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Chapter

Building Pre-Service Teacher Capabilities through Remote and Flexible Placement - A New Narrative

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Abstract

Within practical placements, Australian pre-service teachers acquire a range of skills and strategies. This is in addition to linking the theory that they acquire at university to that in the classroom context. In 2020, to ensure that the pre-service teachers in education courses continue this practical component of their degree, remote and flexible placements were negotiated between the schools and the university. These changes were embedded in order for pre-service teachers to work with schools, students and mentors and they did so from within their homes. This chapter focuses on the experiences from three pre-service teachers during their time on practicum in remote and flexible contexts. A case study approach was applied to analyse each individual's experiences. The case studies highlight the commonalities in experiences for each individual pre-service teacher. Upon analysis of these case studies, these commonalities included implications around how these capabilities were being formed and developed throughout the placement. These capabilities included inference, deduction, pivoting and empathy. These common capabilities across the pre-service teacher's experiences, during their remote and flexible placement, highlight the need for a new narrative around the emerging skills, strategies and capabilities for teacher education in the 21st Century.

Keywords: reflection, noticing, pre-service teacher, teacher education

1. Introduction

Online learning is a commonly used term within some higher education providers, this was not a commonly used term in most Government schools in Australia. Before 2020, remote and flexible learning for Australian schools [1] was a notion that was not as commonly applied. The traditional form of face-to-face teaching was more the norm, particularly for Australian pre-service teachers that have analysed their practice within this chapter. The emergence of COVID-19 saw the closure of many Australian and global schooling face-to-face contexts. This closure had an impact on the higher education setting as pre-service teacher placements were often postponed or cancelled [2]. In many schooling contexts, and for Australian pre-service teachers, placements transformed into an online mode of instruction. Within this chapter, the

online mode will be referred to as remote and flexible teaching, remote and flexible approach or remote and flexible contexts. For the three Australian pre-service teachers that have co-authored this chapter, the remote and flexible approach to their final placement was to be part of a new norm. The classes that they were a part of were delivered via remote and flexible contexts on an array of learning management system platforms in various modes. This included WebEx and Zoom digital platforms. The students that the pre-service teachers taught within their remote and flexible contexts had irregular attendance and they often were not able to ‘see’ the students due to their video cameras being switched off. Participating in a practical placement within this radically different way displayed to the pre-service teachers that there was a necessity for a change in their approach to teaching. They observed this not only for themselves but also in what they saw modelled by the in-service teachers who were their mentors. The nature of practical placements, including remote and flexible placements, allows for pre-service teachers to develop their application of theory in a practical mode. This opportunity in a remote and flexible placement also highlighted the emergent capabilities, teaching skills and strategies that were a by-product of this unfamiliar context for all three pre-service teachers.

Known by a number of terms, capabilities, attributes, dispositions; the notion of what makes good, quality teachers has been widely contested across policy and theoretical constructs [3]. These capabilities can also be interpreted as being attributed to academic-based or non-academic capabilities. Recent recommendations around the selection of entrants into Initial Teaching Education courses from the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership [4] included a non-exhaustive list of non-academic capabilities (see **Table 1**) drawn from various educational literature. For the purpose of this chapter, the emergent attributes identified in the reflective journals and subsequent case studies will be referred to as ‘non-academic capabilities’.

This chapter does not seek out to measure these non-academic capabilities in relation to teacher effectiveness, nor does this chapter provide a non-negotiable list of preferred non-academic capabilities. Rather, this chapter seeks to highlight one set of identified capabilities and the formative, non-static nature of pre-service teacher capabilities that have been identified through this research. Additionally, we discuss how these capabilities can evolve in a significantly different way within the experience of remote and flexible contexts. We argue that teacher capabilities are continually building and that are influenced by a myriad of experiences. This has never been as true as in the current context where teachers have emerged as first adopters of new pedagogical approaches and modes of teaching and learning. Through this research we also highlight the importance of pre-service teachers developing their reflective practice, in particular, their ability to notice in action. The research question that has guided the data analysis in this chapter is: What

Non-academic capabilities [1]	Case study linked non-academic capabilities (Bradbury, Stewart, Barker & Rowe)
Motivation to teach	Inference
Interpersonal and communication skills	Empathy
Willingness to learn	Creativity
Self-efficacy	Deduction
Conscientiousness	Adaptability
Organisational and planning skills	Pivoting

Table 1.
Non-academic capabilities.

emergent 21st Century capabilities were evident for pre-service teachers in times of change?

2. Research design

The intent of qualitative studies such as this is to allow for the emergence of rich, 'thick' descriptions of the phenomena being experienced [5]. Case study methodology was applied in order to represent the experiences throughout remote and flexible placements of three pre-service teachers: Tatinia, Anabelle and Jessica. Reflective journals were kept throughout their placement and contained first-hand accounts from each pre-service teacher. This was a regular practice for all three pre-service teachers during placement and for the purpose of this research, was a way to record perceptions and actions in their individual settings [6]. Qualitative research is applicable in this study as written language in the form of reflective journaling forms the base of the data. The data drawing from journaling will be about the researchers themselves and the events that have influenced and affected them. Tatinia, Anabelle and Jessica kept reflective journals from the beginning through to the end of their placement, dated all entries and used themes from their journal to provide a "final account of the research" [7].

Although there were many pages of journal entries, only certain excerpts will be drawn upon that highlight the themes that link back to the research question. The journal entries were then analysed as a whole document where an inductive approach was applied to uncover the emergent themes. An inductive approach includes the aspects of language; meanings, worldviews and perspectives are taken into consideration and culminate in the theoretical understanding of the people(s) that are being studied. These perspectives create the pre-service teachers' social world and will allow for the "theoretical ideas to emerge" [8] out of the data. The data collection also included un-structured reflective conversations during and after the placement concluded. The combination of the journals and the un-structured conversations were then analysed in order to construct three separate detailed examinations of the author's experiences in the form of case studies. All four authors were involved in the discussions around the reflective journals. Group and paired conversations focusing on themes and patterns in their reflections in order to construct the three case studies. The case studies were written and then reviewed by each of the pre-service teachers in order to provide feedback around content accuracy. Contributions were then made to the analysis and identification of broad themes and sub-themes within the data. A thematic analysis approach provided a framework for thinking about the emergent themes in a data set and has been applied to the analysis of a variety of qualitative data [8]. Broader themes were identified and recorded in the style of a word table [9]. These themes were analysed and recorded by all authors and directed by the research question.

3. Literature outline

3.1 Practical placement experiences – identifying non-academic capabilities through reflection and noticing

The complexity of teaching cannot be underestimated and within a range of educational research, there is not a single agreed upon set of attributes, capabilities or behaviours that is universally agreed upon in relation to what makes a quality teacher [9–11]. There are often overt considerations related to the academic

capabilities of pre-service teachers on placements due to the measurement via the Australian Graduate Professional Standards for Teachers [4]. Intrinsic or less apparent are the non-academic or non-cognitive [11] attributes or capabilities. These capabilities are often seen as the personal or 'soft' applications that encompass "motivation, attitudes, dispositions and personality" [11]. In relation to the types of attributes that constitute teacher quality, measurement and evaluation are problematic and no one set of behaviours can be linked to overall teacher effectiveness for all students [12]. The discussion and subsequent analysis of these capabilities does not [13]. On the contrary, the juxtaposition of these capabilities to a teacher's academic qualifications is an essential combination when discussing teacher effectiveness rather than academic qualifications alone [12].

Post-placement discussions centred on the reflective journals and were constructed with discussions around *noticing*. As pre-service teachers in a new and often unfamiliar context, the professional practice of noticing may not come as second nature. This approach to reflective practice, noticing, allows the professional to make informed choices and considered approaches to how to act in different situations [10, 14]. Naturally, noticing for even the most seasoned professional requires disciplined application. Underpinning professional practices, but when applied systematically, noticing can develop into "the Discipline of Noticing" [10]. Explicit noticing is critical for change in individuals as the lack of noticing can result in perpetuating practice [15]. While completing placement in a remote and flexible context, it is evident that the pre-service teachers were able to continue to reflect on their academic and non-academic capabilities. This noticing of strategies enabled Anabelle, Tatinia and Jessica to adapt to either adapt to the needs of their students in the moment, or to reflect and consider a variant approach in future contexts.

3.2 Adapting to a new space in remote and flexible placements

Amongst the varied opportunities practical placements present for pre-service teachers, one major benefit is that they allow for authentic applications of teaching experiences in classroom contexts [16]. In traditional contexts, this would allow for theory that was learned within the higher education contexts units to then be observed or applied once the pre-service teachers entered the classroom. As the nature of what constituted the classroom had evolved in remote and flexible contexts, often referred to as online learning [13], both in-service teacher mentors and pre-service teachers were applying adaptive teaching approaches and strategies to an unfamiliar teaching environment. Adaptive teaching research takes into account the classroom environments that are ever changing and dynamic [14]. Arguably, the change in teaching contexts that can be seen within this chapter are displaying what Gibson and Ross [14] refer to as microadaptive teaching approaches. This is apparent while Tatinia, Anabelle and Jessica were moving between remote and flexible contexts and then back to traditional face-to-face classroom contexts. These microadaptive approaches are informal and responsive to teaching in order to "overcome impediments to learning" [14]. The impediments in relation to the evidence in the case studies were the new pedagogies of teaching in an online mode, in addition to engaging learners in this new environment. Additionally, all three pre-service teachers conducted microadaptations to their teaching in "direct *observation*" [14] of the responses of their students and looked at these teaching strategies as an opportunity and growth [14].

Within traditional practicum placements, the mentors of pre-service teachers play an important role and guide for the pre-service teacher during the placement journey [17]. Mentors and pre-service teachers work closely together to develop the skills, strategies and capabilities that emergent professionals will require to graduate

and into their first graduate teaching year. Hobson et al. [18] found in their review of literature that mentoring is a highly important and effective support system for pre-service teacher development. They found that positive impacts on pre-service teachers within effective mentor and mentee relationships include increased confidence and self-esteem, decreased feelings of isolation, and an increased capacity to reflect and problem-solve. In addition to the development of pre-service teacher capabilities during placement and with the mentor support, mentors themselves tend to observe their own development in their position as mentor. Hobson et al. [18] argued that the mentor mentee relationship can also be positive for the mentor resulting in the mentor building their self and critical reflection, having their ideas validated, learning from their mentee(s) and aiding in career planning and progression. This reciprocal professional learning relationship became increasingly important in the remote and flexible context as both in-service teacher mentor and pre-service teacher adapted to their new ways of engaging students within their approaches to teaching and learning.

4. Analysing the case studies

This section of the chapter provides each individual pre-service teacher's reflection within the form of case studies. All of the case studies were constructed from the outline of Ttainia, Anabelle and Jessica's experiences as noted in their reflective journals. The contexts of the case studies include remote and flexible placements and then the experiences of moving back to traditional forms of face-to-face teaching.

4.1 Ttainia's experiences

During her final practicum Ttainia's approach to pivoting in this space took many forms. Remote placements hindered the provision of feedback from teachers to students. As written feedback was commonplace, it often targeted certain areas of learning for students in a personalised way. Although provided for each student, it was often not read. This was obvious from the follow-on lessons. Ttainia was aware of the changes in the students during remote and flexible contexts. Ttainia juxtaposed this with the face-to-face context where providing feedback allowed for a follow-up conversations and clarifications. As remote and flexible teaching and learning continued, discussions stemming from probing questions and other ICT games like Kahoot were beginning to be less engaged with. The mindset of going back to school overtook the drive to participate online. Ttainia noticed that students who had usually engaged were no longer taking part in their usual way. Student owned checklists were being ticked but the work was not getting done. Ttainia felt disappointed by this and grappled with how to analyse and interpret the reasoning behind these occurrences. Rather than fixate on the negative feelings around this occurrence, she compartmentalised this in order to follow-up once back into the face-to-face setting. Although much of the time teaching remotely without seeing the student's faces, "You could tell" how the students were feeling. Ttainia use the notion of inference and deduction when moving through this process of planning for the students in her care. Voice and choice were emphasised throughout the remote and flexible teaching. Selections of resources to inject fun and engagement elicited engagement and discussion. These were often digital games and fun activities accessed through digital sources. Ttainia felt a sense of pride with the selections of these activities. This was in addition to considerations around the health and wellbeing of the students once they returned to face-to-face contexts.

Once back in face-to-face contexts, the students discussed and socialised more than in the remote and flexible contexts. Tainaia was experiencing the first time in the classroom with the students face-to-face since remote and flexible learning. The teaching schedule became “less structured than what it would normally have been” and a focus was placed on wellbeing for the students and. From the stories and experiences that Tainaia heard from the students, she empathised with how each of them were feeling now that they were together in the classroom again. She returned to approaches of modelling responses and examples from her own experiences. This compelled others in the room to also support the peers needed it in the classroom.

4.2 Anabelle’s experiences

Anabelle had experienced most of her placement during 2020 in a remote and flexible context. Upon returning to face-to-face teaching Anabelle had learned a lot about herself. She had learned that teaching could be successful in a structured and supportive way when in remote and flexible contexts. She started to consider how this style of teaching could be embedded more regularly in a face-to-face context, as it seemed viable for “real learning opportunities”. Some challenges within the remote and flexible context stemmed from the teaching of specific subject content that was impeded by not being face-to-face. This was evident when teaching a novel with “intense themes”. Anabelle noted that when teaching this novel in the physical classroom, the ways in which the students responded were “written all over their face”. Online, it was less noticeable due to the lack of “videos on” and other documents open at once. In remote and flexible contexts, it was more difficult for her to “read the room” and notice when students were feeling uncomfortable around the content. This was mitigated through the use of chat functions and more surface level engagement, but the richness in discussion was lacking due to not being physically with the students. Being aware of the content herself enabled to enhance her understanding of whether the students might be feeling certain emotions around the text. This “feeling the sense” that others will feel the same way which Anabelle termed as empathy as you would in an approach that was applied in this context. Working with her mentor and the teaching team in remote and flexible contexts was a highlight for Anabelle. Overall, the relationships that she had forged with the teaching team were positive. She felt a level of comfort in both the face-to-face and remote and flexible contexts. Contributing to planning was not as easy remotely as it was in face-to-face contexts. Anabelle was aware that her supportive teachers had faced a large challenge of transitioning back to face-to-face contexts. Knowing this, Anabelle was “reading the vibe” and conscious of the feelings of the other teachers and her mentor before she would suggest any changes or provide insights to the planning that was already in progress. Once back to face-to-face contexts, Anabelle noticed that certain remote and flexible aspects had remained. School assemblies were conducted online and the team of teachers that she had worked with welcomed this. Anabelle had noted that there were enduring elements of remote and flexible learning and identified that this flexibility in design and delivery on-site was something that many of the teachers wanted to keep.

4.3 Jessica’s experiences

Jessica’s context was the only secondary sector and she taught in the English method. Her teaching context held many students from challenging backgrounds. Already being faced with dynamic demographics, in remote and flexible contexts, engaging students with the content was a real challenge. Jessica took on a lot of personal responsibility to engage her students effectively in the remote and flexible

context. The challenges in engaging students in discussions from remote and flexible contexts included that the students have the agency to disengage. Jessica found that this was significantly different to the face-to-face context in relation to how she could engage them once they were dis-engaged. As a result, Jessica was conscious of the health and wellbeing of her students. This pastoral approach was emphasised through Jessica's reflections. As her method area was English, she also added a layer of relevance to their contexts and lining to real-world applications. A percentage of students in Jessica's class came from multi-cultural backgrounds. She chose to view this as a positive aspect as her students were bringing their life experiences and background journeys into the classroom. She celebrated the fact that her students were from varying backgrounds and honoured this in her approach to designing and delivering content. Jessica had a community approach to creating the culture in her classroom both remote and flexible and face-to-face. This included a sense of agency providing students with voice, opportunities to share and compelling them to engage with the content. Jessica found this experience as being an opportunity to "re-invent herself". With each placement and each cohort that she was teaching, she had to adapt and become "tech savvy" fluid with technology and quickly pick up things in relation to knowing her students. When back in a face-to-face context, this required change again to "thinking like a professional teacher" and begin to get to know the students in a professional manner. She learned many approaches to engaging with specific contexts from her mentor including the ways to speak to parents in a sensitive and empathetic way. When reflecting on the remote and flexible experience, Jessica thought that if a blended approach to teaching was to continue, she would set her expectations, norms and culture earlier and foster the community aspect of the context more efficiently and effectively. Jessica noted that she felt that impacts on health and wellbeing might be an enduring issue for her students once returning from remote and flexible teaching and learning. She noted that the break of consistency had affected more students than others, but she was concerned about some enduring disengagement while getting back into the "art of school" again.

5. Findings

5.1 Case study analysis

As stated in previous sections of this chapter, detailed discussions around themes that were identified within each reflective journal and subsequent case study highlighted non-academic capabilities. This was supported not so much around a theory of reflection, but more so on applying the notion of noticing. The non-academic capabilities that were identified when analysed included inference, empathy, creativity, deduction, adaptability and pivoting (see **Table 1**). As each capability was outlined, it is important to note that as they may work independently of one another within this chapter. The authors acknowledge that the capabilities also intertwine and in practice, can emerge as occurring in parallel to other capabilities.

5.1.1 Inference

Observable commonalities and differences across the three reflections were revealed when discussing the pattern of experiences regarding social disengagement in remote and flexible learning. Within Tatania's reflections, despite the distance between herself and the students, there was an awareness of the disengagement of her students where she notes: "you could tell" when they were a disconnect in the teaching

and learning. In contrast to Ttainia's experiences, Jessica states how difficult it was to "read the room" online. This is an interesting difference between the two pre-service teacher's reflections. The reflections highlight the ongoing struggle to engage with the students and the subsequent reflection on how to augment practice so that the next lesson would ensure a higher likelihood of success. Engagement and understanding are often judged through diagnostic discussions or conversations with students, but as the lack of engagement was increasing common across the pre-service teachers' experiences. The emergent capabilities of inference can be seen here when each pre-service teacher began assessing the lack of engagement and learning. Although, as the case studies suggest, this is commonly identified in a face-to-face context, identification of disengagement was difficult to distinguish in the remote and flexible context.

5.1.2 Empathy

Each of the three case studies demonstrated the aspect of teacher conscientiousness around the ways in which students were engaging, responding and feeling in a remote and flexible context and within the face-to-face learning environment. Ttainia, Anabelle and Jessica had all emphasised their concern around the impact that health and wellbeing was having on the student's development of content knowledge, engagement and understanding. They empathised with the emotional needs of the learners and this became a key component of each of the pre-service teachers planning considerations.

Each pre-service teacher found themselves again using the capabilities of inference in relation to the emotional state as a class, reflecting on their planning and pivoting the approach to their teaching. This was to further accommodate for student engagement and counterbalance the increased levels of student stress and anxiety during the time of remote and flexible learning. When teaching in remote and flexible contexts and moving back to face-to-face contexts, Ttainia, Anabelle and Jessica empathised with the ways in which students were transitioning. They focused particularly on the wellbeing of the students in both contexts and have considered that these needs will exist as they move into their first year of graduate teaching.

5.1.3 Creativity

As remote and flexible teaching occurred in an online environment, there is also the capability of creativity with the use of information communications technology (ICT) and the engagement with digital learning approaches. This became apparent through the ways in which Ttainia, Anabelle and Jessica all used these technologies to engage students through and can be located within each of the case studies. This creative approach to embedding ICT and upskilling in this space became a deeply embedded pedagogical approach within remote and flexible contexts. All three case studies reflected upon the importance of understanding and embedding digital technologies and ICT. Collectively, Ttainia, Anabelle and Jessica have shared the difficulty around not only maintaining engagement but also in gauging how the students were being able to take in the content around the topic. The approach to this engagement highlights the creative and critical capabilities within these pre-service teachers and illustrates that as teacher professionals, we must consistently find new ways to reach our students when the traditional modes of teaching are augmented, changed or completely abandoned.

5.1.4 Deduction

Additionally, commonalities within the three experiences showed an increased application of creativity when using digital technologies. Use of digital platforms

required the adaptation to this form of teaching, however, the use of activities, games and as each pre-service teacher expressed, interactive and engaging tasks were often drawn from digital websites and resources. Considerations around the engagement and enjoyment of the students was heightened particularly in remote and flexible contexts. Capabilities emerged as Tatania, Anabelle and Jessica could not always be 'with' their students, they used methods of deduction and inference with their decisions around planning and teaching.

An increased awareness of the students as individuals and collectively, their cultural and social backgrounds were of high importance to Tatania, Anabelle and Jessica. Throughout each case study, it was the students that were central to each pre-service teacher's decisions in planning and developing their teaching approaches. This was evident within remote and face-to-face teaching contexts. Student voice and choice appeared paramount for all three pre-service teachers. The relationship building and collaboration was commonly associated with their mentors and other teaching staff. Although there was not always opportunities to work alongside one another, engagement occurred through online methods and modes. Their abilities within the online space was seen as a benefit and all three pre-service teachers were able to contribute in a meaningful way to the teaching of students in both contexts.

5.1.5 Adaptability

Adaptability during remote learning was a key theme throughout the remote teaching context as preservice teachers had to judge, reflect and alter their perceptions and approaches to current styles of teaching. This led to the pre-service teachers redefining their perceptions of their roles within the context. All three pre-service teachers had to learn to adapt their practice in both remote and flexible contexts and face-to-face contexts. It was noticed that the practices of all three pre-service teachers were undertaking included "teaching as more than talking" largely due to the mode in which they were teaching which did not allow for the teacher to apply this approach. The case study accounts from all three pre-service teachers shows the confronting nature of student wellbeing challenges. For Anabelle, when identifying the patterns in her case study, she reflected upon the notion of upskilling herself through professional development in order to adapt for a potential future teaching focus of student health and wellbeing. One example of this for Anabelle would be seeking out and attend mental health first aide courses will be an imperative for the post-COVID world.

5.1.6 Pivoting

What we have explored in this chapter has been the changes in practice in response to the online teaching mode for Anabelle, Tatania and Jessica in this time of remote and flexible learning. From the shared analysis of their case studies and subsequent discussions between the authors, this has been termed as pivoting. When moving through the aforementioned emergent capabilities, each pre-service teacher could be seen to pivot their practice in order to further support their students, their planning and teaching practice and in supporting their in-service teacher peers.

6. Conclusion

The context in which Australian pre-service teachers were exposed to practical placement during the year 2020 was varied and diverse. As their practical

placement settings changed from remote and flexible contexts back to face-to-face settings, this contextual duality brought with it an enduring change in their teaching practice. What emerged was an opportunity for an in-depth analysis of the formative acquisition of capabilities for pre-service teachers who were exposed to new pedagogical instruction throughout immense change. Although evidence-based measures and evaluation in the form of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers remained for these pre-service teachers, it was the development of non-academic capabilities that Tatinia, Anabelle and Jessica began to notice throughout their reflective journaling. Key non-academic capabilities to their approaches in their teaching were exceeding the measurement of academic capabilities due to the COVID-19 impacts on teaching and learning. It was as a result of this remote and flexible teaching experience that they were able to identify a new narrative around these non-academic capabilities and as seen in the case studies, this new narrative was impactful and enduring in their development as teachers.

The pre-service teacher's in-service teacher mentors worked alongside them throughout this experience. What emerged within these contexts was a new form of collaboration and collegiality from a remote setting that uncovered even more attributes for these pre-service teachers. This research brings to light the question of whether there is a need for exhaustive approaches to measurement and evaluation of teacher capabilities or qualities. This research instead brings to the surface a conversation around pre-service teacher empowerment in noticing, reflection and identification of capabilities that are, we argue, formatively emerging over time. It is the hope that this chapter inspires other pre-service teachers to develop their ability to notice through reflection and to continue this practice throughout their degree and beyond so that with this practice, linking context to experiences, an awareness of individual needs as teachers can become self-actualised and personalised for pre-service teachers. For the pre-service teachers within this chapter, it was through the action of noticing moments that they experienced throughout the analysis and discussion of their own and the reflective journals of their peers that allowed for their capabilities to be identified. As the teaching profession shifts into the post-COVID world with the focus on rebuilding student personal and social capabilities, in turn, a light may also be shone on noticing the ever-evolving new narratives of teacher capabilities.


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