

Community engagement as authentic learning with reflection

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Authentic learning in teacher education is deeply connected with students' future professional practice. This paper describes coaching and mentoring strands of a unit in the preparation of pre-service teachers and critically evaluates reflections made in terms of Professional Teacher Standards.

Community engagement, otherwise known as service learning, has the aim of enriching learning and strengthening communities. The core concept is the combination of service objectives and learning objectives, with the intention that the activity changes both recipient and provider of the service. (Furco & Billig, 2002; National Commission on Service Learning, 2002). This paper considers service learning as exemplary of 'authentic' pedagogies (Newmann et al, 1996). Looking through the lens of the Professional Teaching Standards (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005), this paper describes coaching and mentoring strands as 'authentic'. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the importance of reflection, as research shows that teachers and pre-service teachers who engage in guided reflection have the potential to improve the sustainability of changed systems within schools (Bulajeva, 2003).

Authentic pedagogy

Until recently, little consensus existed about how to define and measure quality pedagogy because of the difficulty in isolating the effects of a specific teaching technique. More recently, researchers have identified general characteristics of pedagogy that have meaning in real classrooms, can be sustained organisationally by schools and have demonstrated effects on learning outcomes for all students. Authentic student achievement occurs in an environment of constructivist learning with high standards of intellectual quality (Newmann, Marks and Gamoran, 1996). Moreover, authentic pedagogy produced achievement effects in students across a range of different social backgrounds (Newmann et al., 1996). This research had a considerable impact on two strands of Australian educational research: Productive Pedagogies (Hayes, Lingard and Mills, 2000) in Queensland and the Quality Teaching model (NSW Department of Education and Training 2003) in New South Wales (NSW).

In a related issue, researchers Wiggins (1993) and Mueller (2006) find a common thread when discussing authentic assessment. They each believe that for assessment to be 'authentic' there should be a 'real world' element involved and that it should use tasks that allow students to apply essential knowledge and skills. Guilkers, Bastiaens and Kirschner (2004) go further and suggest that authentic assessment resembles students' future professional practice. Service learning has the aim of enriching learning and strengthening communities. In this way, as it extends beyond classroom and school confines, service learning exemplifies authentic pedagogy. The core concept is the combination of service objectives and learning objectives, with the intention that the

activity changes both recipient and provider of the service. (Furco & Billig, 2002; National Commission on Service Learning, 2002).

Reflection

University students engaged in service learning have been found to demonstrate greater complexities of understanding than a non-service learning comparison group; and when this was combined with reflection they were able to effectively analyse more complex problems (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Service learning has positive effects on university students' sense of social responsibility, enabling them to work with adolescents who have disengaged from formal schooling (Kahne, Westheimer & Rogers, 2000). Additionally, project-based learning, recognised by adolescents as related to life beyond school, can engage students who are disaffected in the school environment (Munns, Arthur, Downes, Gregson, Power, Sawyer, Singh, Thistleton-Martin & Steele, 2006). When students were encouraged to recognise achievements through self-monitoring reflective processes they were more likely to adopt those processes in general (Silverman & Cassaza, 2000).

Furthermore, it has been found that teachers who engage in reflection have the potential to improve the sustainability of changed structures and systems within schools (Bulajeva, 2003). Consequently, reflection is emphasised in the development of pre-service teachers. Research suggests, however, that repeated exposure to reflection, without some assistance with reflection prompts, does not guarantee that beginner teachers will go on to develop critical or higher levels of reflective thinking (Bean & Stevens, 2002). Feedback is a critical aspect of professional growth (Darling-Hammond, 2006) and effective pre-service education is linked to slower attrition rates of beginner teachers (Henke, Chen, Geis & Knepper 2000).

Professional teacher standards

The university's community engagement responsibility coupled with its teacher educator role drove the construction of a framework for reflection adopting Professional Teacher Standards as this offered opportunities for a mutual language of reflection. Since its establishment in 2005, the New South Wales Institute of Teachers has joined the international movement for a renewed focus on professional learning for teachers (NSWIT, 2006). The criteria for pre-service teacher reflection focus, the first, fourth and sixth standards as shown in Table 1 below, are:

- Demonstrating knowledge of learning (Standard 1)
- Communicating effectively (Standard 4)
- Continually improving professional knowledge and practice (Standard 6)

Table 1: Reflection criteria based on standards

1.1.2	Demonstrate research-based knowledge of the pedagogies of the content taught
1.1.3	Design and implement learning sequences using knowledge of NSW Syllabus Documents
4.1.1	Communicate clear directions to students about learning goals
4.1.3	Listen to students and engage them in classroom discussion
6.1.1	Demonstrate a capacity to reflect critically on and improve teaching practice
6.1.2	Demonstrate knowledge of the professional standards framework and its impact on the professional life of a teacher

Theoretical framework and research design

A series of questions, related to these Standards was used as prompts by pre-service teachers for reflection on Standards 1, 4 and 6 in relation to community service learning.

- What surprised you about your learning in your community setting?
- What research about communities did you engage with before you commenced?
- Why were you surprised about your learning?
- What goals did you set for yourself in your service learning activities?
- In what ways were you communicating with your community participants?
- What do you believe the participants in your service learning project learned?
- What did you learn? How will the experience shape you as a teacher in a classroom?
- How would you help someone else learn what you discovered?
- In addition, those two standards were used to categorise the recorded reflections. The questions prompted the pre-service teachers to analyse their goal setting for their learning and their own reactions to their service learning (community engagement) experiences. In this way their reflection on the ways in which they could inform future teaching in the classroom had a foundation in service learning.

Coaching and mentoring strands of *Professional Experience 3*

The students' voices in the coaching and mentoring strands of PE3 are especially revealing as they reflect on their completed experience in relation to Elements established in the Institute's Standards. In terms of Standard 1, the aspect that is uppermost in PE3 is a focus on learning. In one-to-one and small group situations involving students with gaps in their education and challenging home lives, the pre-service teachers apply their practical and theoretical knowledge to meet students' specific needs. Research confirms that project based learning that engages students in authentic experiences can 'turn around' students who are disaffected and disengaged in the school environment (Stewart, Sun, Patterson, Lemerle, & Hardie, 2004; Vickers, Harris & McCarthy, 2004). Jye said:

I found that the learning was much more focused on the individual student's needs which gave them a sense of productivity and achievement, promoting self efficacy. For the students, we could zone in on specific troublesome areas as requested by the student. We were able to cover topics overlooked or underpromoted in the classroom,

such as the importance of time management and revision strategies. For me, it has influenced the way I will manage senior students in their preparation for final exams.

Powerfully, the UWS pre-service teachers reflect on the opportunity to know and respect the backgrounds of the students with whom they work in this unit – their social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Deanne said:

I got to know the girls I was tutoring, found out what they liked about Chemistry, what they liked to do outside school and what they aimed to do after school. I also learned they were being bullied in the Chemistry class and hated going to Chemistry, even though they enjoyed the subject itself. I drew the attention of the Head Science teacher to the situation and collaboratively found a solution to the difficulty. I also was able to catch the girls up on work they hadn't completed. The girls went from failing Chemistry to passing their Preliminary exams with flying colours. I felt this was the most rewarding moment in my life. I felt that taking time to understand the students I was working with made them more comfortable and open to learning.

Within the *Professional Experience 3* unit, several programs require the pre-service teacher to plan with a budget. Consequently, they learn not only the identification of learning goals but also the design of achievable projects and the selection of resources to support students' learning. For the pre-service teachers, the assessment tends to be visible in a completed project that in turn informs their further planning. Michelle said:

Seeing a vision, a community project, go from plan to product was very enlightening. The students and I realised that you can make a difference. The resources by which the program is framed shaped the way the students and I thought about the routines of life, the definition of leadership and what it means to be successful. More importantly they emphasise that success is not just the end result but the steps you take to get there.

In learning, communication and explanation (aspects of Standard 4) are very important, as is the formulation and ownership of goals. The role of the teacher is one of facilitator, probing, understanding, re-interpreting, synthesising, incorporating suggestions. Matthew said:

Most of the students I mentored were returning from suspension and it was my role to help integrate them back into the classroom. These students would attend a few lessons per day for the first few days after their suspension. It was my responsibility to sit with the students in the classroom and assist them with their work, in the role of teacher's aide. I felt this benefited me as I gained first hand experience of what these students were thinking and feeling upon their return to the classroom. Based on this experience, I found that the majority of time these students were off task because they did not fully understand the activity they were supposed to be doing. To combat this issue I would examine my communication techniques to ensure student understanding of content. By creating a strong relationship with the students based on trust, I could tell that the mentoring experience was making a difference. Most of the students realised that they had behaviour problems at school and that they needed to change them. More importantly they wanted to change them. I was there to support the students and give them a little structure and guidance in achieving their goals of correcting their behaviour. The entire experience equipped me with a better understanding of students with behaviour issues and will greatly contribute to my development as a teacher.

The core of the reflections that are completed in *Professional Experience 3* are to do with improving teaching practice (aspects of Standard 6) through the creation of a safe environment in which adolescents can experience respect and rapport. The disaffected students have often missed this. For the UWS students, the first priority is this element – the creation of an environment in which students can collaborate and enjoy feelings of successful learning. Ashley said:

The group of students I mentored from Year 8 and Year 9 were challenging behaviourally but I worked to develop their trust in me, helping them research in the library, playing sport with them and learning to cook together. In one class, one of my mentees was not having a good day and started to act up with the woodwork teacher. I got the teacher's consent to take the student outside for a 'cooling down' talk. He was disappointed in not being able to go on a field trip and, while I sympathised, I told him that needed to be handled outside of the class. Getting him to talk and listening to him made him feel better and he went back to class and behaved. What I have learned from this experience is going to stay with me throughout my teaching career. I have a new-found perspective on how to approach students and understand their needs for a more meaningful learning environment.

It is the conscious decision of UWS educators to prepare pre-service teachers not only for school-based teaching but also for experience with students who are at risk of disengaging with learning. The embedding of the Standards Framework has implications for service learning internationally. The underpinning philosophy is that varied pre-service experiences allow students to work with field-based colleagues in the achievement of quality teaching goals. These innovations have been initiated so that UWS avoids the path by which '50,000 individuals enter teaching each year without adequate preparation, most of them assigned to teach the nation's most vulnerable in the highest needs schools....because states have lowered standards to fill vacancies rather than increased incentives for quality teachers' (Darling Hammond, 2006, p. 21).

Utilising the Standards in the pre-service program at UWS optimally assesses the skills, knowledge, understandings and values that enable students (both university and school) to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a lifelong learner and an authentic pedagogue. It has assisted in 'providing the language' within the academic team but more importantly it has given the pre-service teachers a common language to map progress and chart development in a professional way.

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