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Rethinking Reflective Journals in Teacher Education

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Schooling in the 21st century must embrace the need for learners to be interdisciplinary, navigate change and diversity, to learn as they go, solve problems, collaborate and be flexible and creative. That is, the curriculum must reflect the notion of New Learning (ACDE, 2001). The renewed Bachelor of Education (BEd) program was designed to promote preservice teacher knowledge through provision of opportunities for critical self-reflection in terms of alignment of personal values and beliefs with the concept of New Learning. One of the innovations within the program includes the use of Shared Journals across courses within the program. This paper describes the design of the Bachelor of Education program within one university in Australia and how its philosophical underpinnings fit with the concept of New Learning, and how the reality of implementing and using shared journals within the program to promote preservice teacher critical reflection has challenged staff to rethink their own beliefs about journaling, critical reflection, and their role in the development of critically reflective practitioners.

New Teachers for New Times

The emergence of 'New Times' (Hall, 1988) and the new knowledge economy have real significance for educators who are supporting young people to be active participants in the world. Educators are required to develop design skills (The New London Group, 1996) and to reconceptualise their roles to fit with this new knowledge economy. Educators are set with the task of being futurologists and knowledge brokers. Not only must they assist students to identify, appropriate and analyse knowledge at a time when information is constantly changing, increasing and being contested, they must forecast the future lifeworld of young people and prepare them for new jobs that have yet to be imagined let alone written. Preservice teachers also face a world that is multicultural and diverse, and not only must educators meet the needs of all learners, but they must prepare students to create and live in a socially just society.

New Learning in New Times isn't just about a new rhetoric to accommodate the latest education reform agenda that will come and go. New Learning is about realising that the purpose and relevance of education as we have come to know it in the 20th century is no longer capable of accommodating the needs of young people. Essentially we find that many young people have superseded their 'school education' with their own real-world self-education (particularly evident in the technology and communication arena). Students could be seen to be voting with their feet – disengagement, boredom and antisocial behaviour are symptoms of a lack of active involvement and participation in their learning communities.

The design of our renewed BEd program was informed by the growing debates around New Learning in New Times. A set of guiding principles was developed,

based on the view that preservice teachers need to become aware of education debates surrounding the nature of curriculum, as well as to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in order to:

- help preservice teachers relate learning content to real world contexts;
- present learning as problem-based within a problem solving approach;
- recognise and draw upon preservice teachers' prior learning and experiences;
- assist preservice teachers to be producers of new knowledge and to increasingly assume responsibility for their own learning;
- establish learning environments that are inclusive and responsive to learning and cultural differences;
- support preservice teachers to be teachers as well as learners;
- apply information and communication technologies to support learning across the curriculum; and
- promote high levels of intellectual engagement and set high expectations for learning.

These principles served a dual role. Not only did they underpin the design of the program, but they also informed the pedagogies used in the program. These principles provided our first year teaching team with guidelines for considering the construction of a university based learning environment that would model new pedagogies we were asking preservice teachers to adopt. The renewed program is designed around pedagogies that requires our graduates to exit with the following skills and capacities:

- Problem solving and critically reflective skills.
- Communication skills.
- A capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.
- An ability to work in teams.
- Networking skills.
- The ability to use and apply communication technologies.
- Awareness of and the ability to address diverse learning needs.
- Awareness of the changing education environment and of their role in equipping young people to operate effectively within this environment.

In 1993, Papert claimed that someone from the 19th century could step into a contemporary classroom and know at a glance where she/he was. Further, Papert argued that since almost everyone has spent many years in schools, the image of 'school as we have known it' is deeply imprinted in our collective and individual consciousness. Similarly, in 1998, Bigum and Lankshear stated that, while everything around us is changing, education appears to stay the same. Bigum and Lankshear (1998) likened educational change to the 'old wine in new bottles syndrome'. Although the names of educational frameworks and practices may alter, patterned ways of thinking and operating remain.

In order for our preservice teachers to embrace aspects of New Learning, and critique outmoded practices, critical self-reflection was seen as vital. Preservice teachers often enter teaching programs with a set of values and beliefs about the profession that are not consistent with the concepts attributable to New Learning (Orlofsky, 2001). In a world of rapid change with Information and Communication Technologies altering the learning and teaching dynamics, preservice teachers must consider the role they

will play in their future classroom in light of their own educational experiences. In order to bring about change, preservice teachers need to become aware of their existing beliefs, deconstruct them and reconceptualise the kind of teacher they hope to be (Yero, 2002). Therefore, the new BEd program must offer a range of opportunities to promote preservice teachers' critical reflection and teacher knowledge, while requiring preservice teachers to consider what it means to be a teacher in current times. As a teaching team, we took up the challenge of integrating this New Learning filter across and among courses within the first year of the renewed program and are creating new courses, pedagogies, and assessments (for a more thorough discussion about some of these innovations, see Latham, Blaise, Malone, Dole, Faulkner, & Lang; 2004).

This paper discusses one of these innovations--the Shared Journal. More specifically, this paper outlines the vision we had for creating a Shared Journal, how it supports the principles that guide New Learning and our BEd program, and the reality of how this innovation was implemented. Part of this reality includes the tensions that preservice teachers faced regarding the Shared Journal and how this challenged us to rethink their place in the program. The paper concludes with recommendations for rethinking the use of Shared Journals with preservice teachers.

Shared Journals

The beginning of the year saw the introduction of the Shared Journal within our program. We are using the term Shared Journal to mean a pedagogical space for preservice teachers to explore the values and beliefs they have about teaching and learning across all courses they engage in, their professional practice sites and their past learning experiences. The following discussion describes the evolving conceptualisation of the Shared Journal as we implemented it into the first year program. We examine the issues from the perspectives of both the teacher educator and preservice teacher, as we struggle with bridging the gap between our vision of promoting critical reflection and the realities of teaching and learning.

As the informal first year teaching team, we were interested in finding ways to integrate the courses that comprise the first year of the BEd to improve the opportunities for connectedness in teacher education (Korthagen 2001; Orlofsky 2001). We felt that developing a shared assessment might encourage us to begin thinking differently about course content as well as challenging us to rethink some of our safe and taken-for-granted practices as teacher educators. We were interested in preservice teachers developing persistent and carefully considered teaching practices in contrast to routine actions guided by impulse, tradition and authority (Wedman and Martin, 1991). We felt that if we were expecting preservice teachers to think deeply and critically about teaching and learning in New Times, then we needed to create opportunities for this type of thinking to occur. Therefore, the team agreed to implement the concept of a Shared Journal across four courses (subjects) of the first year program. *Introduction to New Learning* and *Understanding the Learner* were identified as the most appropriate courses to 'share' an assessment. Instead of requiring preservice teachers to complete a total of four assessments across both courses, they would complete only three, with the third assessment shared between *Introduction to New Learning* and *Understanding the Learner*. Preservice teachers would be required to create and keep a Shared Journal throughout the first semester of

the program with the intention that it would be used throughout the four years of their Bachelor of Education program.

In teacher education programs that promote reflective teaching, journals are commonly used as a vehicle for reflection and the development of professional knowledge (Moon, 1999; Beattie, 2001). Zeichner & Liston (1996) propose five integral features of reflective teaching, where the teacher:

- examines, frames, and attempts to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice,
- is aware of and questions the assumptions and values she or he brings to teaching;
- is attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which she or he teaches;
- takes part in curriculum development and is involved in school change and efforts; and
- takes responsibility for her or his own professional development (p. 6).

The teaching team used these features as a beginning point to develop our conceptualisation of the Shared Journal as a learning and teaching tool.

The Vision

We wanted preservice teachers to use the Shared Journal to critically reflect upon their knowledge and understandings about teaching and learning in New Times. We saw the Shared Journal as a means of allowing preservice teachers to examine the role of their experiences, knowledge, and values in the classroom. It would also serve as a way for preservice teachers to become conscious of, and articulate, their practical and personal theories with their classroom practices (Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

During the first semester, we decided that the content of the Shared Journal would be directed by us through Guided Tasks. Nine Guided Tasks, linked to required readings, were created and meant to guide preservice teachers through the journaling process. We hoped that as preservice teachers became familiar with journals that they would also figure out how to use them for themselves in their everyday lives as preservice teachers and learners.

The assessment details of the Shared Journals were provided in the official course guide and included the following:

The first four guided task activities (of the nine provided to support your readings and tutorial activities) will be submitted for assessment. All tasks should be included in your shared journal and are handwritten accounts of your interaction with the readings, lectures, and the discussion/activities in the tutorials. The final five tasks will not be formally assessed but should be completed as hurdle requirements for the final assessment—the critical essay. All tasks should be written in the one first year coursework shared journal.

Guided tasks with specific readings:

Task 1: *Describe how you imagine the world to be in 10 years time?*
ACDE (2001); McLaren (2003)—Part One/Introduction

Task 2: *Interview children, asking them, “Why do you go to school?” Interview a teacher asking, “What is the role of education/schools?”*

Castells, M. & Caterall, B. (2001); McLaren (2003), Chapters 1-3; Arnold, R. & Ryan, M. (2003).

Task 3: *Describe one week in the life of Peter McLaren in his classroom? How does he view teaching and learning?*

McLaren (2003), chapters 4 & 5; Lovat, T. (2003).

Task 4: *Provide a short description of a critical teacher as described by Peter McLaren through his classroom entries.*

Additionally, preservice teachers were asked to document their thoughts, ideas, and changing views about teaching and learning in their Shared Journals. Through such writing, our expectation was that preservice teachers would begin to see and grapple with connections between their lives as learners and with their teaching, in order to make sense of what it means to be a teacher in New Times. It was our intention that the Shared Journal would become a pedagogical space for preservice teachers to link and build messages and themes presented across their first-semester program.

When the team began discussing and creating the assessment criteria for the Shared Journal, we realised that we each had different visions for its use. Some members thought of it as a messy, work-in-progress, whereas others saw it as a place for preservice teachers to draw together their understandings of teaching and learning. Additionally, not all members thought that written reflections were the best and only way for preservice teachers to critically reflect on their practice. In short, some team members were not ‘the journaling type.’

Through discussion and debate we created a shared vision of our conceptualisation of the Shared Journal. We acknowledged that as we are living in a time of remarkable change, and social and political transformation (Edwards, Gilroy & Hartley 2002), future teachers can not individually solve many of these social and political issues by themselves. But at the very least, they should know about these global and local issues, how they influence teaching and learning, and have a sense of their own values and beliefs about those issues. The Shared Journal was seen as one way to encourage preservice teachers to reflect on and then critically examine how these issues are connected to their personal beliefs about teaching and learning. But we also wanted the Shared Journal to do more.

As a long-term goal, we envisioned the Shared Journal as a tool for promoting consciousness-raising and social action. That is, we saw the Shared Journal prompting preservice teachers to move beyond critically reflecting on issues, to making real changes about them in their everyday lives as teachers. We also believed that the Shared Journal supported similar critical reflective practices that preservice teachers were encountering, such as Peter McLaren’s (2003) experiences as a primary teacher in Canada. Drawing again from the work of Zeichner & Liston (1996), the following questions became the focus of our discussion for shifting our vision to reality:

- How might the Shared Journal become a means of documenting preservice teachers' journeys towards supporting this kind of teaching? Can we assess this? Should we assess this?
- What are the risks of assessing the Shared Journal? How can we be cautious of the trap of promoting reflective teaching in superficial ways? We do not wish to encourage more reflection, just for the sake of reflecting.
- Are we emphasizing preservice teachers' reflections simply of their own teaching and students, and neglecting the broader social conditions of the school and society that influence practice in the classroom? How do we begin the task of helping preservice teachers recognize the social and political context of teachers' work?
- Is reflection an individualised task? How might reflection become a social practice, where groups of preservice teachers begin working together to uncover the social contexts of schools and classrooms?
- Is this type of written reflection promoting the idea that 'one size fits all' or that journaling is the only way to reflect on practice? What about those who don't learn best through writing?
- What cultural, class and gender issues should we be attending to? Does this form of critical reflection support Anglo-Australian, middle-class, and female ways of knowing?
- Could the Shared Journals be undermining the potential for preservice teacher development?

The Outcome

The reality about implementing Shared Journals across three programs (Bachelor of Education, Graduate Diploma of Primary Education, and Graduate Diploma of Secondary Education), consisting of 12 tutorial groups, with over 300 preservice teachers is that it is hard and complex! Even though the practice of using journals to promote reflective teaching is an old idea in teacher education, it is still a difficult task for most preservice teachers, and some teacher educators. Most preservice teachers are products of school systems that value technical and rational models of teaching and learning, and asking them to identify a range of issues, critically reflect on them, and then show how they are related to learning and teaching is a skill that many of them do not have. In fact, this kind of learning and assessment may go against everything that they have learned in schools. And, like many of the staff, they came with preconceived beliefs about the value of journals.

Using Shared Journals across courses and 'sharing' an assessment is also new for staff. It has been especially difficult to implement Shared Journals when the majority of staff are sessional and often do not have a clear understanding of how the program works as a whole, or are staff who may not have a background in new directions of teaching and learning. For those staff interested in learning more about innovative pedagogies and New Learning, we teach in a system that often hinders, rather than promotes, collaboration.

Upon presenting the concept of Shared Journals with the preservice teachers, we realised that we had thrown some of them into a state of confusion. While some preservice teachers were quite comfortable and excited about using the Shared Journal, there were those who expressed anxiety about this activity. In class, through email conversations and office visits preservice teachers kept asking tutors and

lecturers to explain and ‘go over’ the Shared Journal. They wanted to know specifically how to use the journals (when to write, what to write, how much to write, etc.), ensuring that they answered the guided tasks ‘correctly’. Preservice teachers continued asking, ‘Have I got it right?’ ‘Is this what you want?’ ‘Am I on the right track?’ and ‘I can’t get my head around it!’

Clearly, many preservice teachers were confused and frustrated with the Shared Journals. Their need to ‘know how to do it right’ reminded us that this kind of thinking and writing is challenging (Moon, 1999), particularly for those preservice teachers who were used to prescriptive and clearly outlined tasks. This gave us cause for concern about the prospect of preservice teachers feeling unsuccessful, and that they might not give the journals a chance, or take the risk of trying something new.

As much as possible, the teaching team re-iterated the vision for the journal: that it was something they carry with them to all classes, jotting thoughts as they engage in lecture and tutorial activities and reflecting on their reflections. We encouraged preservice teachers to spend time reflecting on their learning at the end of each week, and making a journal entry, not only or solely in words or prose but in pictures or phrases. Some of us also shared our own critical reflections as examples.

Monitoring the Shared Journal

As a way to manage and monitor the implementation of the renew BEd program, a Student/Staff Consultative Committee was formed, comprising of eight preservice teachers (two from each tutorial group) and one member from the first year teaching team. During the sixth week of the semester, preservice teachers were asked to write down what was going well for them and any challenges or issues they were having with the program. Out of the 87 responses, 34 commented on the Shared Journals as one of the issues or concerns they had with the program. The majority of the responses were about being frustrated with the Shared Journal, specifically about receiving conflicting information across courses. One preservice teacher commented:

‘In these first few weeks at Uni I feel very confused. Nothing seems very clear and it’s all very daunting. Messages told in tutes are contradicting each other and information isn’t making sense. It seems even the tutors are lost!’

Another preservice teacher was clearly asking for our assistance and guidance by signing their response, “Please help us! S.O.S.”. Two out of the 34 responses regarding the Shared Journals were positive, although they too mentioned the confusion of the assessment. For example,

‘Overall, it has been quite good. The staff are caring and easy to talk to. I have found the concept of the Shared Journal a little confusing but I’m getting the ‘hang of it’....’

‘...I also feel the idea of the shared journal is good but there needs to be some clarification as to what it actually is used for!’

Raising Questions

As a result of incorporating and assessing the Shared Journal, the first year teaching team continues to think critically about their use. Some of the questions were initially raised include:

- What is the purpose of the Shared Journal? Should it be different for each semester and year?
- How are we presenting the information to preservice teachers? Do we each have a different vision for the Shared Journal?
- What did the Guided Tasks do for the preservice teachers? How did the Guided Tasks help us to see how preservice teachers were making sense of course content?
- What do the Guided Tasks say about the way we view preservice teachers? Is this an indication that we are approaching preservice teachers' learning from a developmental framework? What are the issues involved?
- Should we be assessing the Shared Journal? Why/why not? And, if we decide to continue assessing the Shared Journal, then how should this be done?

Rethinking Journaling

The reality is, we can't go back and undo what we have done with the Shared Journals, but we can move in new directions by rethinking how we implement, use, and assess this innovation. Exploring whether the Shared Journal concept is supported by our practice and what influence our practice is making on the professional learning of our preservice teachers provides an evaluative framework. Through our weekly planning meetings, we discovered that although we intended to use the Shared Journals with and for the preservice teachers, they were becoming a pedagogical space for us to examine and confront our own values and beliefs about teaching and learning in New Times.

We discovered that we went about this task making a series of assumptions about the purpose of the Shared Journal, preservice teachers' prior experiences with reflection and journaling, and that preservice teachers would simply accept the assessment. First, we assumed that staff teaching either *Introduction to New Learning* or *Understanding the Learner* understood the purpose of the Shared Journal. However, as preservice teachers began questioning us about the Shared Journal and asking each other about how it was explained in the tutorials, we soon found out otherwise. Some staff thought that preservice teachers kept different journals for the two courses, others believed the Shared Journal was to be used only with professional practice, and some thought that this was a private journal for preservice teachers to use and that we would not have access to their thoughts and ideas.

Secondly, we assumed that everyone (preservice teachers and staff) had a basic understanding of a journal. We discovered that everyone had a range of prior experiences with journals. These experiences ranged from never keeping or seeing a journal to having daily and personal experiences with journaling.

Thirdly, we thought that the Shared Journal was building on the journals that preservice teachers were expected to keep during professional practice. However, we found out that we did not really know how or if preservice teachers were expected to reflect on their teaching while completing their professional practice.

Fourth, the team did not expect that so many preservice teachers would actively resist the Shared Journal. They resisted with lots of questions about its purpose and the subjectivity of staff reading their 'unrefined' responses to the guided tasks. By

reading their personal journal entries about course readings, class discussions, or what they were observing at professional practice, preservice teachers were concerned about the judgements that staff would make on them as beginning teachers. Also, their resistance was expressed in their constant need to have the assessment structured for them. They demanded a clear set of guidelines for the assessment and wanted us to unpack it for them, rather than defining it for themselves.

As the semester progressed, we struggled with the reality of the Shared Journals and often felt as though we failed as teacher educators. Initially, we discussed the need for clarity about the purpose of the Shared Journal and formalising a more streamlined approach for effectively using the Shared Journal for combined assessment and for teacher action. During the second semester, our teaching team was not able to collaborate and continue the Shared Journals. Interestingly through, several preservice teachers expressed disappointment about no longer having the Shared Journal and were confused about their disappearance.

In retrospect, the reality of the Shared Journals has raised more questions about this innovation:

- What kind of pedagogical space did the Shared Journals create for us and preservice teachers?
- How did the Shared Journals allow preservice teachers to challenge and ask hard questions about our approach to learning and teaching?
- Should we have made the Shared Journals more clear?
- What did preservice teachers gain by feeling insecure and unsafe about the Shared Journals?
- As teacher educators, what did we gain by feeling insecure and unsafe about the Shared Journals?
- How did this experience support preservice teachers' generating their own knowledge?

Shared Journals: The Next Iteration

Although there are several traditions of reflective teaching such as academic, social efficiency, developmental, and critical (Fendler, 2003), we are yet to define what this is for our program and how it should be supported. We have a growing sense that most teacher educators believe in and support reflective teaching, but we cannot be certain about critical reflective teaching. As we evaluate and critically reflect on the learning and teaching from the perspectives of teacher educators and preservice teachers, we will refine our conceptualisation of the Shared Journal and its value in our renewed program for learning and teaching.

Prior to our second year of implementing the renewed Bachelor of Education Program we intend to resolve a number of conflicting beliefs surrounding the Shared Journal at our BEd Review Day. We will seek to arrive at a shared staff vision of the journal and its assessment across the BEd.

Recommended changes to the Shared Journal will be to:

- Communicate our shared vision in a formal way at year level orientations with teams of staff.

- Ensure a clear and common description of the Shared Journal and that expectations have a presence in all Course Guides.
- Scaffold First Year preservice teachers' use of the Shared Journal by framing a number of critical questions that preservice teachers will need to reflect upon.
- Locate at least two occasions during the first year when preservice teachers are required to reread entries in their Shared Journal and write about their combined knowledge.
- Clearly articulate if and how aspects of the journal will be assessed.

Concluding Comments

Rapidly changing social, cultural and technological conditions insist that we rethink ourselves as teachers and learners. The students in our classrooms are not the students we were; they are subjectively different by virtue of their relationship to New Times (Green and Bigum, 1993). They have new needs and new capacities that demand reconceptualised pedagogies and curricula. In teacher education, however, we must move beyond the rhetoric and find ways of translating theory into sound practice. The critical dimensions of teaching and learning are explored through the Shared Journal, providing more reflective space for quality learning, for both preservice teachers and teacher educators.

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