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# Pushing forward by theorising site-based teacher education: Creating the conditions for 'Philosophical Project Knowledge'

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*Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and re-creating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process*. (Paulo Freire, 1972, p. 30)

## Abstract

Teacher education can make a difference, depending. If schooling is primarily concerned with reproducing the values and practices of the market economy and privileged minority, then most likely teacher education will submit accordingly and not make a difference, in fact participating in the rearticulation and sometimes further penetration of the hegemonic practice. On the other hand, if schooling within the dominate economy and values sets about establishing the conditions whereby the majority of students are encouraged to investigate significant knowledge and social constructs critically, imaginatively and independently then teacher education structured in the same way can make a difference, contributing to authentic community building and social change. This paper describes the efforts of teacher education grappling with these tensions and contradictions within the constraints of university and school requirements, as well as a neoliberal economy. It briefly outlines a history of partnership-based and practice-based pre-service teacher education that has generated support for on-site approaches of various types. Moving beyond Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), the paper explores the conditions for a new concept of Philosophical Project Knowledge (PPK) that theorises teacher education as learning through social action and partnerships between communities, schools and universities. In this way, education is seen as a democratic right and a process of liberation for all citizens especially those marginalised and excluded within a market economy.

## Introduction

In their influential report on various high-performing school systems around the world, McKinsey and Company (2007, p. 16) made their famous comment that 'The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.' They argued that the most successful school systems recruit their teachers from the top third of each cohort of graduates, while the lesser successful systems 'rarely attract the right people into teaching.' While the McKinsey Report has impacted on educational policy makers around Australia, this approach to quality teaching seems particularly simplistic. University-auspiced results themselves can be criticised for their validity and accuracy, and to accept them as a major determinant of quality teaching highlights only one dimension of professional capability. Teaching is usually seen as a collaborative effort where, to use a sporting analogy, a good team playing well together can defeat a group of individuals regardless of their specific talents. In terms of comparing the impact of teachers in 'like schools' and therefore discounting for a complex

mix of social variables, questions need to be raised as to whether this is in fact possible because good professional teachers do not 'discount' in this way. Good professional teachers connect the cultures of school and home to make sense of knowledge production and how learning always takes place within the social milieu of diverse communities involving factors of class, race, Indigeneity, gender, disability and the like (Ball and Tyson, 2011). Quality teaching is not as crude and simplistic as the McKinsey Report attempts to make out, with its proposed measures essentially ignoring any deep valuation of educational objectives. Most critically, the report avoids any discussion of how communities themselves value and access education, instead assuming that the measuring rod is the labour *market* exclusively

Teacher education at Victoria University, Melbourne, is structured around a praxis inquiry protocol that encourages pre-service teachers to investigate professional practice through an integrated process of practice described, explained, theorised and changed. This paper reports on innovative pre-service programs that are attempting to develop the protocol further by incorporating practice imagined and practice re-imagined so that more inclusive forms of schooling are available for all school students. In various ways, pre-service teachers are placed in partnership schools for up to two days per week for classroom teaching, the design and implementation of applied curriculum projects and participation in teacher education subjects taught at the school. It is the role of university colleagues and preservice teachers to theorise professional practice as it occurs on site and to connect with key aspects of the literature.

Contextually, we work in three different school settings, all adapting to the parameters of approved teacher education programs. In brief, the detail of each setting involves:

1. A suburban Y10-12 senior college where a group of up to twenty five pre-service teachers spend two days per week in an integrated program of classroom teaching, curriculum project planning and implementation and general school experience. A feature of this program is a learning circle structure, where small teams of pre-service teachers rotate across their various responsibilities including two university core subjects. This integrated, learning circle structure is markedly different to the approach adopted by the regular lecture/tutorial arrangement.

2. An inner-city Y7-12 girls' college with a group of twenty two pre-service teachers working in a negotiated program involving two days per week of classroom teaching, curriculum development projects and two university core subjects. The week to week schedule is flexible and increasingly responsive to identified school needs and activities.

3. An outer suburban Y7-12 school with a group of twenty three pre-service teachers where, similar to the above, negotiated curriculum projects inform a mix of classroom teaching, university teaching and school based activities are pursued.

While we are also involved in a recently funded research project that has received ethics approval and is investigating these different approaches to 'on-site' teacher education, the authors have been collaborating on challenging their own understanding of on-site work and how outcomes for teacher graduates can be extended and enhanced. Within the broad tradition of participatory qualitative research, and drawing on a range of theorists who offer various insights relating to our circumstances and context, our methodology is considered a work in progress. While outlining our approach here, the methodological framework will be

clarified and strengthened as a powerful mechanism for understanding through our ongoing collaborative practitioner research.

We have been writing brief cases (Shulman, 1992) of our own experience, the key points of which have been incorporated below. These have been discussed in a 'case conference' format to support our attempts at theorising our own practices of teacher education. The systematic process of drawing on and theorising our own practice will inform the research project mentioned above and we hope is an evolving model for similar research project design.

In many respects, our approach to research emerges from a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) environment that embraces mutual personal and professional respect, commitment to progressive social and educational change and a generally Freireian analysis of the links between culture, language and action. Wenger's (1998) identification of the components of a social theory of learning that include meaning, practice, community and identity are also strong elements of our stance towards learning. After writing a series of cases regarding our work with pre-service teachers, we participated in a full-day case conference involving the reading and discussion of individual cases. These discussions were recorded and the transcripts analysed for patterns and themes, while the writing of this paper itself continued the contestation and interpretation of ideas. We accept Freire's view that as we act on the world, the world acts on us and as researchers, and the importance of our personal and collective understanding being edited as we interact and engage with each other. In this regard, we reflect Wenger's notion of 'legitimate peripheral participation' as we work and research with colleagues and pre-service teachers and then attempt to find meaning from experience amongst ourselves, moving within and between the formation of ideas. There is an intellectual humility associated with this work in respecting cultural and experiential backgrounds as we struggle to fashion new practices from the restraints of the conventional.

Throughout Victoria University's twenty year history, there has been a determination to encourage pre-service teachers to construct their own meaning from experience and to set about changing circumstances to authorise and admit all practitioners as co-constructors of their own destinies. This approach falls within the broad tradition of all knowledge being socially constructed through social action and by definition seeks to imagine and re-imagine what is in the best interests of the public good. For schools, this means that organisational structures, educational practices, curriculum design and teaching and assessment strategies are all subject to ongoing review to meet the learning needs and aspirations of all students. It is not appropriate to only consider better teaching technique to improve learning, but to connect the culture, history and language of communities with school knowledge so that the purpose and sense of understanding is located and positioned accordingly. From this it follows that improvements to teaching and learning that take place within pre-determined boundaries constrain and often alienate learning for many students from diverse cultural surroundings. It is necessary therefore to look beyond current hegemonic practices (and curricula), embedded as they are in a neoliberal view of the world, that impede local pedagogies and instead envisage new landscapes that explode epistemological imprisonment.

**Philosophical Project Knowledge**

Since the introduction of the four-year Bachelor of Education P-12 at Victoria University in 1994, the two key themes of partnership –based teacher education and learning from practice have guided course design. The concepts of teaching rounds and teacher supervisors were

replaced by the establishment of long-term school-university partnerships and the role of teacher mentor. The VU Project Partnerships (PP) model of teacher education practicum involves pre-service teacher colleagues partnering with schools to develop and implement negotiated projects which respond to learning needs of students. Pre-service teachers are effectively "embedded" in their partner school for a full school year, working on an agreed project in the school for one day a week and undertaking their extended supervised teaching rounds in that setting. Each school is visited by a University Colleague on a regular basis and all graduating teachers are visited in their classrooms when teaching. The ongoing presence in the school for sustained periods allows for strong appreciation of social and cultural dynamics within the school community. The model is grounded in a philosophical commitment to social and educational equality with a commitment to *authentic teacher education as praxis*, collaboratively negotiated between student teachers, teachers and teacher educators across the two sites of school and university (Kruger and Cherednichenko, 2005).
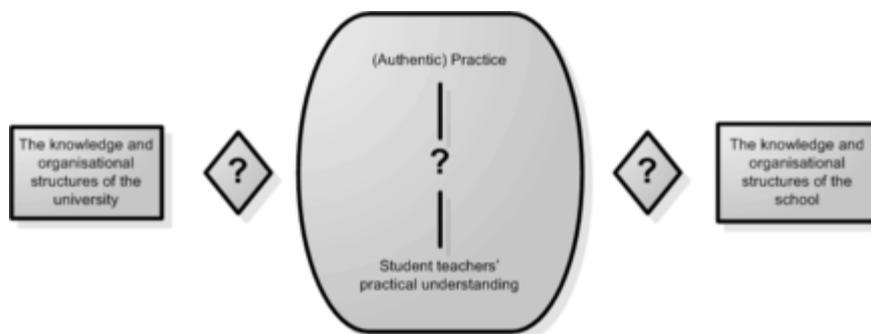


Figure 1. Teacher Education as a praxis problem (Kruger & Cherednichenko, 2005, p. 323)

This approach insists that learners and their needs must be the central focus of partnership work. Collaboration with school and community partners is rooted in the expectation of collective enquiry and the shared development of knowledge (Cacciattolo and Cherednichenko, 2007).

Another feature of pre-service teacher education at Victoria University is the Applied Curriculum Project (ACP) that is a year-long compulsory and negotiated project of curriculum development undertaken by pre-service teachers at every school. The intent of the ACP is to involve all participants more deeply in the curriculum and learning of the school and to establish more authentic relationships between pre-service teachers, mentors and school students.

Over the past few years, an enhanced approach to learning through practice has been introduced through the Praxis Inquiry Protocol (PIP). Following Freire, the protocol guides course design and partnership work in schools and establishes a cycle of practice described, practice explained and practice changed. For example, in the one-year Graduate Diploma of Secondary Education, the first few weeks of school experience (including a four-week teaching block) fall generally into the practice described category. The next few weeks of the program are practice explained, where pre-service teachers are expected to adopt more systematic and literature-based understandings of what they observe. In the third phase that begins the second half of the yearly program, emphasis shifts to attempts at theorising school and teaching experience so that general approaches and improvements can be justified. In the final phase of the program, proposals for change are considered and are included in portfolios for program interview purposes. The Praxis Inquiry Protocol has provided a consistent

approach to teaching, learning and partnership activity for pre-service teacher education and privileges practice as the context and impetus for trustworthy educational practice.

In taking these current circumstances into account, we have conceptualised an approach towards teacher education called Philosophical Project Knowledge (PPK) that seeks to shift boundaries of practice such that outcomes are more democratic and critical. Philosophical Project Knowledge as a process or outcome of pre-service teacher education would deliberately focus on a learning environment that confronts and critiques the nature of knowledge and of learning through investigations of negotiated projects that identify explicit epistemological ideas and principles within a framework of critical pedagogy so that enhanced learning contributes to a better society through communicative and social action. The notion of 'deliberative democracy' as proposed by Habermas (Thomassen, 2010, p. 111) is brought into play here. Habermas considered that communicative rather than instrumental reason was essential for a democratic society and that it was the democratic nature of a public sphere that gave consensus and ultimately law its legitimacy. Locating pre-service teacher education within this broad sweep of progressive tradition also gives it social and epistemological legitimacy. The essential features of Philosophical Project Knowledge are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Conditions for Philosophical Project Knowledge

| Conditions | Implications |
|---|---|
| Investigation of culture, structure, agency, society, power | Transforming system/lifeworld relationships |
| Partnership with schools and teachers | Immersion in professional practice |
| Re-imagining professional practice | Praxis Inquiry Protocol |
| Authorisation for decision-making | Autonomy of professional experience |
| Challenging traditional modes of operation | Innovative practice |
| Integrated reading, discourse, reflection | Theorising practice |
| Contributions from all participants | Enhanced professional collegiality |
| Ongoing partnership with schools | Extended time line of experience |
| Critical practice, discourse and reflection | Enabling of critical pedagogy |

A means of moving towards these conditions is immersing pre-service teachers more deeply in professional practice via 'on-site' school-university partnerships. As mentioned above, this approach involves the incorporation and application of practice theorising on-site through the teaching of university units, classroom teaching and Applied Curriculum Projects (ACPs). All of which is designed to support the learning of all participants, including school students. For instance at one school site, five ACPs are negotiated by teams of pre-service teachers (generally 2 – 6 members), university colleague and the school staff. The ACPs ideally complement and integrate the teaching and research requirements of the school with the curriculum inquiry unit contents of the university program. If this occurs then it is the basis for a strong educational partnership. The ACPs offer such benefits as support of school

student learning and the opportunity for pre-service teachers to explore questions of teaching, learning, curriculum, assessment and the social context of schooling, making explicit links between practice and theory. Working co-operatively with mentor teachers to negotiate the projects, pre-service teachers are able to develop skills and understanding in curriculum development and evaluation and contribute positively to school-based curriculum initiatives.

As each of these relationships in Table 1 have developed, so too have the opportunities been embraced by pre-service teachers to become immersed in not only the core focus of the school, that is classroom teaching and learning, but also to be granted license to critique the pedagogical context of the learning community. Such critique has most often been welcomed and supported by the schools, as the relationship moves beyond the regulated requirements of pre-service practicum placement in a host school. Collaborations around the potential of joint projects including particular ACPs have often drawn the respective partners closer through the recognition of what the school is seeking to achieve for their students. A common consideration has been recognised in relation to the development of school-based research, aimed at gaining a refined insight into both the existing experiences of students as well as evaluating initiatives related to responding to student learning needs.

> *In projects and movements aimed at collective capacity building, we see people securing new ways of working on the basis of collective commitment. We see them achieving new ways of working and new ways of being that have legitimacy because their decisions are made in conditions like those ….the conditions of public discourse in public spheres* (Kemmis and Mc Taggart 2005 p.598).

Upon the development of a relationship formed around the conditions referred to by Kemmis and McTaggart the school and university continue to build and refine conditions of professional development, more specifically one which seeks to embrace the challenges of and opportunities for critical pedagogy.

> *Critical pedagogy is a complex notion that asks much of the practitioners who embrace it. Teaching a critical pedagogy involves more than learning a few pedagogical techniques and the knowledge required by the curriculum, the standards, or the textbook. Critical teachers must understand not only a wide body of subject matter but also the political structure of the school.* (Kincheloe 2008 p.2)

**Discussion**

We have selected two extracts below from our data that illustrate some of the conditions that support our concept of Philosophical Project Knowledge. The extracts are not considered as reflecting all of the conditions in Table 1, but they do connect the practices of pre-service teachers and ourselves in grappling with the imagining and re-imagining of educational and social realities. These are issues that the McKinsey Report does not consider, that is, exactly how human participants work together in understanding their situations and how changes might be made collectively for a more satisfying and socially productive and democratic existence.

Extract 1: Immersion in professional practice

*I think the pre-service teachers I'm working with at ……… (secondary school) already have a degree of professional responsibility and agency in that school setting that for me reframes the way they tackle particular topics or issues in our learning more generally. Or at least I can see the possibilities or the potential, or at least I think that's what it should and could mean and it's a few things: it's being there, but it's the connections with other colleagues, it's the active contribution to teaching and learning in that setting, authentic, genuine, whatever word you want to use, but real.* (Case conference transcript, July 2010)

These comments from a university lecturer regarding her extended, on-site experience at a particular school, indicates her observations of pre-service teachers grappling with the complexities of professional practice at the secondary level. The lecturer does not report her situation from a skills-based, somewhat superficial perspective, but instead suggests that pre-service teachers exhibit some 'professional responsibility and agency' attributes usually associated with graduate teachers. This results in a reframing of issues and learning, presumably over and above the usual tasks of lesson planning, curriculum development and the like. She then goes on to describe in broad terms why this situation may have come about, primarily it seems because of the opportunity of being in a professional position where it is expected that the wide range of professional tasks will be undertaken. This provides for 'authentic,' 'genuine' and 'real' experience from which professional responsibility and agency emerge. These concepts begin to describe educational practice that is located alongside practitioners as they design learning environments, as they interact with school students, as they confront and resolve a multitude of issues and problems every day and as they come to appreciate the daily frustrations and exaltations of intensive human interaction. It is difficult to envisage how such experience can be obtained without the close, sustained relationship with practice that on-site pre-service teacher education enables. As the lecturer states, it is this 'connection with other colleagues' that establishes the necessary respectful, personal and professional relationship with a range of practitioners including school students that concentrates mutual concern on the need to expand rather than restrict learning. Ultimately, pre-service teacher education should impact on classroom learning for all participants, something that is rather difficult if you are 'not there.'

Extract 2: Enabling critical practice, discourse and reflection / Enabling of critical pedagogy

*The pre-service teachers began their inquiry by observing and recording the time students were on task in the classroom. The pre-service teachers were then asked to record and note how much time the students were on task when learning. To do this, one group of pre-service teachers investigated classroom environments. Systematic observations were to note the number of students on task in a defined year level. The group of pre-service teachers spent a day in classes gathering data on student engagement for learning.*

*At the end of the school day the pre-service teachers returned exhausted. They began conversations with peers. They were very frustrated and confused by their task stating that their task had been extremely difficult. Eventually after reflecting, they understood why the task had been so difficult and jointly asked the question of the students they had been observing - 'But what does learning really look like?' As the lecturer, I was delighted with the outcome of their observations. The pre-service teachers began asking teachers and peers about the characteristics of learning. It had challenged each member of the team as they began to question not only how learning may or may not be perceived, but also image what is recognised as learning in the classroom.* (Case conference transcript, July 2010)

There are many possibilities for Applied Curriculum Projects (ACPs). The case above outlines an ACP involving researching Junior School pedagogy in a Year 7 secondary school curriculum. The investigation used a range of methodological tools, one of which was data collected by pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers assisted the research project by collecting data from the Junior School as they worked closely with leading teachers. The data collected by pre-service teachers was further enhanced through an extensive review of professional reading and published literature on effective transition and junior school pedagogy/curriculum. This was the central focus for the project. Addressing these key issues, the school recognised that the ACP would add to the collection of data to support changes that might be required in the junior school curriculum and structure to improve practice and outcomes for students.

Researching practice; what's in it for the teachers and the pre-service teachers? There is opportunity to use the findings in planning for teaching and learning, as well as current and prior experiences, to extend their knowledge of educational practice to enhance and improve their effectiveness as teachers. Research is designed to help participants' establish an inquiry and create a foundation for imagining, learning and reflecting on practices and issues as a basis for scholarly improvement. Providing a space for reflecting on research and inquiry is vital. Loughran and Russell (2002) argue that reflection emerges as a suggested way of helping educators better understand what they know and do in developing their knowledge of practice through reconsidering what they learn in practice. Furthermore, reflection is important in order to sustain the professional health and competence of teachers and the ability to exercise professional judgment which is, in fact, informed through teachers' reflection on their practice (Day, 1999). As all pre-service teachers at Victoria University are in schools two days per week and for whole weeks (the number of which depends on the year level of the pre-service teacher) there are mechanisms to develop Applied Curriculum Projects alongside teaching practice and to integrate opportunities for reflexivity.

Subsequently, the learning and findings indicated from the extracts above led to new thinking and critical knowledge about student learning in the context of particular school constructs. Imagining new conditions for learning was exciting and gathered momentum as the year progressed. Significantly, the data and rigorous analysis by the pre-service teachers provided evidence for change in the school. Teachers and pre-service teachers presented the project to the leadership group within the school. The findings strengthened the PPK approach of the school community. The project became the basis of a further inquiry project and was awarded a grant from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

**Perspectives arising**

To return to our argument as outlined above, a consistent theme that has underpinned pre-service teacher education at Victoria University for the past twenty years has been the concept of social practice. Under this partnership-based or 'community of practice' approach (see above), learning is distinguished as a social act based in the absorbing and reflexive experience of participants. Within each community and family there will be a range of experience drawn from both local and more general settings that will be brought to bear on meaning making for all concerned. If this cyclic process of action and contemplation is diminished or only exploited occasionally, then learning will wither on the cognitive vine for children and adults alike. Ensuring that social practice is the key feature of pre-service teacher education is a daunting task, given the many structural and educational requirements of bureaucratic and conservative education systems. Not only must new structures be found

that create flexible and unorthodox topographies of challenge, but these must be theorised from a progressive lens that explains and guides further change. In this way, pre-service teacher education is constantly in a state of restlessness seeking new comprehensions of schooling, knowledge and pedagogy.

John Dewey argued that 'We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience', that is, the experience alone does not lead to learning. Reflecting on practice and history in teacher education can be directly linked to improved teaching and learning. It is the reflection on experience that enhances learning. This builds on Dewey's (1966) notion that praxis inquiry can be viewed as a reflective bridge that enables teachers to think, challenge and question educational policies or practices. Brookfield (1995) emphasizes the importance of the reflective practice literature for offering teachers a variety of approaches to examine their practice so that they may discover and research taken-for-granted assumptions that influence their approach to practice: 'We can learn about, and start experimenting with, different approaches to assumptions hunting. Many of these approaches outline ways in which a program for the encouragement of reflective practice in others can be systematically developed' (Brookfield, pp. 218–219). New knowledge brings a closer consideration of relationships and power and informs a critique of social constructs.

According to Cochrane-Smith and Zeichner (2005), there are a number of research priorities in teacher education as well as gaps in the research base that need urgent attention. In attempting to strengthen and theorise the practice of pre-service teacher education, we are endeavouring to push past existing arrangements and move to a new position whereby teacher graduates are generally comfortable with their personal professional agency and at least exposed to a historicised practice. This is required if schools are to change to continuously meet the learning needs of school students from a diverse range of backgrounds. While it is most appropriate for teachers to become better teachers and curriculum developers within different subject areas, it is also necessary for teachers to imagine and re-imagine new vistas of learning that encourage all students to investigate knowledge, culture and society so that resourceful and creative understandings are produced. As the neoliberal era has proceeded (1980-present), there has been support for the notion of 'teacher quality' and 'effective schooling' (DEECD, 2011) as the means for improving student learning. This argues that the main factor influencing student learning is the teacher rather than factors external to the school such as community knowledge and interests, family background, economic standing, cultural associations and geographical locations. Good teachers can apparently work entirely within knowledge domains without needing to draw upon prior understandings of students and can engage key ideas without providing cognitive bridges with what is already known. While Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK, see Shulman, 1987) accurately portrays the teacher bringing together curriculum content with pedagogical strategies, our concept of Philosophical Project Knowledge (PPK) goes further in providing a context of historicised social experience and community culture for the challenge of new ideas and dilemmas.

Other models have also been proposed to improve pre-service teacher education and to enhance learning outcomes in schools. For example, a number of states in the USA have recently adopted a 'clinical' model (NCATE, 2011) that purports to develop 'programs that are fully grounded in clinical practice and interwoven with academic content and professional courses' (p. ii). It is important to determine whether the notion of 'clinic' is correct for education, given that it may generate images of patients attending to be diagnosed, treated and cured of deficiencies by detached experts.  Some comments reinforce this view in

suggesting that teachers work 'in much the same way that a family doctor must master the knowledge base of medicine as well as be able to understand patients and their symptoms to deliver a course of treatment that can achieve the best possible outcome' (NCATE, 2011, p. 27). While we do not seek to discredit the proposals of others regardless of detail that surrounds such notion, we do not accept that the 'school as clinic' or 'teacher as clinician' model is an accurate representation of the educative roles of teachers, students and university colleagues working and researching together. Our attempt at conceptualising professional practice for pre-service teachers as moving towards a construction of Philosophical Project Knowledge is dramatically different to the clinical model. Here we envisage collaborative teams of practitioners working on challenging issues and problems that arise because of mutual interest and which result in increased understanding of creative epistemological environments. This is the process whereby 'effectiveness' and 'quality' reside in the generative formats of learning erected by democratic circles of concerned and engaged participants.

In summarising our current aspirational thinking for pre-service teacher education in Table 1 above, we have outlined a holistic and integrated approach to learning. Our stance towards society, schooling and knowledge is clearly one of participatory action where learning is an active and integrated theorising of practice, reflecting on meaning and producing new and personal interpretations of social reality. Learning and lifeworld are not constrained by system convention or regulation. The summary table displays a number of features that arise from 'immersion in professional practice' and rely on all practitioners changing practice as practice changes them. Theorising of practice must include active participation with the thoughts and experiences of others both local and global and as recorded in the recognised texts of history and province. Participants are 'authorised' to construct their own thinking, to risk their own practice and to consider all outcomes whether apparently reasonable or not. In this way, fields of possible educational oppression such as knowledge disciplines, approaches to teaching and learning and assessment regimes can be resisted and transformed. As Freire outlined (see quote at top of paper), an active process of changing the world for majority interest leads inexorably towards a critical viewpoint where critique and reconstruction of current thinking and practice becomes possible and where human knowledge becomes more congruent with experience. Given the dominance of neoliberal ideology at present, it must be stated that prospects for Philosophical Project Knowledge as we describe are unlikely in most teacher education programs. Conversely, conditions of conservatism and constraint also provide scope for fertile imagination and action on which human satisfaction and dignity depend.

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