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# **COLLABORATIVE THEORY-BUILDING IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper will describe a fourth year tutor program for pre-service teachers which subscribes to principles of collaborative theory building. Tutors, in a team teaching situation, learn to document prior beliefs and understandings, autobiographical accounts of prior learning and critical classroom incidents in order to analyse and articulate personal and public theories about teaching and learning.*

*The value placed on cognitive and reflective practices is discussed with a view towards empowering the learner and adjusting pre-existing beliefs about teaching.*

*Teaching is a verb and it developed as I taught.*

*(Sue - Tutor, 1994)*

There is an ongoing debate in North America and Australia regarding the merits of one kind of teacher education program over another. Yet, aside from all the rhetoric, “there has been no fundamental or substantive changes in teacher education during the past several decades” (Frieberg and Waxman, 1990: 622). It seems that the profession has been bogged down in seemingly unshakeable stereotypes of how teachers are perceived and how they should be prepared. A study undertaken for the Australian Education Council on teacher education suggests that the influence of the mass media tends to make the perception of teachers the reality and that “schools, teachers, employment authorities, universities and teacher educators have all tended to become stereotyped in the minds of other groups” (1990:15).

In Australia, negative public sentiment appears to have created a crisis of faith in the teaching profession exhibited by low tertiary entrance scores and difficulties in attracting students to teaching courses. This crisis has forced a re-examination of teachers and their preparation. Informed by a large body of international research into teacher thinking (Clark and Peterson, 1986; Clark and Yinger, 1977; Elbaz, 1981; Meizrow, 1991; Shulman, 1986), along with a resurgence of literature on the constructivist approach to human inquiry (Black and Ammon, 1992; Dewey, 1938; Guthrie and Pearson, 1986; O’Loughlin, 1992), there has been a shift away from skills-based teacher preparation to more cognitive, reflective approaches. This shift allows for greater empowerment in the pre-service teachers (Rainer and Guyton, 1994) enabling them to acquire a public voice to demonstrate their theoretical beliefs and a professional identity which serves to improve their quality of life.

Many teacher education programs are now supporting teachers’ active reflection and construction of a range of pedagogical beliefs and practices in order to adjust and further develop their own personal and public theories about teaching and learning.

As a result of this shift in focus more and more teachers are seeing themselves as agents of change; people who consider themselves researchers, confidently examining the myriad of tacit decisions made each day and dismantling prior assumptions which brought about these decisions.

Thinking like a researcher invites teachers to view their classrooms as laboratories, pose questions which challenge their beliefs and practices and then collect and analyse data in order to measure and articulate personal and professional growth and development.

This paper will describe some of the cognitive, social and reflective practices developed in a fourth year teacher education program in Australia which subscribes to and further develops the model of teachers as researchers and theory builders. The tutor program, in English language curriculum, was developed by three lecturers in the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Initially, twelve fourth-year students were selected as tutors to assist the three lecturers in team teaching an undergraduate subject for one semester of thirteen weeks.

Selection of candidates is based on their ability to work collaboratively, their content knowledge of English language curriculum and their overall level of commitment. Alongside the teaching component, tutors take the subject *Teaching Adults in the Tertiary Setting*, where they raise and explore pedagogical issues about adult teaching and learning which grow out of their teaching classroom. Students undertaking the tutor program are granted credit for two subjects towards their fourth year of study. Assessment of the pre-service teachers is based solely on their ability to document and demonstrate evidence of their growth and development as teachers.

The philosophy underpinning the tutor program is that in order to study teaching, one needs to study the patterns of values, institutions, emotions and actions in one's own life. It is well documented that pre-service teachers base their assumptions and beliefs about teaching on prior schooling and home experiences (Hobart and Wideen, 1988; Hollingsworth, 1989; Knowles, 1992). These preconceptions need to be examined in the light of the new information they are acquiring. This supports Dewey's notion that "teaching and learning are a continuous process of the reconstruction of experience" (1938: 87).

Some unique features of the program make it well suited to a discussion of a collaborative theory-building approach to teacher education: searching the past, scaffolding, collaborating and constructing new understandings.

- ∞ **Searching the Past:** By working alongside a lecturer in weekly planning sessions, tutors are provided with a backdrop of how the theories they are exploring arose. As well, the tutors are revisiting their own educational histories in order to discover how they relate to their current beliefs as teachers.
- ∞ **Scaffolding:** Tutors team teach a subject they undertook as first years providing opportunity for them to revisit and revise content with added experience and knowledge and then build upon that existing knowledge base. As well, they are directed to observe and document specific aspects of their lecturer's teaching.

- **Collaborating:** All tutors are teaching the same subject at the same year level. Although the groups of undergraduate students differ, the content, organisation and assessment remain the same. This provides tutors the opportunity to confer and exchange beliefs and approaches within similar contexts. There is also ongoing dialogue between lecturer and tutor.
- **Constructing :** The practicum component of the program is not assessed, allowing tutors greater opportunity to take risks with their teaching and use the university classroom as a laboratory for conducting small action research projects which are produced as evidence of growth and development. For example, one tutor tape-recorded her teaching sessions in order to assess and refine her questioning techniques and improve her ability to listen attentively to the needs of her students.

### **Program focus**

The areas being examined within the program are pre-service teachers and lecturers' personal and social constructions of themselves and the profession of teaching.

### **A personal construct: learning can be an awakening**

*If we change the way we see things we may notice a need to change the way we do things.*  
(Linda)

A query raised by lecturers early in the first year of the tutor program concerned the origin of teachers' beliefs. Ball and Goodson (1985:13) suggest:

*First that a teacher's previous career and life experiences shape the view of teaching and the way he/she sets about it. Secondly, that teachers' lives outside school, their latent identities and cultures have an important impact upon their work as teachers. And thirdly, that we must...seek to locate the life history of the individual .*

In order to facilitate the further development of personal constructs about teaching and learning, the program requires tutors to keep a professional journal, write and analyse classroom narratives, engage in ongoing discussions with lecturers and peers and share their findings.

### **Searching the past through professional journals and autobiography**

#### ***Professional journals***

*What I have discovered in my writing is that I have always tried to disguise my own voice.*  
(Jennie)

The professional journal serves as a working document for tutors to collect data concerning their growth and development as teachers. In terms of framing a personal construct, graduate tutors are asked to examine and reflect upon their prior assumptions about teaching and learning and place them alongside new understandings. In *The Journal Book*, Fulwiler (1987) notes that teachers' purposes for journal writing include engendering personal

connections to the content, a place to think about the content, collecting observations and data and providing for the practice of writing. Some of the journal entries in the tutor program are directed by the lecturers but the majority are left up to the discretion of the individual. Two or three times during the semester entries in the journals are shared between lecturer and tutor, and between tutors, questions are raised or insights noted in order to assist in taking the ideas presented further. Often earlier journal entries are revised (“*I no longer believe...*”) or expanded upon (“*I need to build on some of the views presented in my entry dated...*”).

Although many find written reflection difficult, the majority come to appreciate how the journal helps them listen to their thoughts and better understand them. Lecturers are also keeping journals and exploring the same issues. Together, lecturers and tutors are sharing their struggles and wisdom. One tutor explained her association with journal work this way:

*I have developed a professional working relationship with my reflection. Action is a key word, it is a constant process of moving back and forth. Finding connections and conflicts can only come through the journal , redefining and adopting ideas. (Sue)*

Another tutor said:

*For people with low self concepts it means undoing years of negative feelings and a new approach to dealing with failures, looking at the positive outcomes of experiences which were negative. My journal, I believe has enabled me to write myself into ideas' wallow in self pity, sit down and view it from another angle, reflect, put it into perspective and say, so what? Well, what do I think now? (Jennie)*

### ***Autobiography***

Some of the directed entries ask pre-service teachers to focus on aspects of their educational history. In year one of their course they are required to write an educational autobiography. Autobiographical and biographical approaches, according to Goodson (1992), Kelchterman (1993) and Kennedy (1990), provide a framework for teachers to interpret events. The centre of the word autobiography is the Greek word *bios*, meaning life. More exactly, *bios* describes the course of one's lifetime (Brady, 1990). Erickson (1966) asserts that memories serve to connect the past to the present. It is this connection the lecturers wish to further. Therefore, it is suggested that tutors revisit their first year autobiography along with school reports and any other relevant information about their prior learning. These documents provide an overview of themselves as learners and show patterns of behaviour and thinking. The focus is not on the events but on the meaning they elicit for the tutors. Rather than have the tutors write another autobiography in year four, directed entries allow them to focus on specific events in their educational history in some detail. Yet getting the graduate tutors to detail an account is often difficult because they lie hidden . Discussions help to unearth them, for, even though each life is unique, there are events which often serve to trigger one's own memories. Once the events surface, the tutors are asked to write them down as narratives having an orientation, conflict and resolution. They began in many ways:

*Coming from two parents who are teachers... (Sue)*

*I don't remember having books or being read to by my parents... (Cheryl)*

*As a child I was terrified of coming up with the wrong answer... (Jennie)*

The next step involves re-reading the narratives and searching for themes in the texts. Often powerful metaphoric language is used and by re-reading the autobiographical accounts, learners come to understand how learning is constructed and the power culture has in shaping their beliefs (Deshler 1990):

*I was a trapeze artist without a safety net...*

*I am a cog in the wheel...*

*College is an umbilical cord for me...*

Journal work is one means towards making the invisible in teaching and learning more visible.

### **Scaffolding and collaborating**

As well as examining past events, tutors are asked to examine current practice. There is comfort in teaching material they had learned in their first three years of the course and many tutors comment on the pleasure they receive in revisiting material with a more informed viewpoint.

*I've found revisiting the articles from first year language that I'm grasping a lot more the second or third time around. (Sheryl)*

*I re read parts of my (RLT) Reflective Learning and Teaching journal - some good points - interesting to see I have moved on and learned new things but not as many as I had hoped. (Linda)*

*Active is a key word . Reflection is a process, working back and forth with your journal but also taking an active process with your learning. In previous journal writing I had written about the present and not really gone back and considered what I had written in light of where it had led. (Jennie)*

Issues arising from classroom practise elicit long discussions between tutor and lecturer at weekly debriefing sessions. Discussion often centres around the contents of the lesson response sheets completed after each teaching session. On these sheets, lecturers and tutors are asked to frame a critical incident in the classroom and write about it in narrative form. Utilising critical incidents, originated by Flanagan (1954), as a phenomenological approach (studying lived experiences), lecturers ask for a detailed description of a significant event, identifying the nature, time, place and characters involved. After re-reading the incident, one is asked to write about what was learned from this event. Then the response sheets are exchanged between tutor and lecturer, in order to gain additional insights.

Dismantling and consolidating knowledge, skills and understandings often occurs when interacting with others. The planning sessions and group meetings are forums for “catching

thoughts” about teaching. There is an attempt to return to Socratic-type dialoguing where participants explore issues raised in the literature and in the classroom and critically examine beliefs from the past and present (Abbs, 1994) rather than reach for readymade answers. Tutors are encouraged to:

- re VISIT
- re THINK
- re STRUCTURE in order to
- re VISION ideas.

The process of working through the past of an individual and examining in some detail, current practice can be confronting. Tutors comment that they are “*uncomfortable, changing and unravelling*”. Other tutors realise that their educational beliefs are built on shaky ground while others are ill-prepared to stir the foundation. Turbill (1993) suggests that cognitive tension is a precursor to learning and change. Fourth year seems a suitable time to shake the tutor’s foundation of beliefs to see what it’s made of.

### **Constructing a private and public image**

*Am I a teacher or have I just been to teachers college for four and a half years?* (Linda)

Aside from a personal construct, tutors need to construct a public view of themselves in the teaching profession. The program attempts to induct them into the culture of teaching in a number of ways. The tutors are involved in planning meetings where a number of staff viewpoints are presented. They are also invited to the staff room and sent staff newsletters. As well, their lecturer is presenting a behind the scenes look at university life. Through this enculturation process tutors become aware of the multifaceted role of the teacher beyond the classroom. As well, they come to understand the place of their discipline within the larger course structure.

The Vygotskian (1978) notion of lending one’s consciousness is inherent in the philosophy of the tutor program. Therefore, even though the responsibility for learning is placed with the tutors, they are not alone in their search. Interacting with lecturers and other tutors with a wide array of beliefs, backgrounds and experiences helps them come to know in multiple ways (Harrington, 1994).

## **Summary and further direction**

This cognitive, socially-centred approach to teacher education provides tutors with a collaborative process of coming to terms with themselves as learners and their beliefs as teachers that is both dynamic and empowering. Preparing teachers to be reflective, inquiring researchers in their own classrooms helps to ensure that their public voice will be heard and that existing views of teaching and learning might be dismantled.

Now in its fourth year, the tutor program is gaining recognition throughout the university. A vast body of research data is being amassed for future evaluation. Some immediate observations, however, appear relevant. The success of the program rests firmly on the commitment of the lecturers and tutors involved. All parties must view themselves as lifelong learners, willing to explore their personal theories and engage in collaborative and reflective practices. This expectation naturally involves a large time commitment on the part of both lecturers and tutors and needs to be continually addressed in future reviews. Aside from the participants, the pre-service course as a whole must reflect and support an orientation towards valuing personal and public constructs. This philosophical consistency will allow the tutor program to be seen as a natural scaffold from the first three years of the course. Thirdly, the program's success relies on building and maintaining a community of thoughtful practitioners, both experienced and novice, who support one another's growth and development. In this regard, tutors are encouraged to co-write papers for publication with other tutors and / or lecturers as well as present at conferences.

The next phase of the study will involve following a small number of tutors over the next five years in order to determine how this cognitive, reflective approach to teacher education impacts on future beliefs and practice.

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