Preparing for professional experiences - incorporating pre-service teachers as 'communities of practice'

Author
Sim, Cheryl

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Preparing for professional experiences - incorporating pre-service teachers as ‘communities of practice’

Dr Cheryl Sim
School of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Education, Griffith University Nathan, QLD, Australia, 4111. Ph. 3875 5926, Facsimile: 3875 5991. C.Sim@griffith.edu.au

This paper focuses on a model of delivery of professional experience courses for pre-service teachers that has been running in the author’s institution for nine years. The overall purpose of the model has been to assist the development in pre-service teachers of a reflective approach as they build their professional knowledge in schools and on campus. To achieve this purpose, the design of the courses for professional experience has used a framework of “communities of practice”. Following a major evaluation of the course through student surveys, the author examines the achievements and continuing challenges of developing a sense of professional community among pre-service teachers. The model of the course is a substantial teaching experience in a secondary school, supported by a campus-based tutorial component.
Preparing for professional experiences - incorporating pre-service teachers as ‘communities of practice’

This paper focuses on a model of delivery of professional experience courses for pre-service teachers that have been running in the author’s institution for nine years. The overall purpose of the model has been to assist the development in pre-service teachers of a reflective approach as they build their professional knowledge in schools and on campus. To achieve this purpose, the design of the courses for professional experience has used a framework of “communities of practice”. Following a major evaluation of the course through student surveys, the author examines the achievements and continuing challenges of developing a sense of professional community among pre-service teachers. The model of the course is a substantial teaching experience in a secondary school, supported by a campus-based tutorial component.

Introduction

Ways of educating pre-service teachers for classroom practice have been and continue to be debated among teacher mentors and teacher educators (Powell, 2000). Three processes frame most professional practice courses currently operating in education faculties across Australia: systematic observation, teaching practice, and reflection. A traditional model of professional practice saw pre-service teachers allocated to schools for two or three ‘blocks’ of school-based experience with little ‘on-campus’ preparation and support for this experience. A teacher educator would visit each student at least once during that time but probably had no prior knowledge of the student or the school. Considerable written communication would certainly have occurred between the school and Faculty regarding the requirements. However, in this model, few opportunities existed to build a ‘community’ for these students in this challenging area of their professional learning.

In 1996 the author became part of a teaching team of a professional experience model that facilitated the development of a sense of ‘community’ for the pre-service teachers before the ‘block’ practicum. It was envisaged that such a model would provide a framework to not
only serve these students during their preparation, but also throughout their career. The purpose of building a sense of community was seen as a means to more effectively provide and practice the strategies of reflective practitioners.

**The significance of building communities of practice**

Wenger (1998) defined community as “the social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence” (p. 5). Each community of practice has its own routines, rituals, artefacts and symbols, stories and histories. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 464), describe it as “ways of doing, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices – [that] emerge from … mutual endeavour”. Wenger (1998) argues that the process of identity formation occurs through belonging to communities of practice and that there are three different modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement is active involvement in mutual processes of negotiating meaning; imagination is defined as creating images of the world and making connections across time and space; and alignment is the coordinating of energy and activity to contribute to broader enterprises (Wenger, 1998). It is argued in this paper that incorporating preservice teachers in tutorials designed to operate as communities of practice becomes an important tool to enable them to transform the changes and challenges that will happen to them during the practicum experiences, into valuable professional understandings.

The provision of tutorials to enable discussion of these changes and challenges is argued here as essential in the professional experience model examined here. Dannels (2002) emphasises the role of communication, “orality” as she terms it, in the development of a professional
‘culture’. The notion of ‘culture’ is important to identifying the existence of a community of practice. That is, there are norms, values and ideologies that exist in all professions – teaching included.

Pre-service preparation is the first step in building - and most importantly reflecting - on these cultural dimensions. Groundwater-Smith (1992) explains, teaching is first and foremost a social practice, and preparing the beginning teacher for the many complexities of the profession demands much more of teacher education programs than providing opportunities to practice technical strategies. She writes (1992,p.113):

> While we can identify many of [teaching's] component parts, we need to acknowledge that these are so intermeshed and interrelated that we cannot treat those parts as though they are singular and detachable.

In the school setting, pre-service teachers, while very aware of this professional reality, find that there is limited opportunity – and for a few, limited support – to explore, discuss and reflect on their developing understandings of these interrelationships.

As Preston & Kennedy (1995,39) succinctly explain, the very nature of teaching is “constantly requiring situational judgments based on complex combinations”. In this paper, an approach is examined which operates on the premise that pre-service teachers as a group have ‘ways of doing, ways of talking, beliefs, and values’ - because of their early career knowledge. Therefore by approaching their learning in the context of such a ‘community of practice’, where members have similar needs and experiences, it enables a more effective structure to examine and reflect on these complex situations.
It is assumed that in schools, under the supervision of accomplished teachers, student teachers will observe, experience and reflect on teaching. It is during the practicum that they may have the opportunity to actively experiment with the ideas and application of theories studied in the university setting. However, tensions exist for student teachers in school-based experiences.

Russell (1988) identifies three types of tensions: the first is between campus-based course work and school-based relevance; secondly, between child-centred and teacher-centred approaches; and finally, between what a student teacher can be told and what that person does in the classroom. Through the provision of a tutorial community on campus, opportunities are designed to address these tensions - all of which are often encompassed as ‘the university world of learning versus the ‘real world’ of teaching’.

Research demonstrates that for most student teachers, knowledge about teaching is strongly influenced by their own experiences as learners in secondary school classrooms. Nearly thirty years ago Lortie (1975) referred to this as a twelve year "apprenticeship of observation" and concluded that as a result, formal pre-service education had little effect on their beliefs and practices. Michelle Comeaux (1991) confirms that views formed from school experiences were seldom changed by the students' experiences in teacher education. In her 1990 study with Gomez they concluded that student teachers frequently teach as they were taught (Comeaux, 1991:162). Such evidence, she suggests, emphasises the need for teacher educators to provide opportunities for students to critically examine alternative styles of teaching in a more effective way than has been done in the past. Calderhead (1991) describes how pre-service teachers have, over many years, been subject to a rich combination of models, images and "taken-for-granted"
practices about teaching. Such studies suggest that it is important that pre-service teachers have opportunities to reflect on these models and the assumptions that underpin them during initial teacher education.

Put simply, overall for teacher education it is a question of how might student teachers examine alternative views of learning and teaching while still being able to fit into the status quo? Adler (1991) sums up the problem by stating that student teachers need to be "instructed in ways that will enable them to survive and thrive in existing school climates" and yet still be "stimulating prospective teachers to see their social worlds from a new perspective" (p.77). Establishing strong and supportive ‘communities of practice’ within teacher education programs should be an effective strategy to enabling tensions to be examined in safe and non threatening environments.

**The aims of the community of practice model for campus based tutorials**

In the model examined in this paper, the formation of the tutorial groups was a significant part in building a sense of community. The composition of the tutorial groups was guided by three factors. First, students who would be teaching during their block practicum in the same schools were placed together in a tutorial group. Second, in one tutorial group there may be four to five schools represented, but all would be in a similar geographical area. Finally, the tutor they were assigned would support them in those schools during the block prac. These three factors enabled a sense of community –in terms of similar situational factors at least – to be quickly established. Members very quickly found some common ground on which to discuss and share issues and concerns.
To develop the sense of a community of learning – within the community of practice - the design of the model examined here is underpinned by three priorities. The first is to provide for critical examination of the principles of effective learning and teaching. Secondly, the relationship between theory and classroom practice was to underpin discussion of challenges and issues. Finally, because of the link to the practicum, it was important to develop in these pre-service students the skills to build effective relationships in schools.

The critical examination of the principles of effective learning and teaching

Teacher educators are aware that pre-service teachers speak differently about becoming teachers once they have had concrete experience in school settings. Following their school experiences, pre-service teachers have acquired first hand knowledge of a variety of representations of teachers’ work. Their ‘talk’ however may not represent a reflective development of knowledge.

As Kemmis (1982,p.12) explains

    a gap exists between those who possess knowledge which claims to be of vital importance in the development of practice and those who must have it for their work. To close this gap there needs to be a development of the consciousness of practitioners.

Importantly this model in the author’s institution is used across three courses of professional experience that must be completed by pre-service students over eighteen months. Thus this first priority becomes more grounded in the experiences of the pre-service teachers as they move from their first practicum on to their second and third. The inclusion of tutorials run as communities of practice provides essential time - and space away from the school setting- for pre-service teachers to share, explore and analyse the complexities that contribute to effective teaching and learning. In doing this, they are engaging in an important professional approach of collaborative examination of their experiences.
Discussion and evaluation of the relationship of theory and classroom practice

Lave (1991) argues that the school experience is an accepted model of “situating learning in communities of practice”, and learning is demonstrated as a process of “changing participation in the community of practice”. Here the reference is to the school’s community of practice. In the model under examination here, it is argued that the process of establishing a campus based pre-service teacher community of practice is a valuable strategy to facilitate the transition for the pre-service teacher from the university setting to the school setting. The model provides what might be termed a ‘bridging’ community in which each student has time and support from a group with similar professional goals, experiences and needs, to consider the theoretical perspectives as a means to “make meaning” of their specific experiences.

The development of the skills to build effective relationships in schools

The third and final inter-related priority is to guide the pre-service teachers on how to interact within the school’s community of practice. In their tutorials, advice can be specific to each group regarding building relationships in their schools during the block practicum. Research identifies that student teachers generally experience either a transmission approach (Ballyntine et al., 1995) to mentoring or a collegial (transactional) approach (Marsick and Watson, 1990). Mentoring approaches cannot be underestimated as impacting greatly on student teacher development. For this reason the aim is to provide opportunities to prepare pre-service students to help build effective working relationships with their school mentors. Having tutors on campus who have a familiarity with the student and with the school site facilitates their development of these skills.
The evaluation - achievements and issues of such a model.

This section of the paper examines some of the evidence gathered from a 2002 evaluation of the tutorials. The data was collected by survey distributed to a cohort of 151 secondary pre-service teachers. They were in their second of the three courses for the professional practice component of the program.

In the Course Evaluation Survey, the statements focused on the campus tutorials. However the opportunity for students to add comments widened this to information offered about the school experience. The course survey was administered in the final tutorial of the course thus a good return of 114 surveys occurred. In order to identify the extent to which the tutorials were building for these students a sense of community, 19 statements on the survey were organized around tutor teaching style (Statements 1,3,4,5,6,8,13,14,17,18), while the remaining ten statements were linked to course organization and assessment. Table 1 below represents the breakdown of responses from the second survey questionnaire:

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The three priorities of the campus component guided the questionnaire as a means to determine the extent to which the tutorials were creating a ‘community of practice’. Thus words included in the statements were deliberately chosen – eg: helpful; sensitive; enthusiastic; useful; comfortable. The strongest agreement is given to items 3, 6, 8 and 14 on the survey. These four together give a picture of learning environments in which the tutors were enthusiastic and focused on aspects relevant to the needs of their students, and where these students felt comfortable to share ideas.

This outcome was reinforced by written responses offered to the question on the survey what were the strengths of the course? The selection that follows is typical of the comments on tutorial strengths:

- Linking theoretical aspects to practical
- Time to reflect on prac and share experiences
- Weekly tutorials – learned lots through readings – great to talk over prac experiences
- The provision of on campus support is great ... really helped me prepare for and reflect upon the experience
- Overall tutor was great and explained things very clearly through this course – I learnt a lot about myself as well
- Collaborating with other students each week
- The tutor had a great knowledge of what we were going to come across – I found having the tutor a great comfort
- It was good to be able to discuss my prac with others in the class and hear other experiences.

The issue of ‘reading’ is an important one because of its role in the tutorials in enabling discussions to link theory with practice. Item 15 on the survey –‘required reading is of
value’ - is one statement where the range of responses was significant – the mean being 3.5. Of the 114 returned responses on this statement, twenty-eight students were undecided about the value, while twenty-one disagreed that the readings were of value.

Students had a set of readings that supported the aims of the course. In particular the literature selected related to the development of a portfolio (the assessment item) and to the examination of pedagogical issues of planning and individual student needs. They were to be used to contribute to discussion about classroom situations.

The written responses provide more insight to this reaction. In response to the question: what suggestions do you have for improving the course? Written responses do suggest this particular issue of reading affected the tutorials. In these responses seventeen (50%) made reference to the tutorial component. Consistency of teaching approach can sometimes be difficult to oversee in large courses where a number of sessional staff members run the classes – the year of this survey, the course employed eight. While these staff members have the best intentions, each has a different teaching style. It can be difficult across a team of eight sessional tutors - due mainly to their own experiences as teachers - to ensure the same understandings of the collaborative learning approach that underpins the tutorials. These are obvious in the following sample of suggestions:

- Less rigid reading and attendance
- Don’t have weekly readings that the groups have to present – this takes time to organize and for no mark
- We need much more free discussion time to talk about our prac experiences and raise issues instead of just spending time going thru the readings and theory
- More time in class needs to be spent reflecting on prac
These comments suggest it is possibly more to do with the way in which the readings were incorporated by the tutor, than the readings themselves.

There is a similar lower response to Item 17, which sought the extent of agreement to experiences of critical and analytical thinking. 64% agreed; for Item 18, relating to problem solving skills, 56% agreed. These results may reflect the diversity of understandings of these concepts. The capacity to think analytically and to problem solve are essential characteristics of the reflective practitioner. Certainly the results to Items 15, 17 and 18 suggest a need to examine our own teaching to improve such outcomes for pre-service teachers.

Conclusions

Overall after nine years of implementing and endeavoring to improve this model, the evidence supports its continuation. However there are characteristics of the on campus tutorials that need addressing if they are to more effectively provide for a pre-service ‘community of practice’ that can address in particular the priority of critical and analytical thinking.

To move towards improving the model, Wenger’s (1998) description of the three features of communities is helpful. The first feature - engagement - is happening. Preservice teachers in their tutorials are actively involved in mutual processes of negotiating meaning. However a strength in being able to critically examine situations is not evident. The second feature - imagination - defined as creating images of the world and making connections across time and space, also requires the development of thinking skills that will enable these pre-service teachers to address the nexus between theory and practice without resentment.
It is clear that the knowledge and skills of those who lead these tutorials must be guided towards the notion of building a ‘community of practice’. This is important to Wenger’s third feature of communities of practice – alignment – coordinating the energy and activity to contribute to broader enterprises.

In our institution we have been successful with this model to a point, but there are obvious and potential weaknesses. These are particularly in the areas of building pre-service teachers’ capacities in the first and second priorities: critical analysis and valuing the relationship of theory and classroom practice. The value of research on practice represented by the literature is under scrutiny by the students. Their comments suggest that the way in which they engage with the literature during the tutorials is affecting their view of its value.

As teacher educators, we are responsible for the development of a ‘teacher researcher’ attitude by these future teachers. Only through our endeavors in the pre-service preparation, can it be hoped that graduates will be confident and able not only to seek out and apply research relevant to their practice, but also to contribute to the field. This is an area where many teachers continue to be reluctant. For this reason, building communities of practice early in their career development is argued as an important strategy to continue to pursue and improve.

References


