Negotiating the dilemmas of community based learning in teacher education

Abstract

At the University of Ballarat, pre-service teachers (PSTs) in their second year of the Bachelor of Education (P−10) are required to plan community-based teaching and learning in conjunction with school students, their teachers and schools along with community organisations. These requirements are in synergy with curriculum developments in schools and appear to be valued by them. In this paper, the implementation of community-based teaching and learning programs developed by pre-service teachers is examined for educational and organisational issues that shaped the outcomes for PSTs. The paper highlights a number of consistent themes that throw light on factors that appear to affect the success of such pre-service courses. These insights contribute to the understanding of community-based pre-service teacher education curricula and pedagogies as an important and emerging area of interest.

Introduction

In this paper, we reflect on a collaborative approach to community based learning implemented in teacher education and discuss research conducted in conjunction with our teaching of a second year Bachelor of Education unit. The unit is in keeping with recent Australian government recommendations for strong links between theoretical and practical facets of teacher education (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2007) and sits within discourses related to pre-service teachers learning through community based programs (see for example, Abbott-Chapman, 2002; Butcher et al., 2003; Kalantzis & Harvey, 2002). Indeed, it is argued that strong links between tertiary institutions and their communities may well be the basis of survival for regional institutions such as ours in the current climate of political upheaval for the tertiary sector (Wallis, 2006). However, community based learning is far from settled and there is strong evidence that the advantages of such programs are not entirely clear (Butcher et al., 2003; Butin, 2005).

The unit we discuss is a compulsory component of a four year undergraduate course offered at the University of Ballarat, a small regional university in the historic goldfields region of the Australian State of Victoria. Typically the pre-service teacher cohort at this university comprises students from regional and rural areas and includes a balance of students continuing on with tertiary education as school leavers and mature age students. Many are the first in their families to attend university (Zeegers, 2005). In their second year, PSTs are required to plan a community-based teaching and learning program in conjunction with the university, the schools at which they are placed for their professional placements along with these schools' communities.

While it appears that this arrangement has many benefits (see Zeegers, 2005), the school placements for PSTs were undertaken by a placement officer independently of either of the researchers and were not made with consideration of the unit as a priority. As such, the partnerships developed

between parties in the project, as well as possibilities for projects, are often beyond the control of the researchers. Moreover, such programs tend to be taken for granted in policy statements, yet they exist within contestations surrounding the meaning of community and community based teaching and learning.

The tensions in negotiating the differing contexts of school and university partnerships are clearly documented (Davies et al., 2007; Perry, Komesaroff & Kavanagh, 2002). Thus, as teacher educators, we wished to explore the implications of utilising this kind of community based learning from the perspectives of PSTs, university teaching staff and the broader school communities. Our main aim in this phase of our research was to investigate the experiences of PSTs as they developed a community oriented teaching and learning program within their school experience placements, all with the purpose of on-going development of teaching and learning.

The unit sits alongside the strong emphasis in education policy in Australia on the value of community partnerships and community oriented teaching and learning. Recent Australian curriculum policy guidelines, for example, emphasise the importance for schools to foster community linkages (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2006; Department of Education, Victoria, 2005a; Queensland College of Teachers, 2006). In the Australian state of Victoria, this curriculum emphasis is supported through the pedagogical framework, the Principles of Teaching and Learning P–12 or PoLT (Department of Education, Victoria, 2005b). The sixth of these principles states that "Students learn best when: Learning connects strongly with communities and practice beyond the classroom [by interacting with] local and broader communities and community practices" (Department of Education, Victoria, 2005b).

Examples of the PST projects are highly varied. They have included transition to high school programs, community identity initiatives and Indigenous community art murals. One program involved PSTs working as a team with a small school on the rural-urban fringe to acknowledge the Indigenous heritage of their area. The PSTs negotiated with school personnel, including the students, and engaged the assistance of a local Indigenous artist to work with students to plan and paint mural boards. Another project involved local community study with children gathering data from fieldwork in their locality. This project culminated in the design and development of a quilt to be displayed in the school foyer. In this project, children were involved as problem-solvers with opportunities for depth of learning involving analysis and project evaluation.

As the latter project demonstrates, the unit encourages PSTs to see children as active and informed community agents (Christensen & Prout, 2005). For this reason, the unit sometimes challenges current practices and depends upon the effective communication of all parties involved. Other projects were quite superficial, and did not employ a substantive theoretical basis or coherent teaching and learning sequences, but were merely activities that had an element of community involvement. For example, some PSTs

arranged 'football days' with local football teams to teach children games skills, or had a 'pets day' with parents bringing in various animals. All PSTs had to present assessment items that explained how their project was a worthwhile exercise in community based teaching and learning.

Some theoretical underpinnings

Community based learning has many meanings. The term refers most broadly to any learning that extends class based learning beyond the school or which involves children and young people working on community projects. The term tends to be conflated with 'community service' and 'service learning'. All terms are the subject of debate (Butin, 2005; Faichney, 2005; Gilbert, 2004). It is generally agreed that the most desirable form of this kind of learning, no matter what it is called, is strongly associated with learning and thinking and not simply being engaged in some kind of community involvement or participation.

Yet, much of the literature (for example, Butcher et al, 2003; Butin, 2005; Hartley, Harkavy & Benson, 2005) concerning community based teaching and learning in teacher education centres on the notion of service-learning and its advantages and limitations as a transformative approach for teacher education. A wide-ranging Australian research study (Butcher et al., 2003) has indicated that the success of community-oriented, service learning approaches are intimately linked with pre-service teachers' pre-existing attitudes of self-efficacy as community agents and with the way such programs are integrated within their pre-service courses.

In addition, in our reading of the relevant literature, it appears that the varied meanings of community tend to be taken for granted. Valentine (2004, p. 8) argues that the "notion of 'community' has a long and contested history within geography and urban sociology". Likewise, in contemporary sociology there are debates about the "myth" of community decline (Elliott, 2006, p. 28). For the terms of our unit of study, we encouraged PSTs to engage with these debates and to see that communities "can be place or neighbourhood based but equally they can operate across a range of different spaces and scales" (Valentine, 2004, p. 9).

An impetus for community based teaching and learning would appear to come also from renewed calls for teacher educators to claim a voice in the education of future teachers through school/higher education partnerships. Pre-service teachers' learning occurs primarily in their teacher education institutions of higher education as well as in schools during their professional placements. According to Darling-Hammond (2006), these sites of learning tend to present PSTs with dissonant messages about what it is to teach. For this reason, Darling-Hammond (2006) sees value in highly integrated programs with strong linkages between teacher education institutions and schools. With the emphasis in schools in our jurisdiction on community based teaching and learning, it would seem that teacher education must also consider ways for PSTs to participate in both of the usual learning sectors in partnership with their wider communities—and to explore the impact of such programs. For the purposes of this unit the researchers used lectures and

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tutorials to present PSTs with differing notions of community and asked them to reflect on how such ideas are represented in their own school-based projects. PSTs were thus challenged to develop linkages between theoretical understandings and the reality of what they were trying to achieve in schools.

Research process and theoretical framework
This study is designed as a form of teacher research, a research mode respected for its transformative potential as widely recognised in teacher research literature (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Kosnik & Beck, 2000; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Zeichner, 1999). Primarily we present findings from one aspect of one iteration of an action research cycle. We draw upon our own notes and correspondence to identify discourses which characterise our experience of student/staff interactions.

Data sources for this study comprise participant observation and the researchers' pedagogic reflections as a form of reflective practice. We draw upon our own reflections conducted during the teaching and learning cycle, email correspondence conducted as collegial conversations for on-going planning and problem-solving, and correspondence with schools at which students were based for their professional placements. We also draw upon documents submitted for the purposes of assessment by students who agreed to be participants in the study in keeping with ethics protocols for teacher research—as well as published newspaper articles from a second phase of the learning cycle.

All PSTs, regardless of participation or not, undertook the same assessment activities, which consisted of three interconnected tasks—a preliminary written and verbal report to their peers in a small tutorial group, an in-depth exhibition of their teaching program to all of their peers in the unit, as well as a final reflection on the experience.

In our interpretation of the documentary data sources, we used a qualitative research methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) in which we were seeking the "the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.106), and utilised an interpretive methodology (Erickson, 1998) to investigate our reflections and to seek insights about the experiences of the PSTs in this undertaking. These data were coded and analysed for instances that might be considered either common to all PSTs or, on the other hand, exceptional.

Our thematic analysis was informed by our reading of van Manen's (1997, p. 79) description of the interpretive process as a "a free act of 'seeing' [involving] a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure." We combined the various approaches outlined by van Manen such as "a wholistic reading approach" (van Manen, 1997, p. 93) in seeking broad meanings from the documents followed by more "selective" and "detailed reading" approaches. Importantly, we were seeking themes which may help us to facilitate this complex program in a way which circumvented some of the difficulties (see, for example, Butcher et al., 2003; Dippo, 2005) presented by community based teaching and learning programs .

Implementing community based curriculum: Our teacher education experiences

Initial findings have indicated that the processes undertaken by the PSTs were broad ranging in complexity and intellectual foundation. The issues involved will be discussed in terms of three themes emerging from the varying perspectives of PSTs, and of teaching staff both in schools and the university. These themes indicate the evolving responses of PSTs to their participation in this unit as it progressed through the teaching period. As the following themes indicate, the PSTs experienced a level of frustration which posed tensions for all involved.

Theme 1: Please just tell us what to do

This theme emerged very soon after the commencement of the unit. PSTs appeared to have a great deal of difficulty coming to terms with the uncertainty that is characteristic of inquiry oriented teaching and learning. In the first lecture this issue had been discussed, yet PSTs continued to find it a matter of concern. Many PSTs simply wanted to be told what to do in schools, and could not feel comfortable with the notion of a lack of hierarchical direction. The unit outline provided for PSTs at the start of the course specifically mentioned the need for self-initiated/directed/designed learning on five occasions, and yet the reality of the tutorial experience for both the researchers was often the very opposite.

Indications from schools also pointed to a difficulty in conceptualising what community based teaching and learning involved, such that a clarification notice that outlined the requirements of the PST placement was eventually sent to all principals. This correspondence explained that the project aims were consistent with Victorian curriculum developments (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005). The letter also indicated the aims of the program were to foster "genuine participation of children and young people" and to "enhance students' links with their communities". Despite this communication, in a number of instances, it appeared that schools asked PSTs to undertake projects that were superficial in nature, and did not reflect the intent of the unit. As one of the PST participants noted, *We were handed this topic by the school and in most part instructed as to the outcomes wanted.*

Such outcomes might be considered unusual in light of the Australian education policy landscape that highlights the importance of community engagement in meaningful learning activities. The Victorian standards for professional practice (Victorian Institute of Teachers, 2005), for example, discusses such issues under the heading of Professional Engagement, while in Queensland one of the ten professional standards for teaching (Queensland College of Teachers, 2006) is devoted to supporting students' personal development and participation in society. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the projects that PSTs undertook in schools were treated sometimes not as an opportunity to develop professional skills in this direction but, rather, as an opportunity to employ PSTs on an already existing program

that often had only marginal application to learning and the development of meaningful community links.

What may have been occurring here was a problem identified by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training in their report, 'Top of the Class' (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2007). In that report the authors noted issues with "the weak link between practicum and the theoretical components of the course" (p. 71) and that, "the expectations of the universities are often poorly articulated to schools" (p.71). This report comments on and suggests that this aspect of communication between schools and the university is an ongoing issue; it appears that we must address a similar issue if the aims of the unit are to be more fully realised. What is clear is that PSTs, in collaboration with schools and the university, need to develop their skills towards being professional decision makers in their classrooms, rather than seeking to be 'told what to do'. There is an imperative here to nurture the development of professionalism though appropriate programs within schools that are supported by the university.

Theme 2: I'm starting to get angry about this
This theme started to emerge about halfway through the unit, and is very closely tied to the first theme. When the teachers of the unit resisted requests to supply specific directions for how the project should proceed, a number of PSTs became quite angry, and felt as if they were being 'short-changed' by not being provided with all the answers to their problems.

This disharmony presented us with a dilemma. We found difficulties in balancing the dual roles of offering support yet challenge. As Halliday (1998, cited in Johnston, 2003, pp. 33–34) suggests, teacher educators must confront these tensions if they are to avoid resorting to offering technical forms of support expected by the learner but which work against learning to manage the complexities of teaching.

Despite our best efforts, not all of the issues these PSTs had were resolved, and tension remained quite apparent in some tutorials throughout the semester. As indicated in the following comments, some PSTs continued to experience tensions in negotiating a way forward in the circumstances in which they found themselves:

> *There was little opportunity to negotiate the process, outcomes or content with the students;*

> *Not all the criteria as set by the university are perceived as ideal in the real world by the schools at which we are placed.*

However, after completion of the unit, two of the most vocal and strident PST critics later approached the authors to say that, after they actually completed the unit, including the school-based aspect, they felt that it was a rewarding (if frustrating) unit. Interestingly, these PSTs managed to produce work of high

quality; yet, they expressed surprise that school students should respond so positively to an approach in which they were invited to be authentic participants in their learning. One PST assignment included favourable feedback from children's parents, which suggested that the differing perspectives PSTs brought to the classroom were appreciated. Similar feelings of success are exemplified in the following statement from a newspaper report of one of these community based projects;

> *It was tiring and busy, but it was a success. All the students had a fantastic day and were really excited about it all. The school was also really supportive in helping us to organise it.* (a PST's statement cited in Kelly, 2006, p.3).

Likewise, another PST said, *The expo turned out to be the climax I intended*.

Theme 3: This is actually very exciting
While some PSTs were clearly not happy with a pedagogical approach that did not stipulate a process they were to undertake to achieve the goals of the unit, a number of PSTs also thrived. The freedom that the unit gave them allowed for expressions of self that they found to be very rewarding, and, as discussed earlier, a number of innovative and highly creative projects resulted. PSTs commented on the evolution of their projects and documented their willingness to adapt their projects as appropriate. One PST commented that;

> *As my time at the school increased, the project became more about the people in the community and a celebration of their feelings about living there.*

In these projects, there appeared to be a willingness for the PSTs concerned to work pro-actively by discussing their ideas with the class teacher and by being willing to work collaboratively with all concerned*: As we got more and more into exploring our possibilities, the project expanded to include a fully blown unit*. This approach entailed compromise and negotiation as the following PST participant statement indicates:

> *Throughout the unit, the children did not have a lot of choice; rather, they participated in lessons which we had planned for them, although we tried to keep these a bit open so they relied on the children's own imagination and interpretation. The children were, however, given choices about how they could share their favourite places and the work they had done with their parents and peers.*

PSTs who took this kind of mind-set to the task also tended to be the greatest contributors in tutorials, and used the tutorial sessions to seek solutions to problems in a collegial manner. They also tended to be the PSTs who sought out the opinions of the students in their classes as to the nature of the work they would be undertaking. It would seem that as Butcher et al. (2003) have

noted, self-efficacy is integral to success as are the development of meaningful learning partnerships with the children in the class. It should be noted that this particular PST not only valued student input but also entrusted the children with important responsibilities, and in doing so displayed responsive leadership, as shown in the following quote;

> *It took a bit of direction as children originally thought we could all go to each other's places, but eventually they settled on the purchase of two disposable cameras by the school which were sent home each night with two children and returned the next day.*

While strong partnerships between schools and universities appear to be integral to successful outcomes in programs such as this one, so is a strong sense of agency on the part of PSTs involved. This finding suggests the need for a multi-dimensional approach in implementing community based teaching and learning programs such as this one.

Conclusions
Community based teaching and learning programs in teacher education are implemented in good faith that they will facilitate an enriched and authentic learning environment for students. While such programs may have the potential to meet these aims, they are also beset with complexities that are not always taken into account either in resourcing for these kinds of programs or in developing the desirable framework within which these kinds of outcomes are likely to occur. Thus, thinking as outlined by Gilbert (2004), for example, needs foregrounding in assessment criteria by being quite explicit about these requirements for children's learning. Specific findings and recommendations from this research also include the need to build a shared understanding of the intentions of community based teaching and learning programs with all stakeholders as well as a pedagogy in which time is devoted to supporting the interpersonal attributes and micropolitical and societal awareness required to operate effectively in such a complex educational landscape.

It is important that PSTs have the opportunity to find their own way through such complexity, albeit with timely guidance, and that teacher educators and school personnel do not resort to telling PSTs what to do. In the main, the PSTs came to appreciate the opportunities presented to them:

> *Overall, I was happy with the project and how it unfolded. It was different to my original plans in some ways, but I felt comfortable with this because the changes were shaped by the community itself and the practical logistics of the classroom, such as the short time-frame.*

This requirement to avoid student pressures for project blueprints further implies that the partners in teacher education build trust and the willingness to maintain effective communication channels. It is evident also that PSTs can

develop meaningful, innovative and highly creative community based projects. The success of such projects seems dependent on multi-dimensional approaches that are inclusive of students in schools as authentic stakeholders in any community based learning. With the highly varied nature of school contexts, students experience the need to finely balance pragmatism and empathy along with a vision for the possibilities in community based teaching and learning. This expectation implies that PSTs respond positively to the contexts within which they find themselves and are willing to negotiate in highly productive ways.

There are unavoidable tensions in utilising the approaches outlined in this research. Teacher educators must be willing to field any frustration and sometimes anger from PSTs, some of whom bring a technical and individualistic orientation towards teaching. It means being willing to be challenged by students, to welcome debate and a certain degree of dissonance, including those kinds of tensions which can emerge in student evaluations of unit curriculum and of teaching and learning. In our experience, PSTs tended to provide positive feedback after the projects had been implemented which was *after* the students had completed the formal evaluations of the unit. Thus, teacher educators must be prepared to justify these outcomes with their supervisors in the workplace. Community based teaching therefore presents teacher educators with very tangible tensions which extend beyond the classroom. In addition, it would seem to call for flexibility in both content and pedagogies that are responses to the particular needs of the PST cohort. For example, it became apparent that explicit teaching in conflict resolution strategies and what is involved in a problem-solving mind-set were needed. Accordingly, we included role-play to highlight ways of responding to hypothetical situations and model ways of responding/being involved in negotiations. In this way, we facilitated reflection and thinking for all PSTs. These approaches were not involved in our initial planning but evolved to foster 'risk-taking' and offer support for the PSTs in their project development. In this way, we attempted to address some of the tensions inherent in teacher education (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997).

This research has sought to gain a deeper understanding of the requirements for more effective integration of community oriented approaches to teacher education. The research points towards further areas of research, particularly in connection with the micropolitics of teacher education and in the pedagogies employed in the development of teacher competencies, as well as research into the varying perspectives of participants in complex 'between sector' education.

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Programs such as the one we discuss in this paper will be driven by forces outside of teacher education as well as within it. for example, the Department of Education through its Blueprint for Government Schools (Department of Education, Victoria, 2005a) fosters community involvement through community participation, community outreach and funded partnerships with community organisations (such as Strategic Partnership Programs or SPPs).