# Chapter 9
# The Influence of an International Context on a Teacher Educator's Knowledge, Practice and Identity

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## Beginnings

My career as an educator began in the early 1990s as a graduate teacher working in secondary schools in Melbourne, Australia. Throughout my time as a secondary teacher, I witnessed the increasing role of digital technologies in my own classroom practices and those of my colleagues. My interest in this aspect of teachers' practices led me to further study and ultimately to take up a role as a researcher and teacher educator at Monash University in Melbourne. My research and teaching focus on teacher knowledge and how this impacts on practices and connects with educational technologies, particularly examining the interplay between technological, pedagogical and content knowledge. While some research has considered the ways teachers develop their technological, pedagogical and content knowledge (e.g. see Mishra and Koehler 2006), this chapter illustrates the influence of context on the knowledge that may be valuable in different settings by examining my experiences leading an International Professional Experience program in Prato, Italy. Through these experiences, my understanding of my identity and practices as a teacher educator shifted from a focus on knowledge, particularly the interplay of technological knowledge with pedagogical and content knowledge, to deeper considerations of context.

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## A Chance to Work in Tuscany: What Can Be Hard About that?

On 22 April 2015 I received an email that quickly gained my attention. My colleague Rosalie wrote to me letting me know that:

> In Jan-Feb 2016, I'll be leading the Prato practicum. Libby 'taught me' as her apprentice last year, and I need to teach an apprentice this year. The apprentice would be in charge for Jan 2017 and would skill-up 'their' apprentice to lead in 2018. I need to locate a person who is teacherly, scholarly, organised, pleasant, flexible, tireless, resilient—basically prepared to roll up their sleeves and deal with no matter what!
>
> Now, don't be scared but I've thought quietly for quite some time that you'd be the best possible apprentice …

While I was flattered with Rosalie's assessment, I was somewhat unsure about my capacity to lead such an undertaking. Until relatively recently, I had been working as a secondary school teacher and leader with many of the 15 years that I had spent working in schools as a Physical Education and Outdoor Education teacher. As such, my reservations were not in regard to my ability to be able to deal with, as Rosalie mentioned, 'no matter what'. I was more unsure about my emerging skills as a teacher educator.

The Prato practicum was part of the broader International Professional Experience (IPE) program that had been running for a number of years in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. The IPE program had been receiving very positive and powerful reviews from both staff and students and had recently been expanding in terms of the number of locations in which programs were situated. I had heard of the program running in Prato, Italy, which Libby had begun in 2014. This program was based out of a Centre that Monash had established in the second largest city in Tuscany, about 20 min north-west of Florence and in a short period of time, the program had been able to establish strong connections with a variety of local early childhood centres as well as primary and secondary schools.

Speaking with students that I knew who had been on placement in Prato, I developed a general sense of the program. Highlighting differences between Italian and Australian schools, these students discussed generally traditional approaches to teaching and learning, limited access to technology and, most obviously, language challenges as contextual features that shaped their experiences in Prato. Both students and staff who had been in Prato as part of the IPE program also mentioned that it was facing up to these situations that generated lateral, creative and resourceful thinking, which is part of what made this experience so beneficial.

It was for these reasons that I was unsure about my capacity to lead such an undertaking, despite Rosalie's suggestion that she thought I could do this work. My concern was focused on both my capacity as a new teacher educator and the areas in which I had specialised in this new direction in my professional life—educational

technologies, associated teacher knowledge and subsequent decision-making. These areas did not appear to fit easily into the contexts in which pre-service teachers would be working in Prato. I was concerned primarily with my capacity to be able to provide the participating pre-service teachers with the support, guidance and direction that would ensure their development as teachers in the making and also to continue the success of the program in this emerging setting.

Despite these reservations, I replied to Rosalie and indicated that I would be keen to be her apprentice and I was excited about the opportunity to work with and learn from Rosalie and, indirectly, from Libby—two highly experienced teacher educators who I respected immensely. Besides which, the thought of spending a month working in a Tuscan town 20 min from Florence also had its appeal!

The months following my reply accepting Rosalie's invitation were busy with student selection interviews, checking character and professional references, and the final selection of 36 students from an initial pool of more than 120 applicants. By the end of July we were well placed to finally divide our 36 successful applicants into two groups of 18 students. The first group would travel in early January and work with Rosalie for three weeks, while the second group would travel in late January and work with me for the following three weeks. While the student groups did not overlap in Prato, Rosalie and I did have the opportunity to spend a weekend together in which we conducted a very thorough 'handover'.

## Coming to Understand the Italian Context

Sitting in a café in Prato as Rosalie's 'apprentice', I was now becoming somewhat nervous as the 'master' was providing me with a large amount of information about the various processes that she had put in place. Many of these were logistical and pragmatic in nature and covered essential information about the roles of various staff at the Monash Centre, where the nearest doctor's surgery was located, how to purchase bus tickets and the like. This information was very important but was the type of thing I was used to discovering when working in different contexts. The information that was to follow was what reminded me about my emerging identity and capacities as a teacher educator.

Rosalie, and Libby before her, had developed a routine of making themselves available to students everyday for a few hours in the afternoon and early evening in the Monash Centre to allow students to drop in and chat about developments in their day. In addition, a tradition of 'group meetings' that followed a 'master class' format had also emerged out of our shared practice over the past few years. These 'master classes' were based around the concerns, challenges and successes students communicated to staff in their drop in sessions and were designed to provide guidance, direction and support for common challenges. While I was comfortable being able to suggest different approaches and ideas that students might be able to undertake in Australia, doing this in a country in which I had next to no language skills, little cultural understanding that I could draw on and no experience in Italian

schools was somewhat more of a challenge. Given what I had already heard about Italian schools, particularly regarding their generally traditional approaches to teaching and learning and the limited access to technology, I was not sure that my areas of expertise, developed through my research and my teaching in Australia and outlined in the next section, were going to be much help to the students that I was about to work with in a very different context.

## My Understanding of Teacher Education: Enhancing Professional Knowledge, Practices and Identity

My work in the five years prior to my experiences in Prato had taken me from the secondary school settings in which I had become comfortable and familiar to a research and teaching pathway. As a teacher educator and researcher at Monash University, I had become increasingly involved in teaching and leading large, general teacher education subjects. My work teaching general units, which focuses on teaching and learning, gives me the opportunity to consider different forms of professional knowledge required by educators. The knowledge separating classroom teachers from content experts has been the focus of academic attention for sometime. Of particular note is Shulman's work (Shulman 1986, 1987) which indicated that both a knowledge expert (e.g. a physicist) and a teacher (e.g. a physics teacher) have high levels of content knowledge. A defining characteristic of the physics teacher, according to Shulman (1986), is that unlike the physicist the physics teacher also possesses pedagogical knowledge. Shulman (1986, 1987) argued that expert teachers have a unique form of knowledge that Shulman called Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK).

In addition to this focus on PCK, the remainder of my teaching and research centres around the use of educational technologies as part of classroom practice. Through this work I have become aware of research which extended Shulman's conceptualisation of PCK. The particular knowledge required for effective technology integration in classroom settings has been an area of academic investigation for some time (e.g. see Mumtaz 2000; Selwyn 2011). Like other teaching practices, the use of technology in classroom practice is characterised by complex, contradicting and changing interdependencies between technological, pedagogical and content demands that are mediated by the situated social contexts that bound teachers' practice (Archambault and Crippen 2009; Cox 2008; Mishra and Koehler 2006; Mumtaz 2000; Shulman 1986; Somekh 2007; Straub 2009). The complexity of the complex relationships between these technological, pedagogical and content demands and the varying results reported by research suggest that simple ideas expressed by many simple adoption or diffusion models do not adequately address the complexity of teachers' pedagogical uses of digital technologies. More recently, teachers' use of digital technologies has been examined through an extension of Shulman's (1986) work, resulting in the development of the technological, pedagogical and content knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra and Koehler 2006).

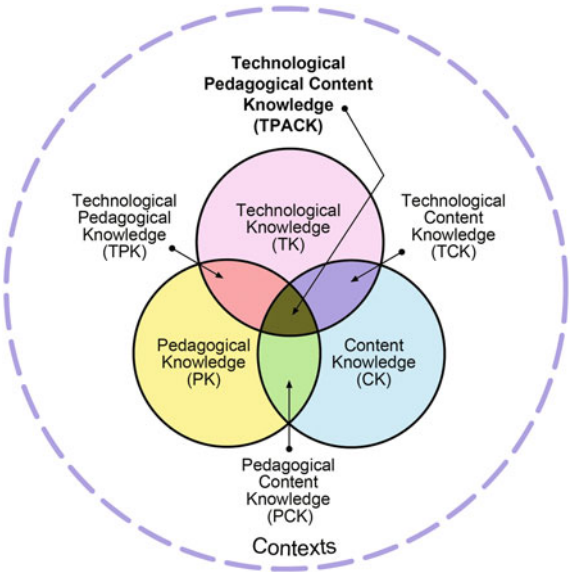


**Fig. 1** The TPACK framework from http://tpack.org/

TPACK, as illustrated in Fig. 1, has become a well-known theoretical framework that has reshaped contemporary understanding of the forms of knowledge required by expert teachers. Mishra and Koehler (2006) argue that effective teachers need to understand the relationships between technological, pedagogical and content knowledge and the most effective teachers sit at the nexus point of all three knowledge forms. Following Mishra and Koehler's (2006) development of the TPACK framework, hundreds of studies have used this framework to explore the knowledge development of both in-service and pre-service teachers and the resulting impact on technology integration in classroom settings (Graham 2011).

Much of my identity as a teacher educator and academic researcher is associated with my expertise and developing international reputation with this framework. My work in this area had, prior to my IPE experiences, focused not only on the knowledge teachers require to successfully integrate technologies into classroom practice, but also on the contextual influences within a school that shape the enactment of that knowledge. While being aware of different contextual levels, my work had particularly considered the micro- and meso-level contextual factors in individual classrooms and schools. My experiences in Prato not only required me to consider new contextual factors at the micro- and meso-levels but I also needed to think more broadly about macro-level factors such as educational system structure, socio-cultural understandings of the place of education in a society and the development of national curricula.

Working in Italian contexts in which educational technologies were used in very different ways compared to Australian settings therefore shifted my focus as a teacher educator from technological knowledge and the way it blends with both content and pedagogical knowledge to questions about the forms of knowledge

more generally required by individual teachers. The technology-rich contexts that had been a hallmark of the contexts in which I had worked as a teacher educator were not part of the educational landscape in Prato. This contextual change disrupted many of the beliefs that I had developed in previous years and had become taken for granted assumptions. More significantly, my work with pre-service teachers in Prato allowed me to consider the ways this knowledge was enacted and shaped in these new classroom contexts.

My recent work (Phillips 2016a, b; Phillips et al. 2016a, b; Phillips et al. 2017) reflects this change in focus, by highlighting the importance of context in understanding teacher knowledge and practice. The shift to a focus on knowledge and context requires teacher educators and the pre-service teachers working alongside them to consider the forms of knowledge that are essential for competent classroom teachers and the broader cultural contexts in which this knowledge is developed and enacted. The remainder of this chapter illustrates the shift to a focus on context rather than a focus on TPACK through a series of events that unfolded when working with pre-service teachers on an IPE program.

## The Context of This International Professional Experience program

The IPE program which is the focus of this chapter ran over a three-week period and involved 18 pre-service teachers from the Faculty of Education at Monash University who worked with one academic staff member. This group were a mixture of seven undergraduate and 11 postgraduate pre-service teachers all about to commence the final year of their teaching degree. Through the selection process described earlier in this chapter, we were able to select a group of 18 students that were resilient, committed, engaged and they were all excellent teachers in the making. These students were placed in two primary schools and five secondary schools in Prato.

Together we were able to explore language, cultural and pedagogical influences that removed many of the 'taken for granted' assumptions that can underpin a professional experience in one's own country. Together, we learned that relying too heavily on such assumptions, aspects of knowledge and habits of practice can limit opportunities to see chances that may be amplified or silenced in other contexts.

For many of us, this 'personal and social story' (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 2) provided us with the opportunity to reconsider many aspects of our classroom practice. This was not only true for the students who participated in this experience, but was is also true for me as a teacher educator. The IPE program in Prato unsettled my understanding of representing knowledge for the development of effective graduate teachers. The remainder of this chapter will focus on some of the experiences I shared with pre-service teachers that shaped my current understandings and beliefs about what it means to be a contemporary teacher educator.

## The Role of Context in Teacher Knowledge Development and Enactment

As described earlier in this chapter, the Italian context in which I worked with a group of pre-service teachers was very different to the Australian context in which I had developed my understanding of what knowledge and practices were important in teacher education. In the Australian context, I had begun to appreciate the strong connections and interplay between technological, pedagogical and content knowledge in the contexts in which teachers worked. This was not only reflected in the teaching that I did at the University but also in the research that I had been undertaking (e.g. see Phillips 2014).

Working in Italy disrupted many of the connections between knowledge forms that had become taken for granted assumptions in my teaching and research. Walking into classrooms in both primary and secondary schools in Prato, I was immediately struck by the absence of many resources that were commonplace in Australian classrooms. For example, the walls of most classrooms were comparatively bare: on some occasions you could find a map of the World, and on others there may be some small examples of student work. In contrast to Australian classrooms which typically feature by an electronic whiteboard, projector and laptop for the teacher running on high-speed wireless Internet, the front of Italian classrooms usually consisted of blackboards and chalk. The physical layout of classrooms in this context was of a traditional nature with desks and chairs in rows all facing the front. In Prato, student desks housed textbooks, notebooks and pens compared to the Australian context where students might have one or more digital devices with wireless internet access, digital textbooks and online learning environments containing other digital resources.

It became clear very quickly that the connections I had previously made between technology, pedagogy and content were not going to hold true in the Italian context. Not only was this a challenge for me in terms of my own understanding of effective teaching practices but it also required me to rethink the approach and advice I provided to pre-service teachers coming into this different learning environment.

## Considerations of Context: Theoretical and Practical Contrasts

One reason why TPACK acquisition and development (and PCK before it) have proven so difficult to measure is that knowledge must be acquired and exhibited in specific contexts. Mishra and Koehler (2006) acknowledged the influence of context on teachers' TPACK enactment stating:

> The core of our argument is that there is no single technological solution that applies for every teacher, every course, or every view of teaching. Quality teaching requires developing a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between technology, content,

> and pedagogy, and using this understanding to develop appropriate, context-specific strategies and representations (p. 1029).

The importance of context was also discussed by Cox (2008) who concluded that 'the effect of context is that TP[A]CK is unique, temporary, situated, idiosyncratic, adaptive, and specific and will be different for each teacher in each situation' (p. 47) therefore suggesting that 'any true example of TP[A]CK must necessarily include the context of that example' (p. 48). Despite Cox's (2008) recognition of the importance of context, her extensive literature review revealed that much of the published research examining TPACK focused on measuring or defining forms of knowledge that are part of the TPACK framework and paid less attention to the context in which the TPACK is developed or enacted.

Cox's findings (2008) were substantiated by Kelly's (2010) content analysis of TPACK research which reported erratic inclusions of context in TPACK research conducted between 2006 and 2009. Subsequently, Rosenberg and Koehler (2015) conducted a comprehensive content analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles between 2005 and 2013 and found that only 36% of published TPACK papers considered context, and that when context was included, classroom and school aspects and those related to teachers were more common than those related to students and society. One may argue, therefore, that the 'contextual turn' which is evident in other areas of academic research is not consistently apparent in investigations of teachers' TPACK.

In addition to this inconsistent consideration of context in TPACK research, Porras-Hernández and Salinas-Amescua (2013) argued that 'the original TPACK framework is limited in that it defines the contexts in which teachers work too narrowly. In fact, the majority of published work refers to the context element in a rather general manner' (p. 224). In contrast, drawing from the conceptual framework from Porras-Hernández and Salinas-Amescua, Rosenberg and Koehler (2015) provided a revised, particular definition of context in relation to TPACK and indicate that context can be considered as 'the conditions around the knowledge and activities of teachers' (p. 2619).

What the academic literature does not discuss are the ways in which changes in context can illuminate different emphases and highlight understandings of what forms of knowledge are considered important by teachers working in different education systems and in different socio-cultural settings. My experience in Prato illuminated what I believe to be significant shortcomings in TPACK's considerations of context and the ways in which context shapes knowledge development and enactment.

My experiences working in Prato have led me to conclude that the broad notion of the 'conditions around the knowledge and activities' may be further enhanced by careful consideration and refinement. Previous research has considered the notion of 'conditions' from a variety of perspectives including factors inside the four walls of a classroom including 'the school environment, the physical features of the classroom, the availability of technology, the demographic characteristics of students and teachers including prior experience with technology' (Kelly 2008 as cited

in Cox 2008, p. 47), the broader socio-political conditions that exist within school workplaces (Phillips 2013, 2014) as well as systemic conditions associated with pre-service teacher preparation (Albion et al. 2010). The variety in these different contexts is reflected in Rosenberg and Koehler's (2015) coding frame that categorises micro, meso or macro contextual levels; however, this characterisation of context amplifies additional challenges for TPACK researchers.

One of these significant challenges centres on the ways in which researchers might consider how knowledge *and* activities of teachers are dialogically linked to the socio-cultural contextual conditions that surround them. While context arguably shapes teachers TPACK development, there is also a strong argument to suggest that context shapes the enactment of this knowledge (e.g. see the discussion regarding pedagogical reasoning and action in Shulman 1987) and this was an aspect of the International Experience program that students in Prato commented on almost daily. Prior research has also shown that the relationship between knowledge and practice is not unidirectional, but researchers also need to consider the ways in which teachers also shape their context (Banister and Reinhart 2011). Thus, context may be better thought of as both influencing and being influenced by teachers and their activities. For this reason, scholars have argued that context cannot be fully separated from individuals (Tabak 2004), their knowledge or their practice. My experiences in Prato certainly allowed me to see this dialogic relationship in action when I observed all of the pre-service teachers working in different classrooms. The connection between context, knowledge and practice is illustrated in an example provided by Ben, one of the pre-service teachers I was working with in Prato.

## Disrupting Notions of Context and Knowledge: Learning from a Pre-service Teacher Experiences

The challenges associated with language were probably the most obvious for the majority of pre-service teachers when working in schools in Prato. While there were some students who did have strong Italian language skills, the vast majority of these pre-service teachers landed in Italy with very limited Italian language. This presented particular hurdles for pre-service teachers.

One of the first things many students described was the challenge in trying to initially make sense of their school and their mentors' classroom practices. During the first few days of the program, students were met by their mentors at the Monash Centre and taken to the schools where they would work for the next three weeks. Based on their experiences in Australia, the pre-service teachers are used to having a mentor who has some explicit plans and direction for their teaching. Similarly, the conversations I would have with pre-service teachers after these initial meetings would be about the ways in which technology, pedagogy and content might shape the teaching and learning opportunities outlined in the mentor teacher's plans.

In part, the challenges pre-service teachers faced in Prato were due to the cultural norms in Italian schools, yet a substantial part of the challenge facing the pre-service teachers was also based on the language barriers that some students faced. While some mentors had good English skills, others had very limited capacity to express their ideas verbally with pre-service teachers. As Ben, one of the pre-service teachers, mentioned after his first day in a school:

> My mentor and I had a conversation today using Google Translate. What would have normally taken us five minutes to chat about took us nearly an hour. I have no idea how much I missed simply because we had to keep things so superficial just to make it work.

Ben not only described the challenge communicating in a situation in which language is not shared but it is also interesting to note the way Ben attempted to resolve the impasse at which he found himself. He turned to technology as a way to solve a problem. While using Google Translate did solve some of Ben's communication issues, he was also able to recognise that technology did not provide him with the nuanced conversation he would have had with an English-speaking mentor and that his technology-mediated conversation was more 'superficial'. The change in Ben's teaching context did not only mean that it was a challenge to communicate with those around him, but the difficulties communicating with his mentor impacted on his capacity to comprehend nuanced differences and to work within this new context.

When asking Ben what he felt he missed in his technology-mediated conversation with his mentor, Ben indicated that it was a lack of pedagogical information that was absent. 'I really wanted to be able to get a sense of the students I would be teaching, about them as individuals. What engages them in the classroom, what particular needs individual students have, that sort of thing'. In this instance, the connection between technological knowledge—the use of Google Translate—and the pedagogical knowledge that Ben was after was not present. This connection suggested by the TPACK framework was not part of the initial work occurring between Ben and his mentor.

Talking with Ben and with a number of other students during their time in Prato highlighted the important, dialogical nature between knowledge and practice. I found myself needing to consider the ways in which pre-service teachers like Ben needed to respond to contextual factors, but also I needed to consider the ways in which pre-service teachers also shaped their context (Banister and Reinhart 2011). Changes in my own knowledge and beliefs were not only evident in this new consideration of context, but also understanding the forms of knowledge pre-service teachers required to be effective in this new context. In contrast to the technological, pedagogical and content knowledge triumvirate that is espoused in the TPACK framework, working in Prato required a more nuanced understanding of the pedagogical differences that characterised classrooms in this part of Italy. The connection between knowledge and beliefs is complex and I am still not entirely sure how my knowledge and beliefs changed while in Prato and during reflections afterwards.

The closest explanation that I am able to provide is that the deep, rich and ongoing conversations I was able to have with the pre-service teachers in Prato,

coupled with observations of all students in classrooms and considered in the light of discussions with the pre-service teachers' Italian mentors, provided me with a lived experience illustrating that, in numerous ways and on multiple occasions, the knowledge and practices that were considered valuable in Australian classrooms were different to those valued in schools in Prato. As such, I had little option but to reconsider the beliefs I had previously held about what knowledge teachers needed to be effective in classrooms. This resonates with the findings of Kyndt et al. (2016) who reviewed literature that revealed:

> … the learning outcomes [from informal learning experiences] reported in studies with more experienced teachers mainly concerned new learning methods (e.g. Henze et al. 2009), as well as changing (often conservative) beliefs and conceptions about teaching (e.g. Hoekstra et al. 2010; Hoekstra and Korthagen 2010; Meirink et al. 2009). (p. 1138)

As it transpired, Ben was a highly effective teacher in Prato. He was able to develop his pedagogical knowledge and to engage, teach and relate to the students in his classroom. This was not done through the use of technology as there were simply not the resources in the school to allow for this. Nor was this done by drawing on his mentor's understanding of individual students as the language barrier between pre-service teacher and mentor was too great.

Rather this was done over a three-week period as Ben began to work with the class and individuals in it. Through careful reflection, often involving other pre-service teachers and myself, Ben was able to discuss different students and situations and suggest ways in which he might approach the next day's teaching. Ben, like many other students working in Prato, would get feedback from his peers usually beginning in the student lounge at the Monash Centre and often spilling over from this setting into more informal contexts as the group would head out to dinner together usually continuing to workshop different ideas to help one another. The new context in which Ben and other pre-service teachers were working was not only evident in the schools and classrooms in which they were located, but also in the access pre-service teachers had to one another outside of school hours—something that was not the norm in professional experience placements in Melbourne. This new context saw pre-service teachers sharing their developing ideas about both pedagogical approaches and content in different ways.

Ben's experiences in Prato were not unique but are offered here because of their commonality with those of other students. This kind of experience not only enhanced the knowledge, planning and classroom practices of the pre-service teachers who participated in this experience, but working alongside students like Ben, my understanding of what it was to be a teacher educator shifted. The basis upon which I had built my expertise—as a technology focused teacher educator and researcher—carried less weight in Prato. My experiences in this new context highlighted the equal importance of different forms of knowledge and the flexible way that effective teachers utilise these knowledge forms in different contexts. Indeed, context may be better thought of as both influencing and being influenced by teachers and their activities. For this reason, scholars have argued that context cannot be fully separated from individuals (Tabak 2004), their knowledge or their practice.

## Conclusion

This chapter has traced some of my experiences working with a group of pre-service teachers on an International Professional Experience program in Prato, Italy. In contrast to my experiences working with pre-service teachers in Australia, my experiences in Italy have unsettled my understanding of what I should have pre-service teachers consider when planning and teaching. Recent frameworks, such as TPACK, suggest that pre-service teachers should pay attention to technology, pedagogy and content in equal measure; however, practising in a context in which technology is not as obvious disrupts this knowledge triumvirate.

In contrast, working in an international setting such as Prato brings such contextual differences to the fore and shows how context may be better thought of as both influencing and being influenced by teachers and their activities. For this reason, scholars have argued that context cannot be fully separated from individuals (Tabak 2004), their knowledge or their practice. Moreover, working in Prato required pre-service teachers to shift the forms of knowledge that they needed for effective practice from a balance of technological, pedagogical and content knowledge to a blend that focused much more on pedagogical and content knowledge.

This shift in context and the resultant change in demands on knowledge required me as a teacher educator to also reconsider what information was considered valuable in this context. Reconsidering the ways in which technology can enhance classroom practice has required me to re-examine the knowledge and beliefs that underpinned much of my work with pre-service teachers. Back in Australia, digital technologies continue to be an aspect of my teaching; however, they do not feature with the prominence they once did. In contrast, providing students with ways to consider the dialogic relationship between themselves as teachers and the context in which they are working is now a key feature of my work.

Following my experiences in Prato, I looked back on the email that Rosalie sent to me inviting me to join the International Professional Experience program. As her 'apprentice' she needed '… to locate a person who is teacherly'. Working in a different context has allowed me to develop a greater understanding of my own knowledge and beliefs. In doing so I believe this experience has significantly enhanced by capacities as a teacher educator—in short my experiences in Prato have made me more teacherly.

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