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Sustaining Productive Collaboration Between Faculties and Schools

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Abstract: Work integrated learning which is terminology now very familiar to all universities' faculty members, has always been integral to initial teacher education programs. As a result of the complexities involved in this field, building effective partnerships with schools continues to be a major focus of education faculties. These complexities around a partnership between two very different institutional contexts require negotiating a relationship that is of value to all involved. The concept of communities of practice can provide a framework to establish the collaboration needed. The Australian Commonwealth government conducted in 2007 a national inquiry into the effectiveness of the teacher education programs in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007). One of the recommendations from the inquiry was to provide funds directly to Education faculties to assist in the improvement of the professional experience (or practicum) component of teacher education courses. This paper describes and examines a project that was funded and implemented in 2009. Project Supervision aimed to develop professional development materials for school supervisors/mentors. The process to achieve this was designed by the author around a community of practice involving teachers – both experienced and preservice – and teacher educators.

Introduction

University teacher educators recognise and value the place of practitioner knowledge in the teaching profession (Carter & Francis, 2000). Over the past two decades there has been a growing commitment by faculties of education to working in partnerships with schools. Of course the features and purposes of these 'partnerships' are varied. The 1990s saw criticisms emerging about the usefulness of educational research to schools (Kaestle, 1993; Saha, Biddle & Anderson, 1995; Shkedi, 1998). Funding under the Australian National Professional Development Program (NPDP) was conditional on collaboration between university faculties, education authorities and teacher organisations. In more recent years, this focus continues to be reflected in research and teaching grant agencies' expectations of evidence of collaboration or partnerships with the professions.

The most effective approach to educating preservice teachers for classroom practice has been and continues to be debated among teachers in schools and teacher educators (Powell, 2000). However a lack of preparation of those who are the school supervisors (referred in some literature as mentors: e.g. Ballyntine, Hansford & Packer, 1995) continues to be a major issue by both school teachers and teacher educators (Zeichner, 1995; Beynon, 1990).

In 2008, the Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations (DEEWR) provided universities with funds for projects that contributed to improving the practicum component of teacher education. This federal funding was the result of a national inquiry into the effectiveness of the teacher education programs in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007). One of the recommendations from the inquiry was to provide funds directly to universities to assist in the improvement of the professional experience (or practicum) component of teacher education courses, a costly part of Australian universities' delivery of initial teacher education programs. Thus, with such a high investment, supporting the delivery of quality supervision in schools is a priority for both faculty and school based teacher educators.

In response to this funding opportunity in 2008, the author developed and managed *Project Supervision*. The primary aim was to develop professional development materials for those who have the important role of guiding our future teachers through their school based learning – the supervisors/mentors. The process to achieve this was designed by the author around a community of practice involving teachers – both experienced and preservice – and teacher educators.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the author will examine the distinction between a collaborative development of a project and the formation of a community. This is considered to be at the heart of strengthening and sustaining scholarly school-university partnerships. The paper then provides a discussion of the theoretical framework and design of the project. The outcomes of the project are then discussed; finally the nature and effectiveness of the project's particular formal community of practice that emerged is examined.

Collaboration as a Priority

Partnerships are a major focus of current discourse in teacher education. The constraints of collaboration are known to many who seek to carry out research or other projects in schools with teachers: the different institutional 'cultural politics'; time demands; teachers focus on their own practice; and insufficient preparation by faculty members with teacher participants in the theoretical underpinnings of a project. Historically, experiences of many schools' relationships with universities have bred professional suspicion of academics – particularly in relation to research. Teachers have often felt used by researchers, whereby they view the academic as benefiting from the work but not the school or its participants. As Bloomfield explains (2009) these working relationships are complex and often contradictory:

Claims that disconnection can be remedied by the establishment of partnerships can serve to gloss over the complex work of negotiating and establishing the legitimacy of different fields of knowledge and practice... (p. 29)

The complexities of the relationship between universities and schools are mirrored in the relationships formed between the supervising teacher and the preservice teacher in each context. There are a complex set of factors unique to each setting. Some of these factors can not be influenced by the participants in the practicum – such as specific organisational factors. In this paper, it is argued that improving the quality of this complex relationship can be achieved through the establishment of a learning environment that is based on the collaborative concept of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998, Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The concepts ‘learning communities’; or ‘knowledge building communities’ (Cardini, 2006) are also used when collaborations between universities and schools are documented. These concepts are often used in the context of practitioners’ contributing to a particular task/topic. Often the partnership is focused on professional development and the communities are formed around action research as the methodology. These characteristics may also be part of a community of practice. So what might be different?

Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley (2003) argue that the community of practice approach will prioritise the partnership as a learning environment. In this context, the dialogue and inquiry that occurs between all participants is directed towards building and supporting the learning of all participants. Certainly their may be a particular project that brings them together – but it is the process of the communication within the community that makes it distinctive.

Source	Explanation	Value
Dewey (1929)	Teachers engage in collective inquiry.	Critical reflection is the goal of interaction.
Lave & Wenger (1991)	Learners enter a community at the periphery and over time move closer to full legitimate participation.	An approach to (a) conceptualise learning; and (b) generate and disseminate knowledge in practice environments.
Wenger (1998)	“the social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence”(p.5).	
Barab & Duffy (2000)	The emphasis is on connections and participation patterns in practice communities.	The communities are “created” for the purpose of supporting learning environments and improving practice.
Buysse et al (2001) Palinscar et al (1998)	A group of professionals and other stakeholders in pursuit of a shared learning enterprise.	Recognises that knowledge is generated and shared within a social and cultural context.
Buysse et al., 2003	Learning is viewed as distributed among participants within the community – and the participants have diverse expertise.	Understanding and experience are in constant interaction.
Sim (2006)	The focus is on the importance of practitioners’ contributions.	The relationships formed among members of the community are integral to effective collaboration.

Table 1: Summary of some key literature on the nature and value of communities of practice

Table 1 organises the literature generally around two major aspects: explanations of communities of practice and the value of such a collaborative approach. There are key features that should lead to effective collaboration and it is claimed across the literature that communities of practice can provide the means to incorporate, acknowledge and further develop these. From Table 1 four core features required for effective professional collaboration and knowledge building can be identified:

- knowledge is generated and shared within a social and cultural context,
- understanding and experience are in constant interaction,
- dissemination of knowledge occurs in practice environments, and
- reflection and critical thinking is enabled through interaction.

To achieve these features, communities of practice form around processes which may originate as a collaborative initiative led by particular individuals. When the processes focus on enabling experiences to be shared, examined and understood through critical reflection with others in the project, relationships develop among participants creating a professional community that exists beyond a one-off project. Communities form around particular professional needs in a single site such as a school. They may also form around a specific professional responsibility common to others across a number of physical sites (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Evidence that a successful community of practice is forming is the commitment by participants' to continue interacting (sustainability) and where research and practice interact (scholarly practice). A critical point in the development of a community of practice is the initial contact phase (Wenger et al., 2002). Adequate time needs to be dedicated to ensuring that whatever the purpose, for the first 'coming together' of all participants – whether it be to participate in a research project or a professional development activity - that everyone can access knowledge and understandings of each other's views and behaviours. What follows then is the structure of the community of practice. Wenger et al (2002) emphasise that it should combine three fundamental elements: “a *domain* of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a *community* of people who care about this domain; and the shared *practice* that they are developing to be effective in their domain” (Chapter 2).

In summary, therefore, learners need to participate actively in that social community by “engaging in and contributing to the practices of their community” (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). Through the social interaction that occurs in a workplace, or community of practice, an informal transfer of knowledge can result. Membership is about each participant seeing the opportunity for him or her to benefit from being part of the community. Lave and Wenger (1991) explain that application of new knowledge is the benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of a community of practice approach.

The concept of learning from others in the workplace is identified in the *Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme: Cross-sectoral Strategic Plan 2006-2009 For Queensland* where enhancement of teacher quality is identified as possible more formally, through the development of “networks and communities of practice as contexts for professional dialogue, and sources for theoretical inputs, practical advice, and mentored reflection” (Francis, Newham, & Harkin, 2005, p. 6). Currently there is no formal requirement for established teachers to supervise those entering the profession. In this context, the establishment of communities of teacher educators – both university based and school based - is a potentially powerful strategy for information sharing and learning for those who supervise new entrants into the profession.

In the next section the process used to create a community of practice around *Project Supervision* is explained and examined in terms of its success against the key dimensions of a community of practice.

Discussion of an effective partnership: *Project Supervision*

Project Supervision's overall goal was to create a professional learning resource that provided some scenarios around "learning conversations". Research into the effectiveness of the professional experience highlights the importance of the dialogue between experienced teacher and the preservice teacher (Smith & Lowrie, 2010). Feedback following a teaching episode is essential in the learning. It is also often very specific to each school site. Conversations, however, are not always about what a preservice teacher has just demonstrated in the classroom. Dialogue around the various responsibilities and issues of being a teacher are critical while students are in schools. Groundwater-Smith, Deer and March (1996) argued that teachers must have a language for talking about their work with preservice teachers and they referred to this as "developing a learning conversation" (page 33).

The community that formed consisted of experienced supervisors of preservice teachers from schools, four teacher educators from the Faculty. These participants – so the domain consisted of the issue of effective feedback during supervision. The improvement in the feedback conversations was the collaborative practice for the community of these school based supervisors of preservice teachers and Faculty academics. An 'achievable' outcome first provided the reason to invite members – all from differing education levels – to participate. A project with a directly applicable professional learning tool was a strong motivation for them to come together. In this way the three fundamental elements for a community of practice were established.

The professional learning outcome was planned as a CD Rom containing film and supporting text around conversations between supervising and preservice teachers. The development of a CD Rom was a decision based on the efforts over the past decade to address the lack of opportunities for teachers in schools to prepare for their roles as teacher educators. This is mainly linked to a lack of time as their roles as teachers are not diminished if they take on the responsibility of a preservice student (Feimen-Nemser, 1996). The CD was to comprise a collection of brief 'vignettes' of learning conversations around recognisable issues for supervision, together with strategies to act as stimuli for reflection, learning and discussion with others. The CD it was hoped would facilitate preparation as it could be used in a school context of their choosing: e.g. staff meetings, two or three colleagues – or simply one on one.

Twenty schools were contacted and invited to participate in deciding the vignettes and contributing to their production. Eleven schools confirmed, nominating two teachers experienced in supervision. These leading teachers came to the meetings; they also then co-opted teachers in their own schools for the production of the resource. The effectiveness of a community of practice is often evidenced by such a development where there is a core group which then draws those on the periphery to contribute at specific times and in places other than the formal community's meetings (Wenger et al, 2002). Thus in a specific school context a smaller school- based community of teachers formed to determine their own focus or issue(domain) for improving feedback (their practice) with student teachers. The formal meetings of the core community teachers and faculty educators were opportunities for us to:

- share the various ideas; then
- establish a plan to achieve the focus; and
- gain professional learning about supervisory strategies.

In this way the community of practice with the peripheral communities in each member's school site collaborated to improve the professional dialogue for the school

based teacher preparation. By the third meeting the core members tabled their decisions on what were the important learning conversations that they had determined within their specific communities. These included newly qualified teachers as well as experienced staff members. The topics suggested were discussed and critiqued by the core community. What emerged was a consistent pattern of 'topics' which were linked to a critical point in any preservice teacher's journey: e.g. the first meeting in the school; the student who was at risk of failing. While the critical nature of these to the learning of the student teacher was acknowledged, it was also agreed that the knowledge and skills to conduct such conversations were complex for the supervising teacher. Thus the conversations were described as essential but difficult, because of:

- (a) sensitivity – such as dress and relationship with children;
- (b) complexity – such as asking the preservice teacher to 'reflect' on their performance, or
- (c) resistance to advice – such as when managing a class.

Finally nine topics featuring key issues/milestones in a supervising teacher's interactions with preservice teachers were decided. These were relevant to preservice students in their first through to final placement before graduation. The next step was for each school team to write and deliver filmed scenario. Each would consist of supervising teachers modelling giving advice and feedback in conversations around:

- professional presentation (dress and language);
- skill building for classroom teaching;
- planning lessons and units;
- advising poorly performing student teachers;
- managing a variety of classroom issues (behaviour management);
- giving feedback to 'resistant' student teachers; and
- reflection strategies.

Between the core community meetings, the participating school teams carried out filming scripted supervisory feedback conversations. This included documenting their approaches and collating supporting evidence. Over six months meetings were held with the project's leading teachers. These meetings included decisions on the scope of the scenarios to ensure a range but also to advise each other on how the situations might be demonstrated. One workshop was led by academic staff with expertise in mentoring and coaching strategies. In this way the community of practice became a learning environment for those participating. Here was the opportunity to share theory and practice to improve their knowledge as lead teachers for working back in their schools. In between these monthly meeting (six in all) each school team was supported by a university advisor who visited to provide advice and to ensure the filming was completed. The Project team led by the author then collected from each school their video clips and documentation. The university multi media staff worked on the development of the CD Rom and booklet.

Each scenario site on the CD includes strategies on how to explain and guide the inexperienced student teacher. The focus is on building empathy and understanding about the concerns and stages of a preservice teacher's growth of knowledge about teaching. The material includes specific skills for giving feed back. A handbook accompanies the CD Rom – this was initiated and agreed upon as important by the leading teachers. Thus far 300 primary and secondary schools who work with the Faculty's preservice teachers have received two copies to help prepare their teachers who are supervisors.

Reflections

While this was a Project that required a specific outcome, the focus was to have a process that would build a strong sense of collaboration. The community of practice approach provided a framework which prioritised enabling a dialogue among the participants' whereby their assumptions and goals as teacher educators would be made explicit, the constraints and possibilities of their contexts would be recognised, and the ongoing work of all participants would be valued.

In this section I examine project Supervision through a lens of the three distinct, but interrelated modes of belonging to a community of practice identified by Wenger (1998): engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement involves the development of identity with the community, from experiences and interactions with other members. Imagination and alignment are derived from a contextualisation of the practices of the community in which one is involved within a broader framework. For example, from the lived experiences gained through engagement, one can imagine oneself as a colleague of others who perform the same or similar role. On the other hand, alignment provides an opportunity for seeing how the practices engaged in align with a particular employer's or system's expectations (Wenger, 1998). Table 2 summarises *Project Supervision* using these three dimensions. It also identifies if the development and application of new knowledge and opportunities for critical reflection occurred.

Dimension	Processes	Specifics
Engagement active involvement in mutual processes of negotiating meaning: – sharing knowledge through situated learning.	Specific context	Teacher education placements in school settings
	Diverse membership Diversity of expertise But workable community – 9 schools three members from each school at workshops	Faculty academics University liaison tutors Primary & Secondary Supervising teachers + School leaders (Deputy Principals generally co-ordinate student teachers placed in schools) + Preservice teachers – therefore a range of experience represented.
	Participatory framework Funding was available to support teacher release; and The place of meetings was chosen as a school not the University. The processes enabled all members to contribute.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 6 meetings over 6 months Agendas led by participants after the first meeting Professional learning workshop on processes of effective supervision led by Faculty staff – thus some incorporation of research in these. 2. School based decisions on activities Decision making on themes for scenarios made by participants through open shared dialogue. Liaison officers attached as critical friend to each participating school Filming completed independently by schools (– more teachers became involved in this on site) Films critiqued by participants
Alignment coordinating of energy and activity to contribute to broader enterprises	Connections with larger community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Production of CD Rom in the hands of the Faculty Contents for accompanying handbook developed by Faculty and liaison staff Resources provided by participating schools. Presentations of this outcome locally, nationally and internationally
Imagination creating images of the world and making connections across time and space.	Future enterprises of the community’s members	This is the area of weakness in this project! Participants appeared to be <i>less aware of how their participation had shaped their own identities</i> as members of a professional community of school based teacher educators. Potential here for sustainability - critical reflection needs to be built in future development with the group.

Table 2: An examination of the community of practice for Project Supervision

Having a specific task to achieve and clear directions to enable the participants to achieve the task were important contributors to engagement. This was further strengthened by the project design's enable to them to work with their specific contexts and to independently contribute to the project. Participants were encouraged to use their initiative – to have a creative approach. They were constructed as “knowers” in the community of practice and encouraged to share that knowledge within the community (Wood, 2007, p.284). This sense of leadership and the level of independence they had in achieving the community's purpose enabled a successful process.

As a result, the participants developed the material for the Project, aligning this with the kinds of learning activities found in their particular school sites during professional experience placement blocks. The determination of the nine scenarios by the core community could be described as based upon ‘representational practices’. These can be explained as the sets of experiences that occur because of the similar practices of ‘supervision’ across schools. Discussions were held at the second meeting of the core community. During this meeting debates occurred around the importance of the suggested stages and types of conversation needed between supervisors and preservice teachers. All participants could recognise the situations, but the priority differed depending on the specific school context and experiences of the individuals. So imagining how the outcomes of this project would align with the contexts for other schools was an integral part of the community's discussions.

As a result the final material while being designed in different school sites did contain and represent shared meanings agreed to by the core community members. These were considered as necessary to pursue the common endeavour of preparing teachers and thus had a wider influence than just their own small community. In summary, engagement, and alignment were achieved within the process of *Project Supervision*.

As Stenhouse (1976, p. 143) argued, “It is not enough that teachers' work be studied; they need to study it themselves”. On examining the project, there were limited opportunities engaging in structured and critical examination of the wider field of novice teacher development practices in school settings. However, it may be that this was wise. The establishment of the community around the focus of ‘supervision’ has been achieved. Following the publication of *Project Supervision*, we have begun a next stage which will involve examining our judgments on preservice teacher performance (that is, assessing them). The same community has become involved. This again is around the same field of practice but will engage these same participants in a much deeper examination of practice and theory in authentic learning and assessment contexts.

The high quality of the completed CD Rom has strengthened the relationship between original members and the university. The community has a common history – and that has built confidence around the participants' knowledge of supervising teachers' work through the opportunity to discuss their role. For the future of the community, the time spent together for the initial task now completed, has established a basis for continuing their work involving more ‘research’ oriented collaboration – scholarly practice - which can move forward from the supervisory beliefs and processes that created *Project Supervision*.

Improving research and practice partnerships between universities and schools is about establishing trust and confidence. *Project Supervision* did engage the participants and align their work within a common educational priority. Having

established this, the community is not at an end but more appropriately beginning to explore possibilities to research and lead change in school based teacher education.

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