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MEETING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS WHERE THEY ARE: SUPPORTING THEM AS LITERACY EDUCATORS

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Abstract

Some media reports (Devine, 2005; Donnelly, 2005) have asserted that pre-service teachers often graduate without an understanding of how to teach children to read and write. In the current climate of professional milestones, national benchmarks and teaching standards for early career teachers, it is crucial that pre-service teacher education programs adequately prepare graduates for entry into the profession. This paper explores how we have tailored a final year literacy elective subject to meet the needs of our pre-service teachers and to support them in their final practicum and subsequent entry into the profession. In particular we report on the processes we engage with to encourage pre-service teachers to identify their own professional learning goals within literacy education and how we incorporate these within the context of the subject workshops. Throughout the session we challenge the traditional mode of a university subject as we create opportunities for pre-service teachers to network with the wider education community through attendance at local professional learning sessions and through contact with key literacy personnel across the school systems. We argue that our pre-service teachers overwhelmingly perceive this subject as a valuable way to stimulate and encourage professional learning and dialogue as they focus on their role as literacy educators.

Introduction

The inquiry into Literacy Teaching led by Nelson (NTIL, 2005) provided a number of recommendations about what constitutes 'effective' literacy teaching in contemporary classrooms. Indeed, such findings are consistent with reviews of teacher education preceding this inquiry. Between the period of 2000 and 2002 three state and federally funded reviews all identified some vital considerations for teacher educators (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002; Ramsey, 2000; Vinson, 2001). Each of these identified that traditional preparation programs are often not adequately preparing our graduate students for the teaching profession. Each of these reviews identified a number of key elements that are often not well developed by traditional pre-service teacher preparation programs. Such skills include: motivating students, dealing with individual differences, insufficient and/or inadequate resources, organisation of classwork, assessing student work, and relationships with parents. Our own

anecdotal evidence and experience working with final year pre-service teachers is that they often leave university feeling inadequate and under-prepared for life in classrooms and confused by what will confront them when they arrive at schools. Indeed, other research has presented similar findings (for example, Kervin & Turbill, 2004, Kiggins, 2001). In particular, they indicate a particular level of anxiety with respect to implementing the literacy curriculum. Further, schools that employ beginning teachers, claim that a majority of recent graduates appear unaware of how classroom cultures operate and find it difficult to transfer what they've studied at university into effective classroom practice (Ministerial Advisory Council on the Quality of Teaching, 1998). The Ramsey (2000) review of teacher education in NSW supported these findings and also asserted that pre-service teachers often do not understand how classroom practice produces effective student learning. In the current climate of national benchmarks and teaching standards for beginning teachers, it is crucial that these issues are addressed within pre-service teacher education.

The actual structure of the university degree and that of subjects within this, impacts significantly on the pre-service teacher experience. The 'traditional' lecture and tutorial structure of university degrees has been criticised for decontextualising theory from practice. Hoban (2002) asserts that many teacher education courses present a fragmented view of learning and this can hinder the development of pre-service teachers into confident, flexible and progressive practitioners. His claim is supported by other earlier studies that also identified the fragmented and decontextualised way that knowledge is often presented in schools and universities (for example, Entwistle, Entwistle & Tait, 1993). As a result essential knowledge can often not be retrieved by pre-service teachers when it is required in real-life classroom situations because there were minimal links made to the situation in which it applies during the 'teaching' of theory.

Teachers have long been identified as being central to the quality of children's learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goodson, 2001). While this is important for all curriculum areas, the importance of this to literacy education is timely with the current concerns communicated by politicians and the wider community. Teacher education programs, and the specific subjects within this, need to actively consider how pre-service teachers can be further supported with both their understandings of how children best learn literacy practices and what the teaching of this may look like in actual classroom practice. The provision of a 'meaning-centred' curriculum working with the cultural resources children have in connection with a balance between explicit teaching and independent practice have all been identified as integral components of literacy practice (e.g. Dyson, 1993; Gregory and Williams, 2000; Kamler and Comber, 2003; McNaughton, 1995).

Within an Australian context, the way that language and literacy practices are taught in classrooms has changed considerably over past decades. Teachers are being called upon to provide explicit teaching,

but also provide for opportunities for individual exploration of language processes. The terms modelled, guided and independent are used frequently in current thinking about literacy teaching in the classroom (e.g. Department of Education and Training, 2000; Crevola and Hill, 1998). These three strategies are acknowledged as being 'recursive' as "...teachers constantly return to them and apply them in new ways" (Department of Education and Training, 2000, p. 28). Teacher educators are challenged as they consider how these theoretical understandings can be best communicated to pre-service teachers in a way that is meaningful and representative of classroom reality. What is also vital is that such perspectives are presented in such a way that they reflect the individual needs of pre-service teachers.

The time has come for teacher education programs to further consider how pre-service teachers (specifically in their final year) can become responsible for guiding their own professional learning as they actively construct their knowledge about literacy teaching. Doecke and McKnight (2003) write:

"Student teachers are not passively inducted into the profession ... They actively participate in their own making, consciously applying various frames of reference in order to make sense of their own experiences and arrive at judgements about professional practice." (p. 297)

We believe the way we have structured our language and literacy subject for final year pre-service teachers is one way to support their entry into the profession as confident and informed literacy educators.

Findings from our subject

The subject we are reporting on in this paper is a final year curriculum elective with a focus on language and literacy. This subject is open to all students within the Bachelor of Teaching and Bachelor of Education degrees, however is restricted to 48 places. In effect we are able to reach approximately 30% of final-year students. Prior to entry into this subject, pre-service teachers have experienced two core language and literacy subjects. The first of these is in their first year with a focus on reading; the second is in their second year with a focus on writing.

We worked together facilitating this subject for three years and during this time we have consistently made changes as we refined and developed our teaching to best support the needs of our final year enrolled pre-service teachers. Continued reflection of our own practice and evaluative feedback from our students have helped us to identify the components of our subject that support them best in their entry into the profession. Each of these components will be described in what follows.

The Learning Environment

While we acknowledge that the traditional lecture and tutorial structure is often criticised, the restrictions placed on universities through funding, staffing and timetabling issues mean these structures are part of our own teaching reality. In order to provide our pre-service teachers with the physical and emotional circumstances that assist to facilitate change we have to be creative with our interpretation of how to best organise our allocated lecture/tutorial time. Our subject is weighted at six credit points and scheduled to run over five hours in face – to – face mode. The first hour is nominated as a lecture slot with the other four hours for two x two-hour tutorial slots. In order to begin the change process we negotiate to have two rooms side by side on campus for our two-hour tutorials. This enables us to engage in team teaching and to move variously between the two rooms. We ‘discovered’ a way to organise this time (between the two spaces) that appeared to best support our students. This is represented in Figure 1.

9:30 – 10:00	Input session on workshop focus (whole class)
10:00 – 11:30	Workshop activity (separate tutorial groups)
11:30 – 12:15	A focus on classroom implications (whole class)

Figure 1: Organisation of workshop time

While this appears a structured routine it allows us to provide input, workshop activities to aide understanding and then ‘pull it together’ with a facilitator led discussion. For example, during this time we often create a series of workshop activities each and then run the whole class through these in a medley between the two rooms. We also actively demonstrate how to teach specific literacy practices. For example, when we focus on grammar and spelling we use a Big Book as an example text, and we explicitly demonstrate how we would identify and then teach using elements of this specific text using a whole to part to whole process. We then provide the students with a range of subsequent activities where they have the opportunity in small groups to replicate this process.

We demonstrate how to work collegially with other teachers by encouraging them to share and discuss their plans for seminar presentations with us to ensure there is no overlap with our own lectures and all points are covered appropriately. We’re not afraid to let them lead discussions or to go with the teachable moment prompted by a question during the ‘lecture space’ so we don’t get into a power struggle for control of the classroom, we want them to assume that level of responsibility and ownership. Our goal is to scaffold them towards this by a process of affirmation, collegial interaction and reflection.

We aim to incorporate structured guidance and support as well as affirmation and collegiality within all sessions. This takes the form of the types of assessments we use and is indicative of an iterative, recursive and supportive process For example in Assignment One we expect that our pre-service teachers will create a Statement of Organisation for Language and Literacy in a selected class stage. This

is then marked and the feedback given is required to be incorporated into their Assignment Three that is the creation of daily literacy experiences for the same stage for a five-week practicum period. They need to include the original Assignment One in their Appendices and to have actively incorporated the previous feedback into the creation of their unit of work. The culminative nature of the assessment supports the pre-service teachers as they build upon their understandings in connection with specific feedback to create resources to support their professional practice.

Negotiating the Curriculum

Our subject outline identifies a number of objectives that we aim to incorporate within the subject. These are represented in Figure 2.

- | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarise students with the N.S.W. English K-6 Syllabus with specific emphasis on its use in planning, teaching and assessing English • Critically analyse various approaches to teaching English • Further extend students knowledge about metalanguage and multi-literacies. • Introduce students to the concept of functional descriptions of images and how these are deployed in a range of multiliteracy texts to make meaning. • Acquaint students with a range of texts, both literary and factual, and in multimedia modes • Workshop a range of classroom approaches/strategies, that will facilitate Language and Literacy learning • Familiarise students with the parallel curriculum cycle for teaching reading and writing within a Functional framework. • Assist students to plan teaching units/English programs that will facilitate practicum requirements including the Third Year Internship. |
|--|

Figure 2: Subject objectives

However, while we have clear aims and have a proposed framework to organise what will happen during the thirteen weeks of our subject, we find that this has to be open to negotiation. In the first week of the subject we actively encourage our pre-service teachers to identify what they view as ‘gaps’ in their understanding of how to teach literacy. During this needs analysis we find that our pre-service teachers typically communicate an overwhelming sense of fear, uncertainty and anxiety about the English curriculum area. At this point we begin to negotiate the curriculum in order to best respond to their identified needs. Thus the subject often flows differently each time we teach it as it is crafted to address the specific needs of each cohort. We have found there are always a core of elements that each cohort identifies as being of vital concern such as grammar, spelling, phonics, guided and modelled reading and assessment. One of the other ways we work towards lessening their levels of anxiety and provide them with access to a visual map of the growth and development of their literacy knowledge is through the use of flowcharts.

Flowcharting to support the experience

The use of flowcharts to illustrate logical thought has a long history and some are still commonly used today. For example, the use of tree figures in science to represent relationships between and among different species or in genealogy to identify the links in a family tree (Gardner, 1982). Schools still use John Venn’s diagrams to illustrate the similarities and differences between two sources of information (Gardner, 1982; Maxfield & Brown, 1998). Although these are the most easily recognised forms a flowchart may assume a variety of forms or structures dictated by the task at hand.

Using flowcharts to demonstrate logic led to the creation of logic machines that played a significant role in the later development of the computer (Goldstine, 1972; Shurkin, 1984; May, 1996). By using flowcharts in this subject we are attempting to provide our pre-service teachers with an easy to use reflective tool that demonstrates their current understandings. By comparing flowcharts created at the beginning and the end of the subject our pre-service teachers begin to realise the depth of their own growth and development over the session. The use of flowcharts both demonstrates to each individual their own growth over time and functions as a way of illustrating complex and intricate relationships. McQuigg and Harness identify the use of flowcharts in planning, remembering and problem solving

‘A properly prepared flowchart is like a road map. It can be used to plan important steps in your thinking. It can be used to help you remember how you arrived at a certain point in your thoughts. Sometimes a flowchart will help you find a better way to solve a problem’ (1970, p.iii).

During the needs analysis workshop within the first week of the subject we also ask our pre-service teachers to create a flowchart or concept map that illustrates their current understanding of literacy. We provide them with the phrase ‘Literacy teaching is...’ in order to stimulate their thinking. We provide them with time, coloured markers and a piece of A3 paper to complete this task. They include their name, date their flowchart, and return it to us.

Once the pre-service teachers have engaged with this activity, we meet privately to review each of their flowcharts in conjunction with notes taken from the needs analysis workshop and develop an appropriate organisational sequence for the subject. A developed sequence is represented in Figure 3.

Week Beginning	Workshop Focus
1 18 th July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Subject and Course Outline • Language Overview and Recap, Language Theories and Social Model

2 25 th July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom Literacy Blocks
3 1 st August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What about assessment and evaluation? What does the syllabus say? How does this link with the Social Model of reading/writing? How can I provide authentic assessment opportunities?
4 8 th August	PRAC
5* 15 th August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grammar/Spelling How can I implement these in the classroom? <p>Assessment Task 1 Due</p>
6 22 nd August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guided Reading: What's it about? How do I implement and resource it? How can I use Community Texts? What are the rest of the children doing?
7 29 th August	Students are invited to attend a Professional Development Workshop on Visual Literacy run by the South Coast ALEA Network. This is scheduled to run on the 31 st of August at 3:45, SeaSpray, Shellharbour.
8** 5 th September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handwriting and resources for casual teaching <p>Assessment Task 2 Due : Seminar Presentation (Groups 1,2)</p>
9** 12 th September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School Principal on Programming Casual Teaching, School's expectations <p>Assessment Task 2 Due : Seminar Presentation (Groups 3,4)</p>
10** 19 th September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critical Literacy...what's all the fuss? What is critical literacy? How can I implement it with Stages 2 and 3? <p>Assessment Task 2 Due : Seminar Presentation (Groups 5, 6)</p>
	Session Break
11*** 3 rd October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information Computer Technology workshop Subject evaluations <p>Assessment Task 3 Due: Mini Unit of Work</p>

Figure 3: 2005 Organisational Sequence

We then repeat this flowcharting exercise in the last weeks of the class. Pre-service teachers are again provided with paper, markers and time to respond to the same phrase as previously. Once this has been completed, we present them with their initial flowchart and ask them to compare and evaluate their own professional learning over the course of the subject, They are also encouraged to identify individual areas to explore further in terms of their professional learning goals as beginning teachers. Our observations have shown that while all of the flowcharts were different, each was a clear representation of its creator's understanding and logic flow.

The importance of relationships

The components we have already discussed require us, and indeed our pre-service teachers, to move out of our 'comfort zone' as we delve into the unknown. Typically they have had some involvement with us in their core undergraduate subjects, however, the lecturer / student role needs to be re-thought when operating in the way we do in this subject.

A key element of our subject organisation requires trust; the pre-service teachers need to trust us enough to tell us their areas of weakness and we need to trust them to guide the process of the subject. In order to aid this process and create an environment of openness and trust it is necessary that we mindfully change roles. We have found that moving into a collegial, facilitative and affirmative mode and using inclusive language such as 'us' and 'we' and 'our' assisted with building positive relationships.

The process of negotiating the curriculum transfers the 'power' from the lecturer to the student. It is within their professional needs that the subject operates as opposed to our pre-determined one-size fits all model, typical to university environments. For many of our pre-service teachers, this is the first time in their university careers that they have been asked to identify their own needs as a prospective teacher. They are often vitally aware that by the end of the year they may have to assume responsibility for their own classroom and students. For the most part, they grasp this opportunity to identify and direct their own learning with appreciation, gratitude and focussed engagement with the subject.

Professional networks

The literature emphasises the need for teachers to form professional networks to assist with the development and refinement of professional practice. Such networks need to create 'community' within individual schools, districts and curriculum areas (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Edwards-Groves, 2003).

As our pre-service teachers engage with the subject, they are often struck with the overwhelming reality of how much there is to learn about literacy teaching. We aim to continually emphasise the need for ongoing professional learning throughout their careers; they aren't going to leave university knowing everything there is to know about how to teach a child to read or write. However, often the pre-service teachers are at a loss as to how they create professional support networks for themselves as early career teachers. In order to address this need, we incorporate two 'networking experiences' into the subject.

The first of these is to invite literacy personnel from local schools and Departmental offices to come and talk to the pre-service teachers about the expectations from their school/system and practical suggestions about how they can manage these things. We have found that this provides the pre-service teachers with 'faces' to put to literacy help in schools and the beginnings of some professional, collegial associations.

The second way we support our pre-service teachers in creating professional networks is through taking them to a professional

development session aimed at teachers run by our local ALEA council. This experience enables the pre-service teachers to sit and talk with 'real' teachers in a relaxed session as they work towards a common goal. Further, it encourages the development of collegial networks that have been identified as a major factor in assisting teachers to transfer their professional learning into their classroom practice (McKenzie, 2006).

Discussion

Our construction of the subject in this way and the use of the types of components we have described appear to provide our pre-service teachers with a support structure that empowers them to accept responsibility for their own learning. The type of learning environment that we are attempting to create is indicative of one that moves away from a transmission mode of teaching to a more facilitative, collegial and reflective one that encourages professional empowerment. Further, it is a model that we hope will impact on the way our pre-service teachers organise teaching and learning experiences within their own classrooms.

Of course our pre-service teachers are not the only learners in this subject. We continue to grow and learn as well and our continual reflection and evaluation of this subject has resulted in our own development and growth as educators as we attempt to replicate the 'real-world' of the classroom for our students and to lead by example.

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