Remaking the Teacher and Redesigning Preservice Teacher Education in/for Uncertain Times

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Times are changing, but structurally and pedagogically teacher education looks very much as it did decades ago. While there has been some tinkering around the edges, some innovative use of ICTs and other technologies to enhance student learning, teacher education itself and policy documents such as Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future (Department of Education, Science and Training, DEST, 2003) endure as bastions of outmoded humanist assumptions about learners and learning-to-teach that, at the very moments they speak of transformation, in operation preclude significant change. New and uncertain times demand newly conceived teaching/learning interactional patterns in universities (and schools) that, in recognising their constitutive force, nurture not only the construction of intellectual knowledge but also innovative ways-of-being a lifelong learner (teacher) living with (in)difference, diversity and uncertainty.

The era we inhabit is marked by continuous change and uncertainty brought about by processes of globalisation and advances in ICTs and other technologies. In schools, this demands a new climate or culture where students “learn how to learn, to develop thinking skills and other metacognitive strategies, to learn in teams, to cope with ambiguous situations and unpredictable problems, to communicate well in speech and not just in writing and to become, creative, innovative and entrepreneurial” (DEST, 2003, p. 217). Such educational outcomes are premised as much on the learner’s identity as a literate and legitimate citizen of the world as on constructed knowledge and skills as traditionally understood. If such outcomes are warranted, and if they are similarly warranted for prospective teachers, the question of how they might be realised in and through institutionalised programs becomes pressing. In this paper I attempt to make the case that “all pedagogical work is always and everywhere identity work of some kind (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant & Yates, 2003, p. 4). If preservice teachers are to achieve themselves as lifelong learners, as innovative, inclusive and generative facilitators of learning in others, then this sense of the professional self has to constituted in pedagogic interactions in teacher education and related sites; it can not be taken for granted to follow from the acquisition of disciplinary and pedagogical knowledges alone, as is too often assumed.

However, a review of the literature in teacher education reveals that most programs are currently based on the assumption that the agency required to act in inquiry based, innovative ways in classrooms follows easily from the reflective construction of professional knowledge. The humanist notion of reflective, competent and agentic professional selves able to think rationally about classroom practice and implement innovatory practice and change endures. Indeed, if Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future (DEST, 2003) is to be believed, teachers can singlehandedly and
unproblematically craft the future! This document (DEST, 2003) invokes modernist conceptions of identity that centre on the knowing, self-sufficient subject (Chappell et al., 2003) as it masks how social (power) relations inform and influence professional identity. For example, a-critical notions of the efficacy of collaboration, learning partnerships and time spent in schools over-simplify the often arduous and difficult journeys of preservice teachers struggling to establish themselves as competent and innovative teaching professionals in balkanised university and school classrooms. The effects are devastating for teachers and education generally; many teachers expecting themselves to be all things to all students, parents and community find they fall short of the mark, and in a crisis of confidence, leave the profession (Sumsion, 2003). As well, the status quo is preserved, as it is seen to be the individual teacher who is defective, rather than the taken-for-granted dreary and alienating constructions of teacher as instrument of change that often inform the learning-to-teach process.

In this paper I acknowledge the challenge laid down by Luke, Luke & Mayer (2000, p. 11) that “Remaking the teacher and the school and redesigning teacher education for new times go hand in hand”. New conceptions of teachers, teaching and teacher education are needed to ground research and practice in uncertain times:

a) Teachers are not instruments to be shaped and molded according to economic, social or ecological imperatives. They, like their students are complex and contradictory subjects constituted through intersecting discourses throughout their lives. Their classroom practice is informed (often unconsciously) by constituted knowing about how teaching and learning is done (Lather, 1991).

b) Teaching is a process that can be intellectually productive and emotionally satisfying, it is always constitutive and never neutral (for teacher nor student). Discursive practices either support or suppress innovative and inquiry-based participation on the students’ part.

c) Teacher education is also a process, with epistemological and ontological elements. In preservice programs, as prospective teachers construct disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, they require the physical, intellectual and discursive spaces to achieve themselves as competent, innovative and inclusive educators of the future. To this end, the discursive practices of teacher education must acknowledge the social construction of knowledge and identity, interrupt the novice/experienced teacher binary and celebrate and support the potential teaching/learning benefits of ‘not knowing for sure’.

**Notion of the teacher as agent of change**

Throughout teacher education and Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future (2003) humanist, psychological notions of teachers and students prevail. St Pierre (2000, p. 500) states: “The individual of humanism is a conscious, knowing, autonomous, and ahistoric individual who is endowed with a will, a freedom, an intentionality which is then subsequently expressed in language, in action, in the public domain”. The humanist individual can observe and reflect rationally on the outside world, and has the power to bring about change. In the DEST (2003) document, it is taken for granted that teachers will understand and reflect rationally on the proposed changes and do their best to implement them. For example, teacher education must ensure “that all students [preservice teachers] improve their broad understanding of the forces of change in Australian society and the importance of science, mathematics and technology in underpinning the knowledge economy and society” (DEST, 2003, p. 145). It is assumed that understanding policy leads to compliant action, rendering invisible the numerous social, emotional and intellectual factors that intersect to affect teachers’ practice. Indeed,
in the above document the teacher is represented as almost robotic needing “a trained capacity to teach” (DEST, 2003, p. 145). The words “train/e/d/ing” pop up intermittently throughout the document; they fall like ‘boulders on butterflies’ obliterating any hope of a federally supported and well funded genuine effort to realise meaningful and purposeful educational change.

Of course it does teachers, and the whole educational enterprise a great disservice to think of teachers as trained robots. Teachers will not be led by the nose in directions they have no desire to go; they have strong investments in teaching ‘well’, but this is as they have personally constructed it, after many years in the classroom as a student, student teacher and teacher. They do understand policy, but its implementation may be ignored or a pretence, depending on how well it meshes with what their own experiences have taught them about how children learn and how teaching is ‘done’. Luke (2003, p. 59), for example, states:

Teachers are artists at resisting, undermining and ignoring policy. For their part, many policy makers know that teachers ignore central office, disregard curriculum reforms, and devote substantial work to getting around policy.

While many taking a humanist perspective could assert that teachers are just being obstinate, an alternative reading could be that asserted by Janks (2002, p. 32) that “identification holds reason hostage”. Teachers, and preservice teachers, often identify with traditional ways of being a teacher, unintentionally reinforced in teacher education, that militate against the implementation of policy and intellectually rich and innovative teaching/learning cultures in schools (Klein, 2002).

Teacher education as agent of change

Similarly, in Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future (DEST, 2003) teacher education is seen as an instrument or tool to ensure “an appropriate knowledge, skills, values and attitude base” (p. 127) and to “convey good teaching practice” (p. 131). Again there is the assumption that the preservice teachers’ capacity for innovative practice follows easily from knowledge and skills developed in teacher education. DEST (2003, p. 163), for example, states: “Building the capacity of teachers to foster a culture of innovation and support students’ innovative learning capacities involves a range of knowledge, skills and attributes...”. However, there is now an extensive literature (O’Brien & Schillaci, 2002) that shows the over-simplification of this assumption; research demonstrates that learning to teach in ways that authorise student initiated inquiry and entrepreneurship is a much more confused and complex process.

In Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future (2003) teaching is seen as instrumental, as something done to students, and again it is assumed that there is a linear translation between skills taught, ‘proper’ preparation and classroom (social) practice. This discursive construction of teaching is convenient though dangerous; it is convenient for policy makers in making change sound easily achievable and yet dangerous in that it trivialises the role of the teacher and the task facing teacher education and schools. First, it constructs the teacher as a technician and teacher technicians are meant to search for and find the ‘best’ techniques for teaching, ignoring the socially, ideologically and politically charged nature of these techniques. At the same time it raises the perplexing
question of how it might be that teacher technicians could hope to foster innovative and entrepreneurial thought and action in those they teach; how could it be that while they themselves are compliant and accommodating to what others demand of them, that they could work with their students in ways that celebrate diversity, difference and innovative participation? Teacher technicians (in schools and universities) and their instructional strategies are unlikely to make available to students the physical, emotional and intellectual spaces needed to fashion critically reflective teachers and citizens of a postmodern world.

**Professional identity is constituted in practice**

A poststructuralist epistemological position recognises how preservice teachers, as they construct intellectual knowledge, are simultaneously constituted through how they are positioned in the intersecting discourses of teacher education. Although these ‘discourses’, as a noun, centre on new types of learning, new partnerships and collaborations and innovative practice in schools, the discursive ‘practices’ of teacher education can act conservatively in funnelling thought and action towards what is constructed as ‘best practice’. Walkerdine (1990, cited in St Pierre, 2000, p. 503) explains that “inherent in the discursive positionings are different positions of power. Individuals, constituted as subjects and objects within a particular framework, are produced by that process into relations of power. An individual can become powerful or powerless depending on the terms in which her/his subjectivity is constituted”. Preservice teachers, who throughout their time in teacher education are consistently positioned on the ‘novice’ side of the expert/novice binary, probably do not have the opportunity to recognise themselves as competent and innovative, they begin teaching on shaky ground, and often leave the profession soon after their first year. Novice teachers can only ‘be’ in the classroom as the intersecting discourses of their lives, including teacher education, have positioned them; they are not the sole architects of their professional identities and abilities (for example, to facilitate inquiry and interact with learners in innovative ways), which are more so the effects of cultural practice and discourse.

Since levels and quality of interactive participation are constitutive of developing professional identities, it is important that a culture of inquiry, dialogue and potential frames teacher education, rather than the current culture permeated by the transmission of knowledge and binary thought and talk. Preservice teachers should be engaged in a learning culture where deep and meaningful learning happens, where who they are and what they can contribute is valued and where teacher educators at school and university sites, listen and learn as much as the students. Luke (2003, p. 71) contributes to this argument:

There is a tendency to want to write off the younger generation of teachers as somehow deficit or unable to do whatever we were able to do, rather than appreciate they are much better with the new technologies than us and generationally closer to the kids they will teach than us. We need an intergenerational exchange around pedagogy…rather than deficit definitions. While intergenerational exchange around pedagogy is the ideal, the discursive practices of teacher education are based on normalising assumptions and discourses that make this very difficult. As Youngblood Jackson (2001, p. 387) makes clear, in teacher education the teacher/student, expert/novice binaries are laden with meaning:
The normative discourse holds that those who have the most experience possess the most power and knowledge, and those who tout this discourse expect novice teachers to conform and fluidly take up an identity similar to that of their mentor, who is the master teacher.

Teacher educators, too, have investments in having prospective teachers see teaching in the ways they do, and can, often unknowingly, demand deference to their ideas through practicum assessments and exams. As an understatement, DEST (2003, p. 131) suggests “A key challenge for teacher education is to change students’ understanding of new approaches to teaching when they have themselves been taught in schools by more traditional methods (chalk and talk, rote learning, transmission approaches)”. However, in line with the argument I have put in this paper, new approaches to teaching would be premised on the intersecting discourses of teacher education including a ‘border’ discourse or pedagogy valorising:

- pedagogic work as always and everywhere identity work;
- author/ity (state of authoring a professional journey) for prospective teachers [this can only be within the discourses through which they have been, and are currently, constituted]; and
- epistemological and ontological uncertainty regarding ‘best practice’.

\textit{Pedagogic work/identity work}

Preservice teachers (and teacher educators) have been constituted through relations of power in normalising practices (discursive practices) in school that essentialise and categorise according to humanist interpretations of ability and socio-cultural status. They have come to know that there are those who can do it, and those who can’t, often categorised along gendered and cultured lines. For example, psychological discourses that inform classroom practice take for granted that there are motivated/unmotivated learners and management discourses speak of the well behaved/poorly behaved students. It is as if learners have essential qualities that define them, that are unchangeable and indicative of their ‘proper’ positioning on the positive or negative side of the binary. This constituted \textit{knowing} (Lather, 1991) about the nature of learners, and the interactional protocols appropriate to learners positioned on each side of the binary, anonymously influence teachers’ practice. Ultimately, if learners are essentially good or bad, motivated or not, there is little need to vary one’s instructional routine; the good, motivated students will learn, while the ‘others’ will not.

A first step is to have preservice teachers recognise how pedagogic work always influences identity; to note, first at a personal level, how the words used to describe them and the discursive practices that engulfed and caught them up in school and community contexts continue to influence their teaching and lives. Within teacher education discursive spaces need to be made for the students to recognise and analyse the educational, cultural and biographical discourses that have shaped them (Phelan, 1996); they need to recall the discursive practices of the homes, communities and classrooms in which they grew up, how these practices supported or suppressed their learning and their sense of themselves as competent and confident students. From the different stories the preservice teachers tell, of how they were positioned (perhaps as ‘clever’, ‘remedial’, or ‘slow’) and the effects this had on their learning, they will realise how identity, as well as intellectual knowledge, is shaped or constituted in discourse.
Preservice teachers could then be supported in celebrating their differences, in sharing the different ways in which they see the world, not to find one better than the other but to learn more through engaging critically with differing perspectives. In celebrating their individual differences, in coming to terms with the complicated and often contradictory discourses through which they have come to know themselves and the world as they do, they may move away from seeing learners in humanist terms, as essentially motivated/not motivated, clever/dull or Anglo/Indigenous. At the heart of this centuries-old problem is ‘deficit’ thought and talk, that comforting refuge of humanists unwilling, and perhaps unable, to change how they interact and work with students. Luke (2003, p. 79) explains deficit talk:

Everybody is deficit: kids are empty vessels, they’re watching too much TV, they can’t speak English properly, their parents don’t parent, nobody reads to their kids. The language of deficit is proliferating in staffrooms right across the country as we face the effects of the new poverty, of culturally diverse populations where previously we dealt with homogeneous ones.

Phelan (1996) uses approaches such as “mapping the self” (p. 344) with her preservice teachers, where they recognise and analyse their constitution through multiple discourses and think about which ones appear convincing and difficult to reject…and what this might mean for how they will interact with students in the classroom. Interestingly, this approach includes analyses of the intersecting and contradictory discourses of teacher education, within which the preservice teachers struggle to establish themselves as competent, legitimate educators.

While the words that are spoken in educational contexts are powerful, the question of who is allowed to initiate and speak them is also significant. To be able to act in powerful ways in a discourse, one must be respected and valued for the contributions one can make. In the past the tendency has been for the teacher and text to authorise what can be spoken and in what manner, often rendering the students silent and marginalising them from full participation in the discourse. Students are not authorised to author their own understandings or make their own sense of the various educational and pedagogical ideas. From a poststructuralist perspective it is important to engage all students, not only the ‘brightest’ (DEST, 2003), in authoring new ideas, in asking new questions, in forming new alliances to investigate and solve the problems they find fascinating. Preservice teachers must be supported in recognising that exclusions and alienating learning relationships matter, as they imagine how these relationships could be altered to better support learner competence and innovative participation.

**Author/ity**

The second issue related to agency for preservice teachers has to do with power; it questions the power of traditional teacher education programs to strip students of the right to speak and be heard on matters pertaining to their own education (of course students do speak when given the opportunity, though they are rarely heard due to the inflexible, pre-determined structures of teacher education). Normalising discourses (student/teacher; expert/novice) frame teacher education and valorise ‘experience’ as if “learning to teach is a linear process in which a novice student becomes a teacher through the function of unproblematic experience” (Youngblood Jackson, 2001, p. 386).
However, ‘experience’, whether on campus, or in schools, is never unproblematic and can have positive or negative effects on developing professional identities. To the extent that teacher education “remains a bastion of traditional pedagogical practices” (Luke et al, 2000, p. 10), out-dated authority relations prevail. Preservice teachers depend on their lecturers, school-based teacher educators, booklets of readings and texts to make available to them the selective skills and knowledge said to be needed to make them recognisable as teachers. In schools they are often expected (Youngblood Jackson, 2001) to ‘model’ themselves on the school based teacher educator, establishing themselves as apprentice to the knowledgeable and ‘experienced’ teacher. However, as Luke et al (2000, p. 9) make clear, such practices “are geared not so much toward the creation of a ‘generative’ teacher for new ecologies and technologies, but more towards the representation and reproduction of particular historical models of ‘good teaching’, as culturally generalisable and as universally practical”.

Introducing a ‘border pedagogy’ of uncertainty

While humanist discourses currently framing practice in teacher education and the production of documents such as Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future (2003) take agency for granted and imagine that “agency is, by definition, a feature of each sane, adult human being” (Davies, 1991, p. 42), poststructuralist theories that speak of the professional self constituted in discourse are much more circumspect. Transformative practices towards more inquiry oriented and innovative cultures of learning, both in teacher education and schools, will not follow mandated tests and threats, but will grow out of purposeful dialogue, community building and courage. Teacher education programs are well situated to begin this transformative process, working with schools and the wider community to demonstrate how transformation can be positively and effectively negotiated in the interests of teaching and learning across institutional sites. As Luke et al (2000, p. 9) make clear:

The challenge is to move teaching and teacher education outside the walled space of the modernist classroom, asking it to intellectually relocate itself in relation to other civic and community, real and imagined worlds, directing it into a critical engagement with the mass civic pedagogies that regulate these worlds, and making it a motive force in the reconstitution of those worlds.

The discursive practices of teacher education could be renewed to situate the teacher in process in learning situations where s/he is able to achieve authorship or authority in knowledge construction. The preservice teacher could be positioned as one who may or may not know curriculum content and pedagogical strategies, but who can find out; as one who is different from every other teacher, who has special (constituted) qualities and abilities that are dynamic and changing from day to day. Often competent in digital literacies and multiliteracies, preservice teachers will flourish in discursive contexts that encourage them to learn from every person they meet, to endlessly ask questions and carefully listen to the answers, as they chart their learning-to-teach journey in novel ways; for example, in e-portfolios constructed throughout their program of study. The compilation of the portfolio puts the preservice teacher in the driver’s seat, enabling her/him to better understand self and profession, to become a proactive architect of professional development and to obtain fair and comprehensive assessment (Campbell, Cignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles & Wyman, 2004).
However, the work of institutionalised teacher education is not yet complete; as well as its constructive role in building up competence, it has the often unpalatable, and unappreciated, role of deconstructing business-as-usual in teacher education and schools. The ‘border pedagogy’ (Davies, 2000) of teacher education imbues and celebrates uncertainty about ‘experienced’ teachers and ‘best practice’. Sumson (2003) has done some interesting research in this area. She found that the humanist based ‘romantic’ views of teaching held by preservice and early career teachers limit their ability to act in innovative ways in the classroom and can lead to an early departure from teaching. This is because they understand themselves as essentially rational beings able, through reflection, to achieve their goals and a ‘supportive’ context that will benefit all learners. The discourses at their disposal “imply that the intrinsic rewards of teaching and of continuing professional growth will be sufficient to sustain [their] commitment” (Sumson, 2003, p. 73). If and when this is found to be untrue, the novice teacher feels a ‘failure’ and leaves the profession. In teacher education, new discursive resources could be made available to deconstruct this romantic view. In enacting discursive practices framed by notions of teachers and learners as constituted, and all learning contexts as socially and politically compromised, the hope would be to build up in prospective and new teachers a sense that ‘things could be different’ and that “nothing is ever settled completely” (Phelan, 1996, p. 344). Phelan (1996, p. 344), for example, states: “Prospective teachers learn that a teacher’s identity is an invention, a constant social negotiation among discourses that are made available during teacher education and thereafter”. A particular role of teacher education programs, thinking innovatively about innovative practice in schools, is to interrupt discourses centered on humanist understandings of the individual that, in operation, are counterproductive to teaching and learning in new ways.

**Conclusion**

I have premised my argument in this paper on the notion that new times demand new pedagogical relations that ‘live’ uncertainty (wondering or asking rather than telling), support the construction of intellectual knowledge, and recognise their constitutive potential. Teacher education programs can make available to prospective teachers new ‘truths’ of what teaching and teachers might be, foregrounding and interrupting the socially constructed binaries around ‘best practice’ and ‘experienced’ teachers. However, it is not only at the level of lecture and talk that this should happen; the pedagogical process, in operation, must make discursive and physical spaces for novice teachers to achieve themselves as generative and innovative educators of the future, asking questions about learning that fall ‘outside the square’ and whose resolution may not be found in lectures nor textbooks. This necessitates their constitution as an inquiring subject, moving mind and body beyond the walled classrooms to contemplate questions that matter, to embrace new ecologies and technologies as they face the tensions and contradictions that ‘not knowing for sure’ bring. For as Davies (1994, p. 35) reminds us: “While consistency and total coherence are pleasurable and satisfying, they involve a large degree of selective perception and ignorance”. Although the journey beyond ‘selective perception and ignorance’ is likely to be long and arduous, with no end, it is perhaps worth it for its
own sake; for to have begun the journey is to recognise that learning is not as it should be in teacher education and schools, there are questions to ask, no certain answers but lots to be done.

References


