

WILL LETTS

11. WORKING WITH PRACTICE COMMUNITIES TO CONDUCT TEACHER EDUCATION

An International Endeavour

What I like most about the program is that you are in the classroom teaching two days a week for the whole school year and you also have teaching blocks. This format gives you the opportunity to build a relationship with not only the students, but also with your associate teacher. (Rob, 2010 BPES graduate)

Consistently on surveys and program evaluations our teacher candidates and graduates report that the most important part of our Bachelor of Primary Education Studies (BPES) program is the integration of in-school professional experience, or practicum, with the university coursework. This 9-month consecutive teacher education program, which builds upon a previously earned bachelor degree, prepares teacher candidates to teach from junior kindergarten to grade 6. Like Rob, many of our teacher candidates comment about the benefits of engaging in their teaching practicum in such close proximity to their time in the university classroom, and about the way this structure encourages a dialogue between these different aspects of their preparation to be teachers. In a similar way, Clift and Brady (2005) contended that the practicum was the most memorable part of their preservice program and described how it was critical to assisting preservice teachers to form their professional identities.

This chapter takes the BPES program as a case study in order to examine how we structure our program and our work to create and sustain powerful partnerships with the practice community of school education, to provide an authentic and meaningful teacher education program. Darling-Hammond (2006b) identified that an enduring criticism of teacher education concerns the perceived theory/practice gap between what happens in the university classroom and what happens in the school classroom (see also Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Langerwarf, & Wubbels, 2001; Loughran, 2010). We have structured and organised our program in ways to explicitly redress this criticism, and to ensure that a reciprocal conversation takes place between theory and practice throughout our teacher education program. In this way, we honour the dialogical nature of practice and learning (in) practice (see Lee & Dunston, 2011). It is also worth noting that we don't take the notion of a theory/practice gap at face value, recognising that it is worthy of critique and can serve as a shorthand oversimplification of a more complex interaction. We do not conceptualise theory and practice as dichotomised and mutually exclusive

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(Loughran, 2010). In what follows I describe aspects of the structure of the program, the learning communities approach to practice-based education (PBE), how internal and external standards shape and support our practice, and how being an Australian university (Charles Sturt University, CSU) with a campus in Canada assists us to internationalise our work.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Because “contemporary research suggests that learning about teaching develops through participation in a community of learners where content is encountered in contexts in which it can be applied” (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005, p. 405) we have organised this degree to maximise teacher candidates’ engagement with formal and informal learning contexts where their learning about teaching can be cultivated and applied. We are also cognisant of Darling-Hammond’s call that “teacher education must venture further and further from the university and engage ever more closely with schools in a mutual transformation agenda” (2006a, p. 302). We recognise that increased time in schools, not only by our teacher candidates but also by our teaching and supervisory staff, allows us to work more closely with them, and it enables us to contribute to their professional learning and change agendas, not just to have our need for practicum places filled.

The program is structured so that teacher candidates spend 2-3 days per week on campus in university classes, and the remaining 2 days per week in a school classroom on practicum placement. Each term also concludes with a traditional teaching block, where the teacher candidates spend all of their time on a 3-week (term 1) or 4-week (term 2) teaching block. These intensive periods of planning and teaching are positioned to allow teacher candidates to consolidate all that they have been learning in the degree and to enact it in their professional practice, and afford opportunities “to organize prospective teachers’ experiences so that they can integrate and use their knowledge in skilful ways in the classroom” (Darling-Hammond, 2006a, p. 305).

Seeking to redress the perceived theory/practice gap referred to above, Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) wrote that “many teacher educators argue that student teachers *see and understand* both theory and practice differently if they are taking coursework concurrently with fieldwork” (p. 401). Our program embraces the notion of coursework and practicum teaching happening contemporaneously, and capitalises both on the teacher candidates’ recent time in the school classroom to draw out the ways, for example, they see theory in action, and on their recent time in the university classroom to offer new ways to think about and enact curriculum and pedagogies (e.g. Russell, 2007). In this we also acknowledge that initial teacher education “is a critical site of education for teaching practice, involving education about teaching as well as in and through ‘practice teaching’ itself” (Reid, 2010, p. 288). This is an important distinction, for as Reid noted, “educating for teaching practice means educating for teacher learning, and the continual change that characterises professional growth” (2010, p. 285).

WORKING WITH PRACTICE COMMUNITIES

Because our program embraces a learning communities approach to teacher education, a variety of nested learning communities can develop to support and enhance teacher candidates' learning. All the teacher candidates and the staff form the broadest learning community, and nested within that are learning communities on campus comprised of the smaller groups in which candidates take their classes, and the school-based learning community of other teacher candidates and their respective associate teachers, the site coordinator, and the faculty supervisor. This is taken up in more detail in the next section.

A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES APPROACH TO TEACHER EDUCATION

Our program, like the “powerful” teacher education programs explored in Darling-Hammond’s (2006b) book, “involve[s] teachers in clinical work throughout the entire program” (p. 153) and is structured such that “clinical experiences are also tightly tied to simultaneous coursework and seminars that pose tasks and problems to be explored in the clinical setting and that support analysis and further learning about practice” (p. 154). Seeing our work as engagement with colleagues in a professional learning community also affects the ways we work with and consult with the profession.

Our professional experience (practicum) program is structured with a variety of roles to support the teacher candidates' learning, to create the conditions for a vibrant learning community to develop while on placement, and to enact the importance of building and sustaining relationships (e.g. Olmstead, 2007). We strive to place groups of 4-6 teacher candidates in the same school in order to have a critical mass that serves as the seed for a learning community. A teacher candidate, or sometimes two in the case of a paired practicum, is placed in a classroom with an associate teacher with whom they will work most closely for the duration of the term-long professional experience. Each school also nominates a site coordinator from its staff, who serves as the primary liaison between the school and the university, and who comes to meetings on campus six times per year to discuss aspects of our teacher education program and engage in professional learning sessions. Each teacher candidate also has a faculty supervisor from the university who visits at least three times per term to offer feedback, advice and support to the teacher candidate. All our full-time faculty members supervise teacher candidates on practicum, thereby keeping faculty connected to life in school classrooms and affording the opportunity for first-hand conversations with classroom teachers and principals. This is seen as a core part of our work as teacher educators. Five times each term the faculty supervisors meet with their whole group of teacher candidates as part of a practicum seminar, to consolidate learning from the seminar and contextualise it in relation to their experiences within their practicum classroom and school.

Beyond the practicum, there are other ways that we engage with the practice community of school education to sustain the dialogue between our program and the profession. We have a Teacher Education Advisory Committee whose

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membership consists of university faculty, teacher candidates, Directors of School Boards and principals, who advise on issues related to program currency and quality. Our professional connections with the Boards where we place teacher candidates extend beyond just the practicum. We stay connected by offering and attending professional learning seminars, by participation in research projects initiated by one party or the other, and by having our program faculty serve on committees and advisory groups for the Boards, such as the New Teacher Induction Program, the Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee, and the Early Years Advisory Committee.

Framing the school-based practicum as a reciprocal act of learning – “both ways learning” as opposed to the more traditionally conceptualised unidirectional learning from school or associate teacher to the student teacher/teacher candidate – is significant. This strategy foregrounds that learning happens in dialogue and acknowledges that we hope associate teachers and the schools they work in also benefit from the practicum placement. We view the associate teachers and site coordinators as school-based teacher educators and valuable partners in the important work of teacher education that happens in both school and university classrooms (and beyond them). The structure of our program and the roles of people within it honour the notion of Cochran-Smith and Lytle that “learning from teaching ought to be regarded as the primary task of teacher education across the professional lifespan. By ‘learning from teaching’ we mean that inquiry ought to be regarded as an integral part of the activity of teaching and classrooms and schools ought to be treated as research sites’ (1993, pp. 63-64). Conceptualising teacher education as an inquiry-driven process of “learning from teaching” means that our teacher candidates need to be thinking at once about what they are being taught (and are learning) and how they are being taught, and why they are being taught that way.

Our work-integrated learning model, which occurs concurrently with university study, allows both sites – the university classroom and the school classroom – to become sites for the enactment and attainment of the standards (discussed in more detail below) that frame our course. Thus, our teacher candidates are learning about practice *in* practice, so that we are “entwining carefully designed clinical experiences early and throughout the program” (see Darling-Hammond et al., 2005, p. 401).

GOVERNED BY INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STANDARDS

To support our work with the practice community of school education, and to contribute to our program framework, we use both internal and external standards as reference points and touchstones to shape our work. The internal standards we reference are CSU’s *Standards for professional and practice-based education* (Education For Practice Institute, 2011). These standards not only serve to provide a common framework of reference for PBE across all of CSU, they also provide a means of reflection for our program team on their performance and contribution to the quality of this practice-based program. Although these standards are presented

across four key areas – course learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, course infrastructure, and university infrastructure – for the purposes of our discussion about working with practice communities, we focus here on *course learning outcomes* and *learning and teaching activities*.

In relation to course learning outcomes, two dimensions of these standards particularly inform our work with the teaching profession. The first is *professional judgement*, where the standards discuss critical and creative decision-making in practice-based contexts, ensuring that work-related decisions are aligned with professional values and expectations, and demonstrating accountability for the decisions made and actions taken. The second dimension is *professional competence and work readiness*. This encompasses standards related to demonstrating capabilities of a beginning practitioner/professional, integrating discipline, practical and social knowledge into professional practice, and demonstrating an understanding of the legal and ethical requirements and boundaries of the profession.

The learning and teaching activities dimensions against which we benchmark are *PBE teaching and learning activities* and the *inclusion of work-integrated learning/workplace learning activities*. The PBE teaching and learning activities dimension encompasses standards related to having learning/teaching activities explicitly demonstrate their relevance to practice, utilising a range of teaching strategies other than teacher-led activities, and learning activities that include consideration of and opportunities to engage with relevant stakeholders within practice communities. The inclusion of work-integrated learning/workplace learning activities dimension calls for providing workplace learning opportunities to gain real-world experience and to provide work-integrated learning strategies to bring the practice world into the classroom.

The external standards that are part of our program framework are articulated by our accrediting agency, the Ontario College of Teachers. The College has two sets of standards – *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* (2006a) and *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* (2006b) – that shape the work that we do and the way we interact with the profession. The former encompass professional knowledge, professional practice, commitment to students and student learning, ongoing professional learning, and leadership in learning communities. The latter encompass care, respect, trust and integrity.

The internal standards speak most directly to the work that we do as a university and how we connect learning and our students to practice communities through our curriculum, pedagogies and policies. The external standards position our students as emerging professionals and describe what their interactions with teachers and students in the practice community of school education should look like. Collectively, these standards form the basis for our work with professional communities, including but not limited to the teaching profession.

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AN INTERNATIONAL ENDEAVOUR

As an Australian university with a campus in Canada (where the BPES program is offered) we are uniquely positioned to take full advantage of positioning and advocating for teacher education as an international endeavour. Although our students come from Canada (when they enrol, although they have a diverse range of countries of origin), our teaching staff is a combination of individuals seconded from our Faculty of Education in Australia, from local school boards in Ontario, and directly hired in Ontario. This unique mix of faculty, in terms of geographic origins, roles within the education sector, academic backgrounds and recent professional experience, helps to heighten the program's attention to international contexts, frameworks, and opportunities. And although we are governed by local policy and teach local curricula, we are still a campus of an Australian university that brings with it to Canada many policies and practices that afford us an opportunity to compare and contrast the Canadian legal, policy and curriculum landscapes with those from Australia. So our program, although offered with the consent of the Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities in Ontario and accredited by the Ontario College of Teachers, allows us to inhabit a hybrid space that encompasses but exceeds the requirements of Ontario.

Our work is an international endeavour not only because our university has campuses in two countries. Global citizenship is a value that underpins our program framework and that both informs and is infused into all our programs. In relation to the BPES, this value entails an appreciation of the ways that culture and history (our own and that of others) affect our behaviours, beliefs, and relationships in a multicultural world. Moving in concert with and beyond the powerful but partial mantra of "think globally, act locally," global citizenship takes account of relationships, intercultural competence, global perspectives in the curriculum, the literacies of global citizenship (as a facet/aspect of multiliteracies), and envisioning the global classroom.

Pondering and teaching about global citizenship also compels us to acknowledge the importance of *place* when thinking about teacher education, and the importance of perspective and practising teachers being able to read place and appreciate the importance of acknowledging place. Such a place-consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003; White & Reid, 2008) also enables teacher candidates to discover when policies, curricula or even pedagogies are metro-centric or Euro-centric, for example, and to devise strategies to mitigate the effects of such an orientation. As part of the social justice agenda of global citizenship, we can work with our partners in the field of practice of school education to reveal such biases and strategise how to overcome or eliminate them.

LESSONS FROM TEACHER EDUCATION

It bears mentioning that all our work in teacher education with practice communities occurs against a backdrop where "teachers bring to their work their own idiomatic school biography, the conflicted history of their own deep

investments in and ambivalence about what a teacher is and does, and likewise they anticipate their dreams of students, their hopes for colleagues, and their fantasies for recognition and learning” (Britzman, 2003, p. 3). That is, none of this work happens on blank slates, empty canvases or in an uncharged context. Instead, all of us involved in these endeavours bring both baggage and affordances, histories that are vexed and that facilitate our learning, and aspirations that can both energise and motivate us, but which might also position us for disappointment or frustration. In this complex work, the simultaneity of these seemingly contradictory states and emotions offers us challenges in this work, but also incredible opportunities and possibilities. Like few other professions, we experience a reversal of roles as we learn to be teachers, for we have all had teachers and been students, and teacher education with practice communities flips this so that we eventually are teachers and have students. And in the middle of this process (minimally) we are simultaneously teachers and students.

While the example in this chapter is of a teacher education program, it contains aspects that would be germane to programs that prepare practitioners in other professions. At the heart of this work is learning (about) a profession while participating in that profession – from near and afar, from within a university classroom and at the site of teaching practice, in this case the school classroom. In such practice-based professional education the structure of the program matters in order to facilitate optimal conditions for learning *about*, learning *in*, and learning *for* practice (Reid, 2010) to occur. The program’s orientation towards and relationship with the practice community is an important enabler of the professional learning that can be jointly undertaken. A framework of standards (or a few!) to both underpin and serve as a touchstone for the learning and teaching in the degree is important, as are the value orientations that the program embodies, that shape and guide the professional education program. Collectively, these features contribute to PBE that integrates conceptual and practical work and acknowledges and responds to their interdependencies.

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