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The Virtual Classroom as a Pedagogical Space in Preservice Teacher Education

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In preservice teacher education programs, professional practice is typically an integral part, offering a partnership between schools and universities and a space for preservice teachers to experience and experiment with theory into practice. Professional practice sites are generally familiar environments to preservice teachers. Yet sometimes, professional practice sites, as places where information and communication technologies have changed the way we think and learn, provide little stimulus for reflecting on teaching and learning for the 21st Century. The creation of a virtual classroom in a virtual school was conceived as a means to provide a space for preservice teachers to observe, question, and challenge established schooling practices. In this paper, the virtual classroom is described and analysed.

Background

More so than any other program at University, when students enter teacher education programs, they are entering a place to prepare them for working in a world that they have already experienced. Arguably, the schooling experience will have shaped, structured and moulded individuals' beliefs and attitudes about the practice of schooling and the process of education. As Papert (1993) argued, since almost everyone has spent many years in schools, the image of school "as we know it" is deeply imprinted in our collective and individual consciousness (<http://kids.www.media.mit.edu/projects/kids/sp-talk.html>). What is the effect of prior schooling experiences upon the goals and aspirations of teacher education programs? Considering this question, again the words of Papert (1993) resonated when he stated that someone from the 19th century could step into a contemporary classroom and know exactly where he/she was. Are beginning teachers merely perpetuating a model of schooling as they exit teacher education programs, based on a model of the schooling they experienced? If beginning teachers are aware of the new world in which the students they teach live, can they influence and change existing school practices to match?

In this world of rapid change and ever-advancing technologies, common phrases have filtered into educational debates: that schools need to prepare students for jobs/careers that are yet to be created; that jobs/careers will change every five years; that information and communication technologies impact upon the way we think and learn. According to

the Australian Council of Deans of Education (2001), schooling must reflect the notion of New Learning: that schooling in the 21st century must embrace the need for learners to be interdisciplinary, navigate change and diversity, to learn as they go, to solve problems, collaborate and be flexible and creative. The challenge for teacher education programs is to excite beginning teachers to think deeply and critically about teaching and learning in the 21st century; that is, to encourage critically reflective teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Reflective teaching is about action and about challenging safe and assumed schooling practices. It is about thinking differently about schooling and actioning change. In 1998, Bigum and Lankshear stated that while we live in a world where everything around us is changing, education appears to stay the same. Further, they stated that while the names of educational frameworks and practices may alter, (the “old wine in new bottles syndrome”), patterned ways of thinking and operating remain. If this is still the status quo in schools, then preservice teacher education plays a vital role in altering old patterns of thinking. Reflective teaching must become embedded within the psyche of new teachers.

Many preservice teachers enter teacher education programs with beliefs that are not consistent with New Learning (Orlofsky, 2001). Courses within teacher education programs must assist preservice teachers to consider their place in the classrooms of tomorrow in light of their own educational experiences and learning. In order to bring about change, preservice teachers need to become aware of their own beliefs, deconstruct them and reconceptualise the kind of teacher they hope to be (Yero, 2002).

In an effort to encourage preservice teachers to examine their own beliefs and attitudes about teaching and to be critical about practices within schools, we created a virtual classroom within a teacher education course. In this paper, the creation of the virtual classroom is described; its use and potential as a vehicle for examining schooling practices, and its impact upon preservice teachers’ attitudes and beliefs are discussed. As a new innovation, and work in progress, the virtual classroom is yet to be evaluated in a rigorous sense. Here, we use anecdotal and informal assessment data from preservice teachers, surveys, online discussion group entries, course evaluations and our own reflective journals as a preliminary analysis of the value of the virtual classroom within preservice teacher education courses.

Virtual Classroom – Early stages

Teacher educators have long used critical incidents (Killen and McKee, 1983) to address issues in teaching and learning as they introduce and develop reflective practices in their preservice teachers. These significant moments in teaching and learning are most often drawn from professional practice sites where moments are singled out, described and deconstructed in order to raise greater awareness of their pedagogical importance. While working with these incidents, preservice teachers are involved in identifying the assumptions that underlie their thoughts and actions, analysing these assumptions against their reality and then reconstructing and revisioning the assumptions so that they become more inclusive and integrated (Brookfield, 1990).

While most worthy of individual examination, critical incidents for groups are far more problematic as they require large amounts of contextualisation to be of much value. Also, there is a growing realisation that many professional practice sties were not reflecting New Learning. We felt the need for our preservice teachers to discuss a common group of students, teacher, classroom, school and school community when working through noteworthy episodes in teaching and learning. Thus, the idea for a virtual classroom was conceived as a place where preservice teachers could talk together about the same schooling situation, take risks and connect theory to practice. The virtual classroom was intended as a place where critical incidents could be raised in the day-to-day teaching and learning of the students in the virtual classroom. It was hoped that the preservice teachers would enter the virtual classroom with the freedom to take risks in their teaching as they worked with a dynamic and challenging group of virtual 9 -11 year olds. There is a need for all educators to trust new ways of thinking in order to redesign their practice. It was hoped that the virtual classroom would act as a safe place for university lecturers and preservice teachers to continue to learn and build upon New Learning and to put their burgeoning beliefs into practice.

Entering the virtual classroom

The virtual classroom was incorporated into a primary literacy course, initially as a place for 4th year preservice teachers to consider the literacy needs of a small group of students within the classroom (for example, low attention learners, highly able readers, language backgrounds other than English - LBOTE students) as well as to design and implement curriculum for the entire virtual class. Upon implementation of the course, preservice teachers were informed of the virtual classroom, where it was described as a Year 4/5 classroom (Year 4/5F) in a school environment in an inner urban setting. The preservice teachers were introduced to the 25 pupils within the virtual classroom (who had been previously created by the course coordinators). The profiles of all the students were posted on the Learning Hub (online) to access electronically. The students were created to reflect the diversity found in most classrooms. Descriptions of the school environment and the classroom itself were also contained on the Learning Hub site. To promote ownership and understanding of the virtual classroom, each preservice teacher was asked to select one of the students from the virtual classroom and to draw an image of that student. The drawings were then scanned into the site and posted with the profile of the student. A folder was created for each student in Year 4/5F and information was slowly built up by the preservice teachers. For example here is an initial description given of Jack, one of the children in the virtual classroom:

Jack is 9.5 years old and is known as a talkative boy who recently arrived at the school. He has a sister at the school named Isabelle. Of average height, Jack has reddish hair. He enjoys peer attention and receives it through doing whacky things such as shaving off all his hair for Canteen. Heedless of classroom etiquette Jack calls out in class often offering irrelevant suggestions. He tends to operate according to his own logic and is learning to play the class clown associating closely with Ahmet and Simon. He is a sports lover and is not overly engaged in classroom activities unless they have some direct impact on his thinking.

A preservice teacher imaged Jack:



Over the course, preservice teachers added additional information to all the students' profiles:

Jack is growing tall, continues to be very talkative and still needs the attention of the other students. He has however, become more engaged in class work. He is becoming even more aggressive towards the other students in and outside the classroom. This is becoming a problem because of his size and strength. Jack continues to love sport.

Preservice teachers role-played interviews with the children in Year 4/5F in an effort to try and learn more about them as well as capture their voices and their unique personalities:

Hi, it's Jack. You met my mum last week. My favourite thing is my bedroom cause that is mum lets me keep all my stuff. At school we have to read boring stuff and we can't talk and at home mum tries to make me read and not play after school...

Preservice teachers also held mock parent/teacher interviews with the families of the children in Year 4/5F and responded to their concerns.

From Jack's mother:

I have a small problem regarding Jack's involvement with Simon and Ahmet. I believe they are a bad influence on my son and distracting him from learning...

Preservice teacher's response:

I understand your concern about Jack's involvement with Ahmet and Simon. I do plan to alter seating arrangements for the entire class in order to offer them opportunities to interact with other classmates. This process may take some time so I will keep in touch.

Preservice teachers were also asked to visualise the classroom through the description provided, and to draw a plan to further assist them in embodying the virtual experience.

As our preservice teachers began to grapple with elements of the virtual classroom, we also found ourselves challenged with numerous unfamiliar and complex dimensions. The creation of the new classroom encouraged a close focus on depth, detail and richness within this environment. Both preservice teachers and lecturing staff found that the virtual classroom required us to reflect, explore and critically analyse our roles as teacher researchers.

Strengthening the virtual classroom

Upon reflection of the virtual classroom at the end of the course, we further considered ways to broaden the experience and make it even more dynamic for when the course would be implemented the following year. We felt that developing the profiles of the Year 4/5F students had taken precedence over the role of the class teacher. Increasingly, we began to wonder how the teacher could become the vehicle through which preservice teachers might imagine themselves as new teachers in new times (Hall, 1988). The virtual classroom teacher, Ms Anna Jones, began to emerge as a teacher in her 5th year of teaching who embraces ideas about New Learning, yet struggles with ways to move her teaching towards these more innovative practices. In many ways she was created to represent the preservice teacher's stance yet with additional experience and courage to guide her. It was our hope that Anna Jones would offer our preservice teachers a way to realise these ideals.

Despite embracing many of the theoretical concepts about good classroom practice, we ensured that Anna fell into patterned and comfortable ways of teaching. The preservice teachers read passages from Anna Jones' Professional Journal. In the following entry Anna describes the tension she experiences between her past education and her desire for change:

My own schooling background was very traditional in nature. I was schooled in 'correctness, neatness, spelling lists and colourful borders.' There was not much deep thinking inside those borders.' I learned to 'Do School' well and therefore I was praised by my teachers.

By high school this path became very ordinary and I knew I needed to change directions. An idea grew within me that I would go into primary teaching and change the 'Learning to Do School path.'

When I graduated as a teacher I was passionate about change but fragile in terms of how I might put my ideas in place. I have learned to be patient but never to be complacent. But sometimes, when I'm too tired or rushed I fall back into patterned ways of responding.

Anna Jones' responses are commonly reported in the literature and referred to as the 'washed out' effect (Zeichner & Tabachnick 1981). Fortunately, Anna remains a critically reflective practitioner who discusses and writes about significant teaching moments in some detail. These reflections allow preservice teachers to witness her negotiating and discarding practices that fail to marry with her current beliefs. For instance, Anna shares a disappointing day:

Today was not a day I felt good about my teaching. For the second day in a row, I had the class answer comprehension questions silently from the end of the chapter. Yes, I was tired and the class was more restless than usual, yes I needed a settling activity but it's too easy to fall into this kind of 'sit down and get on with it' activity as a regular end-of-day resort. I knew that highly able readers like Simon and Claire were really bored, while those who struggle with reading - Edward, Jack and Koichi - appeared frustrated - the comprehension questions were not pitched at their level. Who were they pitched at? That's part of the problem - they were aimed at some middle point and none of the students in 4/5F is this hypothetical 'middle' child...

What I need maybe is to think through my text activities before I become tired and less patient with the students; they're tired too and need extra effort from me to engage them in the characters and narrative. Perhaps I should plan some small group acting, create some music to go with a scene, design an alternative book cover? I'm feeling better, I'll do more tomorrow.

An added dimension

While the virtual classroom continued to grow, the lecturing team became aware of a gulf between the delivery mode of the course material and our new concept. We began to explore the lecture space as a means of extending the community of the virtual school. Aside from the virtual class teacher providing insights, invited guests who are part of the school community were brought into the university to give lectures 'in role'. We have had the president of the school council, members of the parents' organisation, the principal of the school and a Department of Education coordinator. Some of these invited guests have gone online to continue dialoguing with the lecturers and preservice teachers. A recent visit from the President of the School Council and the President of Parents Victoria brought rich and varied discussion about the roles of families in the teaching and learning of the children in the virtual classroom. These guests discussed parents' views on homework, information nights and school reports, among other areas. Together we developed a Homework Policy for the virtual school.

Within this rich and highly-contextualised learning environment, preservice teachers learn and recognise the need to inform, support and move these families towards new ways of thinking about learning. As the virtual classroom continues to gain strength, the preservice teachers are taking increasing ownership of the site. Some are enhancing Year 4/5F curriculum practices with writing samples they have collected during their placements from their professional practice sites. To provide an aural and kinaesthetic dimension to the profiled students, sound and animation are being added to the virtual students by the preservice teachers.

Informal Research Findings

Using anecdotal and informal data from preservice teachers, teaching staff and guest lecturers, the teaching team have been able to analyse and assess the merits of learning in this virtual classroom. Analysis has centred on the following:

- dialoguing about the same students;
- risk taking which allows preservice teachers to move beyond static practices, and
- linking theory to practice.

These three areas were selected for analysis as it was felt they held the promise of challenging preservice teachers' existing beliefs about teaching and learning.

The teaching team analysed 160 (voluntary) online discussion entries made by preservice teachers, teaching staff and online guests. These online dialogues appeared to allow opportunity for preservice teachers to test their beliefs about teaching and learning in a wider yet supportive context. For instance, participants discussed the appropriateness of two class novels selected for Year 4/5F students (issues of age appropriateness and content appropriateness surfaced):

I have just finished reading the series and I got to the stage there that during the 7th and 8th book I stayed on the train for an extra station so that I could keep reading. I was hesitant at first about the series and the covers as with many other people but I found that by the third book I wanted to know who this beast on the cover was and what the characters would have to do to get the gem from this creature. I really appreciated that the various strengths of the characters were highlighted. I think that all children (in Year 4/5F) could identify with one aspect of one of the characters. I liked the examples of leadership and the way they could acknowledge that they needed to work as a team to utilise each other's strengths.

Dialoguing about the same group of students offered the preservice teachers support, guidance and purposeful ways of extending their teaching and learning. They expressed great admiration for their peers as they listened to each others presentations and gained further knowledge about planning for a diverse range of students.

While discussing engagement and teacher expectation, one preservice teacher shared beliefs about why children are bored or frustrated at school:

...we place a lot of pressure on children whether we know it or not. Pressure to do it the 'right way' pressure to learn quickly. I also think the way learning is presented to them does not always relate to their life as they know it and they can connect with it, and so become bored and confused about where things fit. I also think that praising children leads them to always want to please the adult rather than just being free to do what they want and enjoy their learning.

Issues also surfaced around the pros and cons of mixed ability groupings. Many of the preservice expressed that they had never experienced mixed ability grouping on

placements. Anna Jones, the virtual classroom teacher, believes in mixed ability groupings and shared her views and classroom practice that allowed preservice teachers the opportunity to rethink their beliefs.

One of the assignment tasks for the course centred on meeting the needs of a small group of students in Year 4/5F. The task was designed so that it could be shared and assessed by preservice teachers' peers. Following the task, a survey was administered to all preservice teachers in the course, asking them to assess their willingness to take risks while designing their curriculum. The majority of preservice teachers felt they had moved well beyond their traditional norms in order to try and engage, excite and challenge learners in the virtual classroom for new times. One preservice teacher commented on the way she integrated the virtual classroom into her oral presentation on boys and literacy:

I utilised visual aids, eg poster format with digital copies of each boy in 4/5F and what their interests and needs were. I showed books that could be used in the classroom to engage boys.

With the freedom and encouragement to take risks in the virtual classroom, preservice teachers found new ways to teach literacy and devise rich tasks that they described as 'exciting, authentic and therefore purposeful.' They also saw the benefit of interviewing practising teachers as a means of gathering important information.

Research into areas of student need and curriculum planning were made purposeful as the preservice teachers were applying and testing the theories on particular students and groups of students in this virtual classroom.

When these preservice teachers critically reflect on their teaching, their peers, classroom teacher and university lecturers are able to provide constructive feedback to support and extend their efforts. Questions are raised such as:

- Why would you do it that way?
- Whose interests are being served and who is excluded?
- Is there a better way to achieve that result?
- How does this practice align with your beliefs about teaching and learning?

If questions such as these continue to be asked, it is hoped that teachers will begin to ask them of themselves.

Moving the virtual classroom across the program

The potential of the virtual classroom is being realised by other staff who teach in the program as preservice teachers are heard discussing people and events and as they make presentations to other student cohorts as part of assessment requirements. There is recognition that other courses in the program can take advantage of the potential of the virtual classroom, moving the locus from a literacy perspective to include policy,

leadership and further partnerships. Invited guests can continue to create added dimensions, challenges and viewpoints to the virtual classroom experience that open up fruitful dialogue. Colleagues with expertise need not be physically present in order to contribute a wealth of ideas. A number of educators are writing online contributions in role, further building the learning community. The challenge to us as teacher educators, who in turn have become new learners, continues to be how we can make a static text environment dynamic in ways which replicate classroom life. It is this interactive potential which renders the virtual classroom as an effective teaching tool, and one which is growing in possibilities as we forge ahead with the idea.

Concluding comments

As the virtual classroom continues to develop, we are in a position to extend a bifocal led approach simultaneously to teaching and researching. We see rich opportunities to follow our preservice teachers after graduation to better understand how they are effecting their own reconceptualisations of classroom practices. We would like to incorporate a more longitudinal view by implanting and monitoring the virtual classroom in all four years of the program. We continue to discover the potential of the virtual classroom to extend and enliven preservice teachers' curiosities while strengthening the theory/practice interface.

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