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Coteaching Social Education: An Oasis in Changing Times

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Abstract

With the introduction and continued steady roll-out of the Australian Curriculum, teaching Social Education in 21st Century Australia has become increasingly challenging. This article explores how two teacher-educators tackled the challenge when developing a new Social Education course at a Queensland university using the strategy of coteaching. During the case study, data were collated from cogenerative dialogues, pre-service teacher questionnaires, and reflective journals. The data were subsequently explored using concepts from cultural sociology such as capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and agency and structure (Sewell, 1992). This paper examines how coteaching afforded the teacher-educators a vehicle to develop innovative curriculum and model ways to create a productive learning environment that reflected the philosophy of Social Education. It therefore speaks to higher-education institutions and schools about ways for navigating the present educational milieu through the adoption of collaborative strategies based on ethical relations that promote shared decision-making and reflexive practices.

Introduction

The study on which this article draws responds to changes occurring in Social Education. Rather than a discrete subject area, the authors view Social Education as a philosophical approach which draws upon multiple traditional disciplines such as history, geography, economics, politics, and sociology together with interrelated areas in values, civics and citizenship, and sustainability education. Teaching Social Education calls on critical curriculum approaches (see Kemmis, Cole, & Suggett, 1983) as characterised by: inquiry styles that investigate issues, information, and events in ways that encourage multiple perspectives and a variety of alternative solutions; an acceptance that citizenship, locally, nationally, and globally, is accompanied by rights and responsibilities; ethical approaches inscribed by principles such as respect, responsibility, inclusion, and social justice; and, instilling motivation and commitment in students to take action for a better future (Menzie, Tudball, Collins, & Ditchburn, 2011). Until recently, Social Education has predominately been

taught to Queensland primary and middle-year students (aged up to 13 years) through an integrated Key Learning Area (KLA) called Study of Society and the Environment (SoSE). With the advent of the Australian Curriculum, SoSE is being replaced by new separate curricula in history, geography, and civics and citizenship – the latter two having yet to be officially rolled out. The challenge faced by the teacher-educators in this paper was how to prepare their pre-service teachers to teach these curricula while reflecting the intent of the Melbourne Declaration (2008) of graduating “successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens” (p. 7). In other words, how were they to prepare pre-service teachers to be social educators, with a *big-picture* focus on students as future global citizens, rather than training them as content-focused discipline teachers? In response to this challenge, they employed the strategy of coteaching. This article therefore explores the question of: How did coteaching enable two teacher-educators to design and present a nine-week Social Education course to meet the current and future needs of their third-year pre-service teachers?

Reviewing the literature on coteaching

Although coteaching involving teacher-educators in university classrooms is implemented variously in Australia and overseas, limited research is available that reports on the strategy’s effectiveness (Milne, Scantlebury, Blonstein, & Gleason, 2011). In the last decade, coteaching emerged as a promising mechanism for teaching secondary school science in Canada and the United States of America (e.g., Roth & Tobin, 2002) and has since permeated other content areas and educational settings (e.g., Willis, 2009). Tobin (2006) describes coteaching as when two or more individuals teach a group of students collaboratively across all aspects of teaching including planning, enacting, reflecting, and assessing. In a university context, it differs from other joint teaching practices such as tag or team teaching which aim to minimise participants’ work by sharing the teaching and administrative load (Milne et al., 2011). Rather, the purpose of coteaching is for individuals to learn how to teach or to improve their existing teaching while providing their students with more learning opportunities than they can as single practitioners (Roth & Tobin, 2002).

Cogenerative dialogues (cogens) go hand-in-hand with coteaching. These sessions generally follow cotaught episodes when participants discuss the teaching and learning process in which they engaged (Roth & Tobin, 2002). LaVan (2004)

describes cogens as when participants talk, listen, and learn from one another despite such boundaries as age, gender, and professional or educational background. Previous investigations have highlighted the supportive culture of partnership that frequently develops among coteachers (e.g., Gallo-Fox, 2009). One possible reason relates to the theoretical and philosophical notion of the *ethics of responsibility* as developed by various philosophers such as Lévinas (1978 [1998]) that underpins the strategy. According to Stith and Roth (2008), the ethics of responsibility refers to the inherent responsibility individuals have *to* and *for* one another in the world – a responsibility that links everyone together and is interwoven throughout social networks such as those associated with education. Individuals acknowledge ethical responsibility through proactive behaviours aimed at inclusivity irrespective of each other's institutional positions (Roth, 2007). Hence, coteaching is framed by principles such as equality of respect and regard for each individual's contributions which manifest in the different ways participants' views are solicited, accommodated, accepted, incorporated, and acted upon during coteaching and cogens (Roth & Tobin, 2002).

Although most research into coteaching concerns pre-service teachers learning to teach alongside experienced teachers in pre-school to Year 12 classrooms, the strategy has been utilised at tertiary level. Studies include teacher-educators working with pre-service teachers (e.g., Siry et al., 2010) and practising teachers (e.g., Carambo & Blasie, 2010) and as part of university science methods courses in pairing pre-service primary teachers to improve their knowledge of inquiry-based approaches (e.g., Eick & Dias, 2005) and pedagogy (e.g., Eick & Ware, 2005). Research by Milne et al. (2011) investigated coteaching between teacher-educators by examining how the participants interacted with one another and their practices. Their findings indicate that the strategy expands teaching and learning opportunities for all players in cotaught classrooms. They also found the strategy, particularly cogens, offered an effective pedagogical tool for identifying and responding proactively to problems as they emerged and for generating positive emotional energy for the individual teacher-educators involved.

Describing the study

The research site for this study was a Queensland university and consisted of two lecture-sized classrooms. The participants included Karena, Linda, and 72 third-year pre-service teachers who attended either a morning or afternoon workshop.

Workshops lasted three hours each week and spanned nine weeks of semester 2, 2011. In planning and developing the curriculum, Karena and Linda met for several cogens in the months preceding the course and thereafter cogenerated following each workshop and at other times via telephone and e-mail.

Method

Case study research that used qualitative and quantitative techniques underpinned this investigation. Both Karena and Linda performed dual roles first, as researchers in collating and analysing the data and second, as teacher-educators in planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating the Social Education course. Primary data sources entailed descriptive summaries of cogens between Karena and Linda and students' responses to questionnaires administered pre- and post-study. Other data sources included field observations, teaching artefacts such as planning notes and documents, e-mail communication, records of informal conversations with students, students' reflective journals, and formal course feedback collected by the university.

Where possible, data such as e-mail correspondence were analysed using qualitative techniques such as discourse analysis (Silverman, 2006). Data from student questionnaires were coded deductively in relation to the relevant research literature pertaining to coteaching and Social Education. Codes were also derived inductively by paying attention to unexpected, unusual, or interesting aspects of the data. Questionnaire data were subsequently graphed quantitatively according to the number of times codes appeared. Information from across the data sources were formed into broad themes from which tentative assertions were constructed. A search of the data for evidence to confirm or disconfirm tentative assertions was conducted. From this process, initial assertions were adjusted and final assertions that reflected the case were assembled. Guba and Lincoln's (1989) criteria of fairness, ontological and educative authenticity, and catalytic and tactical authenticity were utilised in judging the research quality.

Developing the Social Education curriculum through cogens

In designing the Social Education course, Karena and Linda cogenerated on several occasions. The following metalogue (see Roth & Tobin, 2002), illustrates their learning from these sessions:

Linda: Our initial cogens focused on developing the course through the three formal educational processes of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. I remember wondering what you envisaged for the new curriculum.

Karena: Before we met, I had several opportunities to speak informally with different colleagues about the movement from SoSE to the separate national curricula. This gave me time to think about what to discuss. One of the most important aspects for me was clarifying and articulating just what Social Education was.

Linda: Certainly a theme of our early cogens was defining Social Education. You had a much clearer idea than me. Through our conversations, I recognised how my ways for conceptualising SoSE could be transferred to thinking about Social Education in the national curriculum setting. For example, I learnt that we needed to retain the intent of SoSE as encapsulated in its values component in any new curriculum that we developed.

Karena: I also had thought about the national curriculum documents which were in various stages of iteration. I considered that the cross-curriculum priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and sustainability, and the relevant general capabilities such as ethical behaviour and intercultural understanding provided a framework for the new course.

Linda: I agreed that your framework provided a neat way for threading together what to teach. We also recognised its merits in helping us avoid being tempted to adopt a content-driven approach.

Karena: Our attention then shifted from the topics to their intent. Regarding the new history curriculum, we began to ask questions such as: What were the historical understandings? What were the inquiry processes involved? It gave us a vantage point which strengthened our view of Social Education as more of a philosophy than a curriculum area and for helping our pre-service teachers recognise what becoming a social educator entails.

Linda: Cogens also provided us with a forum to consider how to align the philosophy of Social Education with our classroom pedagogy.

Karena: We were conscious that the students came to us with prior knowledge from their first-year course of the disciplines that traditionally underpin Social

Education. I always envisaged our teaching sessions as comprising workshop-based, collaborative activities with an inquiry focus over teacher-directed styles so students could gain a sense of what being in a Social Education classroom was like rather than only talking about it.

Linda: And I remember verbalising how well that dovetailed with the strategy of coteaching because two of us working alongside the students in the classroom could potentially expand their opportunities for learning about the new curriculum documents and inquiry models considerably more than if we taught solo.

Karena: Through our exchanges, I started to see that coteaching was not the same as team teaching. Coteaching was different in that it described a closer kind of partnership between teachers than what I'd experienced during my years of middle-school teaching. It resonated with me, for example, when you explained that the word itself reflects the relationship since "coteaching" is not hyphenated to signify its collective and collaborative nature.

Linda: Cogenerated decisions about curriculum and pedagogy subsequently drove our ideas for assessment. We considered assessment tasks from our previous SoSE courses such as having each student plan a unit of work and discussed how these were unsuitable for the new Social Education course we conceived.

Karena: Our conversations led us to decide on one assessment item that required students to work in small groups to design and coteach a classroom activity to their peers.

Linda: We also decided on the students compiling weekly reflections on the workshops and course readings to make salient their learning in Social Education and what it meant to become a social educator.

Karena: Most importantly we felt our assessment pieces would assist the students to interpret the information they learnt during the course through a Social Education lens.

Findings and discussion

This section explores two assertions that emerged from data collation and analysis that respond to the research question in this paper. The first concerns cogens as a

dialogic space that enabled Karena and Linda to develop an innovative Social Education course for their pre-service teachers. Viewed theoretically, cogens enabled Karena and Linda to summon their available capital from their different fields as teacher-educators to reach a shared understanding of Social Education. The Bourdieuan (1977) term *field* refers metaphorically to a particular physical site but also to the *structures* identified with that site where structures comprise *resources* (human and non-human) and social norms, attitudes, and beliefs (i.e., *schemas*) (Sewell, 1992). *Cultural capital* describes an individual's knowledge of practices and schemas within a field while *social capital* emphasises the value of one's connections with others (Bourdieu, 1977). During cogens, Karena's participation was shaped by her knowledge and attitudes from the field of researchers and teacher-educators at other universities with whom she had had discussions and gained a sense of the future direction of Social Education. She also brought knowledge gained from her previous university work in similar courses. This knowledge enabled her to recognise differences between SoSE and Social Education which she identified for Linda with whom she enjoyed considerable cultural and social capital. Her approach therefore aimed to include Linda by connecting their existing knowledge and understanding of SoSE with new ways for conceptualising Social Education in the context of ongoing curriculum change.

Subsequent dialogic exchange between Karena and Linda yielded shared schema about Social Education which enabled them to draw upon their respective resources to exercise their agency in particular ways. *Agency* denotes an individual's capacity or power to act (Sewell, 1992). Karena and Linda's individual and collective agency was enhanced by virtue of the structures that operated during cogens. For example, cogens created an environment that fostered responsive communication whereby each one's ideas and suggestions became resources for mutual decision-making and problem-solving. The process is explained by conceiving agency and structure dialectically (i.e., agency|structure) (Sewell, 1992). Like dual sides of a coin, the existence of one entity presupposes the other (Roth, 2005). Structures available through cogenerative dialoguing therefore enabled Karena and Linda to exert their agency as teacher-educators to develop a course that: reflected their understanding of Social Education, achieved alignment among the formal educational processes of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and met the perceived present and future needs of their students.

A second assertion relates to how coteaching enhanced student agency for teaching and learning Social Education. Student responses obtained through questionnaires administered before and after the course provided evidence of considerable change in their understanding of Social Education. When initially asked to describe Social Education, typical comments included that it was, “obtained through one being social and interacting with others” and “concerned with the world and society.” For the most part, definitions indicated narrow understanding and detached views. Following the course, students’ descriptions more accurately reflected the breadth and depth of the field and what it entails. Two representative comments were that: 1) “Social Education is a complex field of many inter-related principles. It requires learning about local, national, and global issues from the past and present in order to develop critically-aware and active citizens who can positively influence future society”; and 2) it represents an “holistic approach to education in order to produce students who are socially-conscious citizens. Much like literacy and numeracy in schools, Social Education should be pervasive.” The students thus showed changed schema in relation to Social Education. Research in coteaching involving pre-service teachers in American primary schools by Siry (2009) discussed the potential for enhanced agency in new but related fields by participants who experienced changed schema.

Altered schema by the pre-service teachers in this study was further confirmed throughout their written reflections. For example, on the topic of ethical behaviour and values education, one student wrote:

Values education should not just be a poster on a wall or words for students to memorise. As social educators, we need to “encourage people not only to know how to act morally, ethically, and so on, but to actually choose to act in ways that promote these values” for the greater good of society (Gilbert, 2011, p. 89). I see this as very important. I acknowledge that conflicting values and controversial issues will arise within my future classrooms. I know discussing these issues with students will be complex, scary, and sometimes personal, but I also know that explicitly and implicitly teaching ethical behaviour and values is necessary for creating active, informed, and respectful citizens. (Student 1, October 18, 2011)

The students’ changed schema demonstrated their capacity to reinterpret and mobilise their resources in their future schools and classrooms in ways that reflected new understandings and dispositions gained from completing the course.

Data collated throughout the case consistently linked coteaching pedagogy with enhanced student agency. As noted previously, studies of cotaught settings, including tertiary classrooms (e.g., Milne et al., 2011), highlight expanded learning opportunities for all players – a finding confirmed by this study. Students attributed the quality and quantity of knowledge they gained to coteaching. One student questionnaire comment, for example, was that: “Multiple teachers facilitated learning together in a way that was more than just the sum of their parts.” This observation reflected others in which students noted that Karena and Linda brought together a range of different experiences and knowledge that compounded their teaching base. Students also noted how coteaching enabled the teacher-educators to effectively cover the course in the nine available weeks. Comments such as, “more eyes and ears gave them opportunities to observe details that may otherwise have been missed” and “coteaching meant the teachers ensured that each other was on track” suggest that the strategy heightened efficiency and attention to detail on Karena and Linda’s part. Coteaching therefore enhanced opportunities for student learning as the teacher-educators marshalled their agency in frequent, targeted ways that aligned with their goals for teaching Social Education.

Another theme throughout the student data was the connection between coteaching and the nature of the teacher-educators’ explanations. Students described these as “detailed”, “multiple”, “complimentary”, and accompanied by “lots of examples.” Student comments suggest that coteaching afforded enhanced avenues for Karena and Linda to explain Social Education terms and concepts that elucidated and consolidated their understanding. This finding gained substantiation through the teacher-educators’ observations that, compared with other courses where they taught singly, the number of student e-mails seeking clarification about difficult-to-understand aspects of Social Education and the course generally was significantly lower. Coteaching appeared to enhance student agency by facilitating fuller and more robust explanations from the teacher-educators.

Coteaching expanded student agency by promoting pedagogical approaches that aligned with those emphasised when teaching Social Education. Students observed that two teacher-educators exposed them to more “perspectives”, “ideas”, “opinions”, “feedback”, “teaching strategies”, and “ways of thinking” compared to a single practitioner. Representative comments included that coteaching “allowed for a variety of learning styles and multiple ways of teaching the same topic” and “the amount of

time for discussion and deliberation was valuable for learning.” Interestingly, students appeared to link coteaching to their level of engagement with the course materials and concepts. Reasons included that the strategy created a dynamic, challenging environment that increased opportunities for critical thinking, collaboration, and open questioning and encouraged self-reflection of assumptions and practices. In considering “good pedagogy” for social educators, Reynolds (2012) categorises the most valued processes and skills under five headings: self-direction, flexibility and creativity, collaboration, reflective thinking, and communication (p. 25). Evidence from this study suggests that structures in the cotaught classroom encouraged the pre-service teachers to: respond to different perspectives and consider alternative ways of looking at situations; adopt collaborative approaches that involved communicating information, sharing ideas, and making decisions using critical and creative thinking; and, reflect continually on their learning and understanding. The manifold learning experiences that mirrored good pedagogy during coteaching compared with non-cotaught settings provide insight into how the students became imbued with cultural and social capital to potentially access as resources and exert their respective agency as future social educators.

The emotional climate of the cotaught classroom also enhanced student agency. Students described the atmosphere as “positive”, “interesting”, “friendly”, “fun”, and “non-pressured.” Typical comments were that “the manner of the coteaching constructed a very comprehensive and supportive learning environment which I thought was very effective” and “different teaching strategies made things easier for everyone to feel included in class.” Students indicated that coteaching contributed to a productive atmosphere because there was, “extra support in class for teachers and students”, “the workshops were a helpful demonstration of embedding the pedagogy and values of Social Education”, and “the teacher-educators worked collaboratively in an interactive relationship of lead and support roles.” Coteaching therefore enabled the teacher-educators to not just teach about Social Education but model the philosophy for students. Reflecting on the student data, Linda spoke to Karena about the role of ethical responsibility:

During coteaching, we were thinking about our students’ learning uppermost. Being in the classroom with them meant working alongside and for them. So we did not try to outdo one another but rather worked to

complement each other in what we said and did. (Cogenerative dialogue, December 10, 2011)

Roth and Tobin (2002) write that, “the stepping back and stepping forward is the essence of coteaching” (p. 41). Although to step back and forward with fluency takes time, the process of Karena and Linda learning to coteach afforded their students opportunities to see them model trust and mutual corespect as happens when coteachers show willingness and readiness to trade the lead role, assume complementary roles that evidence coresponsibility for teaching and learning, and demonstrate ways to disagree respectfully. Coteaching therefore continuously created material and social resources for Karena and Linda to expand the agency of their students to develop practices and ways of thinking that align with Social Education philosophy (i.e., notions of respect, responsibility, inclusion, and social justice).

In addition, Karena observed that coteaching engendered an unexpected sense of security and ease compared with teaching in her other courses. From her research, Linda recognised that solidarity and positive emotional energy are connected to cultural and social capital which reportedly arises because of the mutual trust and understanding that develop in successful coteaching arrangements (Siry, 2009). These aspects create a sense of belonging for the individuals involved (Siry, 2009). The social and emotional dimensions of coteaching underscore Linda’s metaphorical description of the strategy as an *oasis*. What was interesting to the teacher-educators was that some students reported similar feelings. For example, students noted that they experienced “flow” in the cotaught classroom whereby they were unaware of the time and became immersed in what they were doing and heightened motivation and anticipation connected to their week-to-week attendance (compared with their other classes). Solidarity and positive emotional energy are credited with empowering individuals to act differently than they would otherwise (Siry, 2009). Structures oriented to ethical responsibility in-built in coteaching appear to not only have promoted the students’ learning academically but socially and emotionally as well – dimensions critical to Social Education. This finding provides further evidence of how coteaching imbued the students with relevant capital from which to draw resources to be agential in schools and classrooms as future social educators.

Significance and conclusions

Using the theoretical concepts of fields and capital (Bourdieu, 1977), the agency|structure dialectic (Sewell, 1992), and ethical responsibility (Stith & Roth, 2008), this article addressed the question of how coteaching enabled two teacher-educators to develop a nine-week Social Education course to meet the needs of their third-year pre-service teachers. Two assertions were presented. The first entailed cogens as a dialogic space that enabled Karena and Linda to draw on their respective capital to develop an innovative, comprehensive course to assist their students negotiate changes in the Social Education field as the integrated Queensland SoSE curriculum is systematically replaced by new separate national curricula. The second highlighted the structures in the cotaught classroom whereby the pre-service teachers experienced processes and skills aligned with Social Education first-hand. Data collation and analysis showed altered schema, modelling good pedagogy, and improved learning outcomes academically, socially, and emotionally built the pre-service teachers' capital in ways that positioned them to understand the field and critically and creatively activate their respective agency as future social educators.

Coteaching thus represented a powerful vehicle for learning and teaching Social Education. Given ongoing flux in the field, this study provides a practical model for educators of how to navigate change through the adoption of collaborative strategies based on mutual decision-making, reflexive practices, and ethical relations. The study extends the corpus of knowledge in the separate fields of coteaching, particularly in tertiary contexts, and Social Education with regard to innovative strategies that enhance teaching and learning.

Author reflections

This study represents a glimpse into the possibilities of using coteaching as a Social Education strategy. We enjoyed the process of becoming coteachers and anticipate more fluency in our classroom delivery as we continue to improve our learning and that of the students whom we teach directly and indirectly. We look forward to extending our research by involving other participants and using the strategy in different contexts as well as writing about further findings from this case utilising the data already collated.

Author details

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Karena Menzie is a lecturer in Social Education at the University of Queensland where she is undertaking her PhD into adolescents' experiences of active citizenship. Karena has developed and taught tertiary SoSE curriculum courses and previously taught SoSE in Queensland schools. She has been involved with the SoSE Association of Queensland since its foundation and recently joined the national committee of the Social Educators Association of Australia.

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