

OK, please just tell us what to do: The challenge of freedom in teacher education

Introduction

Community partnerships and community oriented teaching and learning are currently strong themes in schooling and teacher education, and it could be argued that this approach to curriculum through partnerships, community based teaching and learning and service-learning is now 'centre stage'. In July this year, for example, the International Center for Service Learning in Teacher Education (ICSLTE) is presenting an inaugural conference, the *First International Conference on Service-Learning in Teacher Education* (see <http://www.clemson.edu/ICSLTE/conference/index.html>). Recent Australian curriculum policy guidelines, likewise, emphasise the importance for schools to foster community linkages (Department of Education, Victoria, 2005a; Department of Education, Tasmania, 2006; Queensland College of Teachers, 2006).

In the Australian state of Victoria, for example, the Department of Education through its Blueprint for Government Schools (Department of Education, 2005a) fosters community involvement through community participation, community outreach and funded partnerships with community organisations (such as Strategic Partnership Programs or SPPs). 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, 2005b).

In teacher education, too, there is a strong discourse of pre-service teachers learning through community based teaching and learning (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). Thus, there are likely to be varying imperatives for institutional/community links. Programs such as the one we discuss in this paper will be driven by forces outside of teacher education as well as within it. In order to overcome any constraints and to maximise the benefits of such programs, there would appear to be an urgent need for community based teaching and learning programs to be examined, particularly as the advantages of such programs are not entirely clear (Butcher et al., 2003; Butin, 2005; Johnston, 2003).

In this paper, we outline research connected with a component of a four year Bachelor of Education program in which pre-service teachers (PSTs) are required to develop community based teaching and learning projects within a foundation studies unit in the second year of their course. The research sought to gain a deeper understanding of the requirements for more effective integration of community oriented approaches within teacher education. The

unit, Creating Learning Environments, which comprised the contextual framework for the research, attempted to address some of the limitations of community based teaching and learning programs through the integration of school and tertiary based teacher education and was designed to meet the hopes and expectations of such programs in schools and the university as well as for our PSTs.

In the respective unit, PSTs develop teaching and learning projects for formal tertiary assessment requirements. However, the project development is a form of authentic learning which is negotiated with the schools at which PSTs are placed for their two week practicum at the conclusion of the respective teaching semester and at the end of their second year of the course. The designated task for this unit is quite complex. It requires PSTs 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. In addition, our unit is based on notions of children and young people as active and informed community agents (Chawla, 2002; Christensen & Prout, 2005; Driskell, 2002; Hart, 1997; Wyness, 2006). According to this view, children are participating members of their school and its various communities. Thus, we have encouraged PSTs to recognise and include children and young people as active decision makers in any community based teaching and learning projects in which they may be involved. For these reasons, the projects involve a level of uncertainty and depend upon strong communication from all parties involved. In this paper, 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. In identifying such discourses, we seek themes from the research in order to inform further program development.

In this paper, we also refer to a second phase of the teaching and learning cycle which produced several public documents which demonstrate changes to the way students are talking about these projects. Accordingly, we draw upon newspaper articles which reported the student/school collaborative projects developed by PSTs whom we teach in this unit. Through an examination of these media reports we are able to highlight the way that the projects are developing recognition in the eyes of schools and the community and reflect the outcomes of our altered approach to this unit in the current teaching cycle.

Background to the research

The overarching objective of this research was to investigate the experiences of PSTs as they developed a community oriented teaching and learning program within their school experience placements. From the literature (for example, Butcher et al., 2003; Johnston, 2003), it was evident that more research into such pre-service programs was required, and that the nature of the course that the PSTs were undertaking was suited to the investigation of community based learning. Moreover, the research itself allowed for an insight into the pedagogies and assumptions employed by the researchers, who were also the teaching staff for the entire cohort of PSTs. This research, therefore,

broadly examines the implications of utilising community based learning from the perspectives of PSTs, university teaching staff and the broader school communities.

This research also allows for the indirect investigation of the experiences of the school students and staff at the schools in which PSTs were placed, through mention of the perspectives of schools and PSTs as reflected in our teaching logs and email correspondence. This research is exploratory and forms the basis of a longer term investigation into these and other issues that surround community based learning specifically, and teacher education more generally.

Some theoretical underpinnings

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. Findings from this research (Butcher et al., 2003) have highlighted the need for further research in this area.

Indeed, the need for further research into this form of teaching and learning appears to be supported by findings from teacher education research conducted at the University of Tasmania (Johnston, 2003 & 2006). Findings from this study indicated that when PSTs do choose to teach about the community and in conjunction with community organisations, they tend to draw upon a limiting and biased dominant discourse perpetuated in Australian curriculum blueprints for the teaching of society and environment. Findings from this Ph.D. study indicate that the dominant curriculum discourse promotes a limiting notion of community and perpetuates a hegemonic curriculum bias along with socialisation through a cultural transmission approach to curriculum.

According to Dippo (2005, p. 91) some versions of community based teaching and learning are highly conservative and characterised by a sense of "*noblesse oblige*". To avoid these limitations, Dippo (2005, pp. 92–93) suggests that programs should be based on particular defining characteristics: "reciprocity", "a well-understood conceptual/curricular framework" as an underpinning framework for any collaborations, and time for these associations to evolve in productive ways.

In our reading of the literature concerning community based teaching and learning or service-learning it appears that the contested and varied meanings of community tend to be taken for granted. As Valentine (2004, p. 8) argues, 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.

Research process and theoretical framework

The researchers for this study are the coordinators of a one semester second year unit, which is a compulsory component in a Bachelor of Education pre-service course. The coordinators of the unit, which is one with a strong emphasis on extending learning beyond the school and classroom, also comprise the teaching team for the unit. In this respect, the 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). In keeping with the methodology for studies conducted as teacher research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000), this study is a naturalistic enquiry situated within the teaching context in teacher education.

Data sources for this study comprise participant observation and the researchers’ pedagogic reflections as a form of reflective practice. Accordingly, in this paper, 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. Public documents such as newspaper reports which arose from PSTs projects were also examined for the public discourse they generated. The various sources for data were framed by the wide-ranging educational contexts encompassed within the unit—schools, community organisations and the tertiary, teacher education setting.

The data collection was designed to allow insights into the participants' experiences in relation to their development of a community based learning program. Furthermore, the issues associated with the implementation of the teaching and learning programs were to be explored in-depth. These included classroom strategies used by the PSTs involved, the developmental processes they used, the influence of the educational context in which the PSTs worked, and the manner in which they managed competing interests in an educational environment. All data were gathered when participants were PSTs in this unit. Thus, the data sources are contextualised within the naturalistic teaching enquiry situation and the PST participants were, to a certain degree, research collaborators or co-researchers.

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. The researchers also developed teaching logs that were used to reflect on their own mentoring of PSTs throughout the semester.

In our interpretation of the documentary data sources, we used a qualitative research methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) to identify the outcomes of the teaching and learning in this unit as indicated in the reflections of the co-coordinators who were also the teachers of this unit. The reflections and correspondence incorporate our interpretation of the experiences of the PSTs in their project development. In seeking the “the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.106), we 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.

Through our analysis of our reflective notes and correspondence as teacher/researchers, we were seeking evidence in the discourse and actions of all participants of their experiences relating to the educational and organisational issues associated with the development and implementation of learning environments in their placement school. Notably, our analysis of student assessments and public documents is based on earlier analysis from naturalistic enquiry such as participant observation and reflection on the natural teaching context. Our thematic analysis was informed by our reading of van Manen's description of the interpretive process as a “a free act of 'seeing' [involving] a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure” (1997, p. 79). 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; Johnston, 2003) presented by community based teaching and learning programs and which fostered productive outcomes from the collaboration of

various stakeholders. The findings will be presented as illustrative examples of individual circumstances that reflect key issues that PSTs and beginning teachers may face in the classroom while undertaking similar activities.

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 reality of 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 mentions 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 (VCAA, 2005). The letter also indicated the aims of the program, for example, 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 the 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 students 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 the development of meaningful community links.

As previously noted, the coordinators of the unit were also prompted to write to all principals with a letter of clarification following enquiries regarding the nature of the unit. 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 aspect of communication between schools and the university is an ongoing issue that must be addressed 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 through 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 refused 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. However, it should also be noted that two of the most vocal and strident critics of the unit 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. The students expressed surprise that school students should respond so positively to an approach in which they were invited to be authentic participants in their learning. These feelings 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).

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 a number of innovative and highly creative projects resulted. 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. 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. 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 (documentary evidence from PST participant).

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. 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. Specific findings and recommendations from this research 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. This requirement further implies that the partners in teacher education build trust and the willingness to maintain effective communication channels.

It is evident 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.

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 explicit teaching in conflict resolution strategies and what is involved in a problem-solving mind-set. Accordingly, we included role-play to highlight ways of responding to hypothetical situations and model ways of responding/being involved in negotiations.

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 in 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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