they love to make choc cake everyday in the sandpit and their dad's girlfriend's name! (anon)

Some, too, realised that they had the capacity to make a difference within their centres. These students went further than merely stating how they intended to use sociocultural theory in their own programming, explaining that they hoped to act as agents of change.

I will be using sociocultural observations and planning in a hope that I will be able to get my teacher to try something different (anon)

I feel I will continue to use the sociocultural approach in my observation, and I intend to use this to support my planning. I intend to integrate sociocultural theory/approach into the current workings of the centre (anon)

These last examples demonstrate the possibility and potential power of student teachers acting as agents of change in bringing new theories to existing communities of practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study suggest that two clearly defined communities of practice exist. The field based community of practice and the university community of practice offered two distinct and theoretically different approaches to education. In addition, the model for preserving the integrity of the community of practice in the field was for the student teacher to become the apprentice. The supervising teachers with whom they worked during their practicum mostly reinforced an apprenticeship model. These teachers have themselves developed within models of how people learn that are

...based on ideas of learners acquiring or experts transmitting pieces of knowledge, and they seem to have difficulty understanding a participation perspective like that embodied in the idea of a community of learners (Rogoff, 1994: 209)

In many ways, the student teachers experience the following discordance as they navigate between two communities of practice (See Figure One).

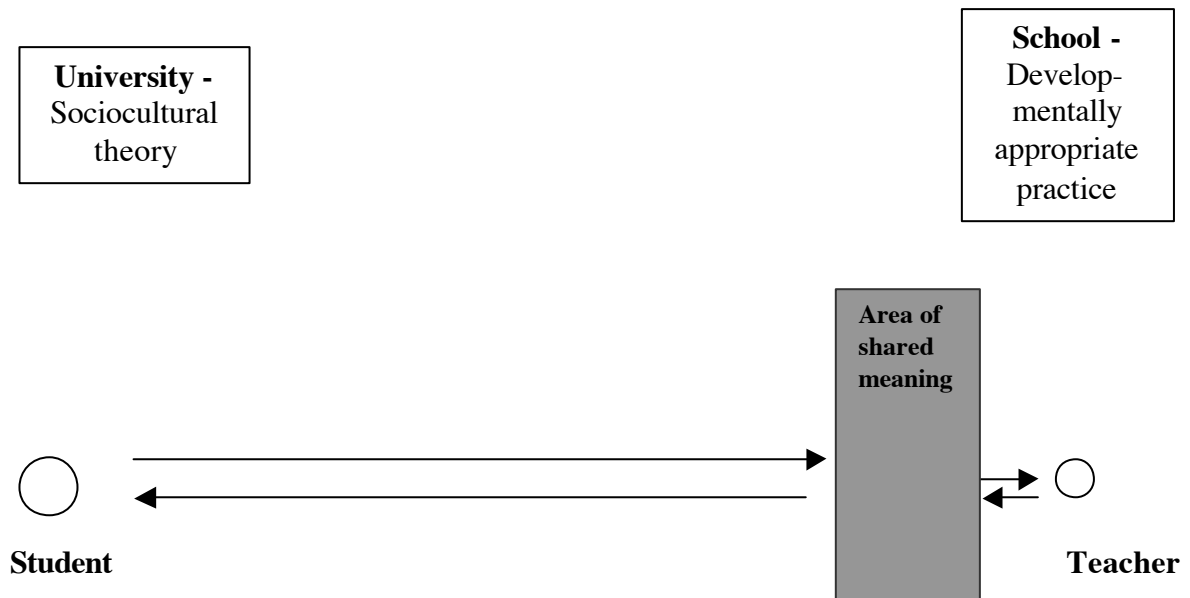


Figure One: The disjunction between theory and practice –theoretical reproduction through an apprenticeship model (Adapted from Jordan, 1999)

In Figure One, the gap between the university teaching and learning culture and the school teaching and learning culture are a long way apart. This is a very difficult scenario for the student teachers.

Yet for students to successfully appropriate new theories – ones not known in the system – they needed to bring these two communities or practice together. Whilst these students do on the whole, successfully appropriate sociocultural theory at the conceptual level, they gain this knowledge not through participation in the school context, but through scaffolded support in the university environment. As indicated above, it would be better if the communities of practice supported each other, so that student teachers could see the theory in action. Videos, lectures and modelling by the academic staff are not the same as witnessing this theory in action with children and teachers in a school setting. In addition, interaction and growth will be most effective when there is trust that what is shared between communities of practice will be valued by others within those communities, and that *responsibility* for understanding is also shared (Palincsar, Magnususson, Marano, Ford and Brown, 1998). That is, while students may be able to bring together the two communities of practice, transformation will only occur when there is trust, similar values and shared responsibility for change. Further, the academic community of practice needs to avoid the danger of top-down efforts in which there is simply a transmission of ‘new’

theory to schools and preschools via student teachers. Both contexts, that is ‘the field’ of early childhood education and university educational faculties, must recognise that each group can bring different expertise to their collaborative efforts (Palincsar et al, 1998). Student teachers, through participation in both university activities and professional experience, can act as the agents to bring the two groups together in order to facilitate change.

The study also showed that for a minority of student teachers the theoretical gap between the school and the university was either minimal or non-existent. This is represented in Figure Two below as shaded box – area of shared meaning. In this way student teachers can explore sociocultural theory with their supervising teachers and better appreciate how sociocultural theory resides within practice. Therefore instead of a gap, there is shared meaning between the student teachers and the practising teachers.

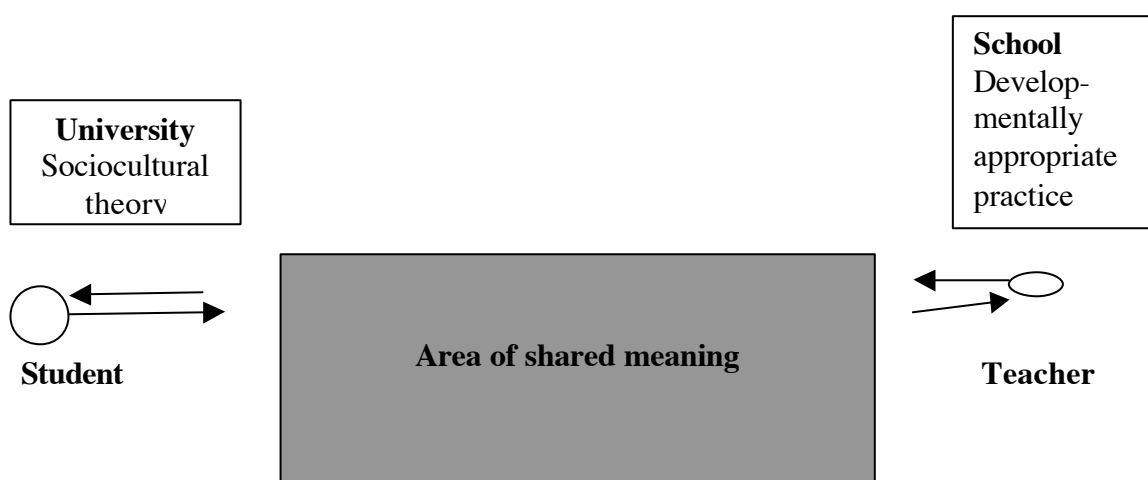


Figure Two: The explicit sharing of theory and practice – dynamic and bi-directional appropriation (Adapted from Jordan, 1999)

Through a model of appropriation rather than an apprenticeship, both supervising teachers and student teachers co-construct new theoretical tools and realise them in practice. In effect, it is about knowledge production rather than knowledge reproduction. In this scenario, supervising teachers see their role as co-constructors of new theories rather than seeing that the student teachers are the apprentice entering a practice that they must replicate – resulting in the fossilising of practice. In this model (Figure Two) it is possible for professional renewal to occur and for student teachers to learn that professional practice, like culture, is not static and is ever evolving. As Lave and Wenger (1991) have pointed out, it is possible for communities of practice to come together, and in doing so they evolve and develop. Further, as Rogoff (1995) has described it is important for both scholars and practitioners to ‘share in the endeavour of exploring both the commonalities and differences among the varying communities in which we have the opportunity to learn from our observations and participation’ (Rogoff, 1995: 226).

SUMMARY

This study has highlighted the challenge faced by student teachers as they navigate their way through two communities of practice – the university and the school. In this process, student teachers encounter closed communities, where many practising teachers continue to recycle tired ideas (Edwards, 2000). In addition, this study has shown that for professional renewal to take place, the professional experience model should move away from an apprenticeship and forward to a co-construction approach. It is through changing the professional experience model that we can reconceptualise the university-school partnership. Through an appropriation model, with in-built expectations for professional renewal, we will find that teachers, students and university academics can more effectively distinguish between cultural capital that gives agency to each member of the community of practice and cultural baggage which inhibits new thinking and new practice (Edwards, 1999).

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