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Abstract

The UC diary project draws on our professional dialogue as University Colleagues (UC) in site-based teacher education partnerships, through an email exchange and case writing (Wasserman, 1993). This project has facilitated a shared reflection on both purpose and practice in a space that demands multi layers of performance, and has resulted in the identification of a number of key factors for UCs to consider in framing their work.

Emerging from ongoing conversations around the practice-theory nexus in teacher education, more recent explorations of site-based partnership experiences for preservice teachers have given rise to literature discussing the role of the UC. At Victoria University, a strong emphasis on placing preservice teachers and academics in school settings for extended periods beyond the traditional practicum has been significant in informing changes in the nature of university 'supervision' and contact. As UCs we find ourselves located in schools working alongside teachers, students and importantly preservice teachers undertaking core university classes and negotiated school-driven projects (Eckersley et. al., 2008). The role can be bewildering, with competing demands and a complexity of tasks spanning both academic and mentoring responsibilities (Le Cornu, 2009). The requirement to move fluidly between school communities, preservice teaching teams and traditional academic settings presents challenges, and can raise tensions regarding time, language and values.

In considering the multiple roles we assume as UCs, we ask the following key research questions:

- What is our role as the UC in site-based teacher education?
- What are the emerging opportunities and challenges?
- How do our experiences as UCs inform the development of sustainable site-based teacher education?

This paper will be presented as a performance piece, capturing both the process and outcomes of the research project, inviting the audience to share in a reflection on the relevance of the data and its significance for teacher education.

Introduction

This paper discusses the findings of a year-long self study we have termed The UC Diary project. As university colleagues (UCs) acting in multiple roles within site-based partnerships in teacher education at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, this project saw us engaged in a professional dialogue through email exchange, Skype conversations and case writing. The objective was to facilitate a shared reflection on both the purpose and practice of the UC role, enabling us to better document the work and identify a number of key descriptors that best capture the UC role in site-based partnerships at VU.

We drew on the existing literature on the role(s) of academics in professional experience or practicum components of teacher education courses to compare our experiences with those of others. Le Cornu's (2008, 2009) discussion of the 'middle space' had raised some formulations we were interested in applying to our own experiences. In particular we wanted to reflect on the "complex cognitive, emotional and interpersonal work in schools" (Le Cornu, 2008, p. 205) we carry out as UCs in site-based partnerships, and how such work "fits" with other academic requisites, considering the opportunities and tensions raised by Beck and Kosnik (2002). We wanted to consider our own practices in response to some of the issues around hierarchies of knowledge in teacher education raised by Zeichner (2010), as well as the notions of hybridity and 'third space', and how we might see our own practices contributing to the development of "expanded learning opportunities that are created through the interplay of different sources of knowledge" (p.96) .

Site-based teacher education at VU

Teacher education programs at VU are based around the Project Partnerships (PP) model, which sees preservice teachers (PSTs) placed in schools each Tuesday alongside their traditional block placements, undertaking Applied Curriculum Projects (ACPs). The ACPs are collaboratively negotiated with school colleagues, ideally mutually beneficial to both schools and the PSTs, and aimed at enabling strong connections to be made between the theories explored in university coursework and the practice of teaching and learning in schools (Hooley and Moore, 2005; Dalmau et al, 2007; Eckersley et al, 2008). The PSTs are essentially embedded in the partnership school, with practice rooted in the expectation of collective enquiry and the shared generation of knowledge (Cacciattolo and Cherednichenko, 2007; Cherednichenko and Kruger, 2005).

A number of site-based partnerships are currently being developed, further extending this approach with groups of PSTs undertaking their PP together in the one school and also undertaking core university classes on site each week. This means the UC and PSTs are in their partnership school for two full days each week, and then full time when undertaking the block placements. Both authors are currently UCs in site-based partnerships, with the role encompassing lecturing, tutoring, supervision, observation, mentoring, administration and brokerage.

Ongoing research into the experiences and outcomes of the site-based approach aims to identify the distinct benefits to all partners involved, and ascertain how such an approach might contribute to attempts to address the perennial challenge of strengthening the "link(s) between the practicum and the theoretical components of teacher education" (Top of the Class Report, 2007, p. 6) and ensure sustainability and authenticity (Kruger et. al, 2009). In this paper we limit our focus to the nature and practices of the UC within the site-based model and implications for sustainable teacher education.

The VU site-based partnership model situates academics off-campus for at least two full days each week. Clear about the potential value of sharing our individual experiences as UCs but frustrated at the lack of time to meet, we developed a schedule of on-line conversations and case writing that enabled us to document our work and reflect on our own and each other's experiences in real time. Coining such a process The UC Diary project, the mode and style of dialogue paralleled the immediacy, or 'in-the-moment' nature of UC work, the 'rollercoaster ride' of relationships, experiences, action and negotiation.

Methodology

Drawing on elements of Loughran's (2007) self-study method, we conversed regularly via email and quarantined time to record Skype conversations. We began each exchange with "How was your day?" building up a series of texts focused on questions about the nature and purpose of our roles as

UCs. This process also lead to case writing and case commentaries facilitating the description of and reflection on our work.

This approach enabled us to take up Samaras, DeMulder et al's (2005) observation of the need to "explore effective collaborative processes to revisit, re-envision, and reconstruct a core set of beliefs and principles of practice regarding our collaboration and document our work in writings" as part of efforts to ensure sustainability and resilience of our programs and improve our practice as UCs.

Fundamentally a qualitative inquiry, our professional dialogue sought to capture the many layers of our experience as UCs to enable us to investigate and analyse practice. The data generated was analysed interpretatively and descriptively (Bodgan and Biklen, 1992), employing an inductive approach to analysis, indicating the influence of grounded theory (Hutchinson, 1990).

Drawing on Cherednichenko et al (2001) the analysis of data sought to identify emerging patterns and key threads of experience in an attempt to develop a set of descriptors that captured the critical aspects of the UC role as understood by the two authors. At the heart of the process was the belief that "looking inward can lead to a more intelligent and useful outward gaze" (Mitchell and Weber, 2004, p. 4), challenging us to consider areas for improvement in our practice and developing a clearer understanding of the role in the context of broader research into on-site partnerships in teacher education.

What is our role as the UC in site-based teacher education?

For us as UCs, each day involves a range of professional learning conversations and activities with PSTs, teaching staff, Principals and in some cases school students, discussing, reflecting on and negotiating the partnership model and learning within it from all perspectives. As others have said, the work is can be described as both intense and complex (Le Cornu, 2009) What struck us is how this all must happen in real time, bringing a certain dynamism to the role as well as a number of challenges.

"In-the-moment" – UCs building learning communities in real time

Being in the place is convenient for learning. Facing the contextualised dilemmas and challenges proves worthy of reminding us of our vulnerability and considerable input when it counts. Debriefing is immediate and negotiations about time and priorities are made 'on the run'.

UC Diary Project Extract #1

> *Jo: ... an example of the immediacy and collaboration of the contact, during our ACP, feedback from teachers was that the PSTs needed some more direction regarding a strong outlining of expectations etc before they took off on excursions with students... the principal came and talked to me, then I shared that information with the group that morning and we collectively workshopped the approach - preparation for excursions... things improved greatly for the next four excursions... the mentor teachers (MTs) see instant improvement, and the principal is content that we (VU PSTs and UC) are responsive and taking responsibility. It demonstrates a shared identifying of priorities and areas to address.*

An important factor here is that the communication happens in real time, with the UC required to be responsive not only to the PST needs but to the school's needs. This enriches the experience and appears to generate stronger outcomes for the practicum, but also generates added pressure for the UC. The immediacy of the links being made between core coursework and school-based practicum certainly enables us as UCs to play a role in developing "effective critical reflection" skills in PSTs and "reciprocal learning relationships" across the partnership actors as outlined by Le Cornu (2009).

New protocols are written as collective responses to the need at that time, and thinking in the context with the prevailing challenges of the setting and time becomes 'normalised'.

UC Diary Project Extract #2

> *Jo: I as UC am thinking through the particular context... at the same time that the students are, we are actively and authentically reacting and interacting with the environment collectively, sharing knowledge, it is a community of practice. The UC is modelling a collaborative and reflective environment, not only to the PSTs but to the school.*

As this real-time shared learning becomes more common, a challenge arises as UCs are expected by both PSTs and school colleagues to be there more and more often. As a result we shared the experiences of Beck and Kosnik (2002, p. 15), finding that the traditional "relatively free" period of time when PSTs are in schools on their blocks becomes one of heavy workload for us as UCs in site-based models. It should be stressed that this real-time role is not undermining the PST/MT relationship, but rather the UC is being drawn on to strengthen the experience for all and as a means to share experiences across the entire partnership team. Moreover, some teachers are not keen on change and flexibility and 'on-the-fly' is unwelcomed. There can exist a tension between 'in the moment' madness and 'skittishness' as termed by Martin (2007) and real-time decision making and authentic learning. UCs are called upon to respond and ensure trust and democratic processes are not undermined.

From little things big things grow – UCs foster cultural shifts

Another important point for us was that the "little things", which often do not hit the radar in terms of official workload allocation, or even documented partnership activity, are critical to a partnership's success and are precisely what enable the "bigger things" to occur. Sometimes rich learning relies on smaller connections. For example our Skype conversations highlighted the importance of small talk and the role it plays in clarifying a shared vision and seeing the bigger picture. The conversations demonstrate the shift from brief, consultative and often disconnected conversations between UCs and school staff, to purposeful, collaboratively considered exchanges that tie together PST learning, school student learning and mentor teacher experience. The little things are what tips this process over, fostering trust and mutual respect and seeing those traditional hierarchies of decision-making around teacher education break down. In earlier papers we considered borders and boundaries in teacher education (Williams and Davies, 2009; Arnold and Edwards, 2009), arguing that the UC has a key role to play in facilitating the culture shift that is required for all partners to cross those borders and engage in a genuinely collaborative approach to teacher education.

UC Diary Project Extract #3

> *Jo: there is a lot of humility required as a UC, in part our role is to break down historic barriers and borders between "academics" and teachers. We have to earn our stripes, and we earn them by being there more often (quite simply...) and by facilitating a shared set of perspectives for the partnership*

> *Julie: You are right Jo. Humility is an essential part of learning. Saying to others that I want to know actually admits that I may / do not know. Learning is about risking this position not normally comfortable with teachers / academics.*

> *Jo: It means in some cases, on some days, handing over our core course content... this week the principal suggested there needs to be an emphasis placed on the introductory 5 minutes of each lesson. She asked if I could work with the PSTs on how they approach the **beginning** of a class. So together we ran a workshop on setting up a class, establishing expectations*

etc, and were also able to speak to teachers about their conversations about this issue with the PSTs.

Moving beyond the rhetoric of mutual benefit to a genuinely collaborative partnership with shared purpose and decision-making can prove challenging, particularly when working within historically constituted boundaries and with long-held notions of roles and responsibilities. The UC becomes the critical actor in challenging these blockers and fostering relationships where all partners assume responsibility for the direction, approach and outcomes of the model. The UC therefore is not seen to be in a position of power or hierarchy, rather there exists a 'democratic pull' when evaluating and decision making as questions are posed and decisions made collectively. SWOT analyses, ongoing reviews, and collaborative reports are generated to support and develop the quality of experiences and foster a sense of co-creation in the partnership..

What are the emerging opportunities and challenges?

Location, location...

We suggest that there is something more to being "on-site" than simply being *at school more*. As UCs the time in school takes on a qualitative value above and beyond the obvious quantitative value. We are increasingly viewed as part of the school community as opposed to a visitor.

UC Diary Project Extract #4

> *Being on-site changes the UC role....firstly, people know me. The teachers are getting to know me, Ruth in the office knows me, the students are getting to know me. I am fast losing the tag of "visitor". The teachers get to see me working with all of the PSTs and I think this is impacting on how they view me, why I'm there, why we're there. Conversations in the staff room can go beyond introductory formalities and incidental conversation and instead be about substantive issues, we can pick up where we left off last time.*

> *Teachers pop in and out, asking the PSTs if they can assist with this or that program or class and it's now starting to go beyond that.. one MT arrived with copies of a handout from a PD she'd just attended. She asked if she could address the PSTs collectively, I said of course! She explained that the PD was on an assessment approach the school was considering implementing and that she'd love them all to have a look and see what they think. What a brilliant message and opportunity for the PSTs! We were all of a sudden at the heart of the P&D culture of the school!*

Initially we were concerned that having our own room would see us isolated from the school community despite being on-site, and that those seemingly intractable borders that exist between universities and schools (Williams and Davies, 2009) would not be challenged by such an arrangement. However it seems the opposite has occurred, with us being seen as part of core daily school life. Positioning teacher education in a school setting (Wilmore, 1996) and being 'in the place' highlights opportunities for more authentic practice. Having our own space seems to have legitimised our presence in the minds of the teaching staff. As UCs we are viewed differently and as a result have different responsibilities that extend beyond the traditional PST supervision role. The school's issues become our issues, and in turn, the PST experience becomes of greater collective interest to the teachers. The development of this 'hybrid space' means that we are also much more aware of the potential to bring teachers' knowledge into our own practice as UCs, and able to see very concrete possibilities for bringing together "school and university-based teacher educators and practitioner and academic knowledge in new ways to enhance the learning of prospective teachers" (Zeichner, 2010, p. 61).

Understanding shared experiences of the practicum

Arnold and Edwards (2009) identified a number of key challenges for PSTs in site-based teacher education, which included knowing students in their diversity, well-planned risk-taking, questions of engagement and diversity and understanding change processes. Interestingly, the UC Diary project has revealed similar challenges for UCs, with us needing to;

- know and understand the PST's, the teachers and school students in the diverse school community;
- adopt and integrate an environment that reflects the twenty-first century;
- take considered and well monitored risks for the learning and teaching of all partners;
- balance the lure of pragmatism with an approach that nurtures engagement; and
- identify the democratic potential of the learning community and frame our stance as UCs on that basis.

A conscious consideration of these similarities can assist UCs to better understand the experiences of the PSTs, and as a result highlight for the UC how learning alongside each other can maximise the outcomes for all partners.

The lure of pragmatism

Genuinely collaborative and democratic learning environments are messy, involve risk taking and take time. Considered alongside the increasingly complex workloads facing teachers and academics and the balancing act facing PSTs, the *lure of pragmatism* is very real and can threaten to undermine the authentic learning experiences of the partnership. The UC regularly makes important decisions about the balance between organisation and facilitation. The in-the-moment nature of the partnership increases the dangers of the lure of pragmatism as well as the potential for structures that support a democratic, collaborative and responsive relationship between all partners.

UC Diary Project Extract #5

> *Jo: I feel there are real tensions between being a good organiser as a UC and the potential for that to effectively resign others, both school and PSTs to passive roles, and inevitably elevate the "academic" firmly in the driver's seat. The lure of pragmatism in an action research context can be very real at times... As a UC I see myself as a facilitator, but with so many technical, logistical things able to go wrong, we can end up being organisers. I think we need to resist this, and ensure that although we are organised facilitators, we are primarily facilitators, or brokers....*

How do our experiences as UCs inform the development of sustainable site-based teacher education?

At the centre of our understanding of the UC role is the complex interpersonal work that facilitates relationship building and the fostering of learning communities. An approach based on inclusivity and flexibility is required to effectively respond to and overcome the "current division of responsibilities for delivering teacher education and the lack of a sense of shared responsibility between the major parties" (Top of the class Report, 2007, p. 75). The UC plays a critical role in fostering a partnership environment that emphasises mutuality, a mutuality that "initiates reciprocities that are evident as each stakeholder in the partnership is called on to contribute in ways not experienced within conventional teacher education" (Kruger et al, 2009, p. 79). Positioning our own learning at the centre of the partnerships enables us to develop a clearer understanding of what we do as UCs and how it contributes to a re-imagining of the partnership and supports the changing roles and responsibilities within it. In particular our developing knowledge of our work as UCs assists to understand the importance of the role in fostering the capacity of all members of the

partnership to take active responsibility for the development of new and sustainable models of practice.

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