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***‘Stepping back’ to understand learning: Pre-Service Teachers’ perspectives on their learning through authentic experiences in professional settings***

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This paper will examine Pre-Service Teachers’ (PSTs) perspectives on their learning through their involvement in one of three workplace-based initiatives undertaken as part of their teacher education program. Research conducted by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2008) confirms that highly effective teachers support meaningful learning in a number of ways, including ‘creating ambitious and meaningful tasks’ that reflect how knowledge is used in the field, by engaging students in active learning and by encouraging the type of thinking that enables students to learn to evaluate and guide their own learning (p. 5). The three school-based initiatives selected for this research project have been designed accordingly in an attempt to promote meaningful learning for PSTs. The initiatives that are examined are *The Youth Festival*, undertaken as part of the Graduate Diploma of Education Secondary (GDE Sec); *Pathways to the Adult World (PAW)*; and, several *Small Group Learning Projects* in the Bachelor of Education (Physical Education).

The study has been conducted as a University of Ballarat Institute of Professional and Organisational Learning (IPOL) teaching and learning fellowship. While the researchers employed a qualitative, self-study methodology in the research, this paper focuses on the PSTs self-study on their learning through their involvement in the various initiatives. Data were derived from an assessment task that was completed by the PSTs after their involvement in one of the work-place based initiatives and subjected to thematic analysis by the researchers. The research attempts to interrogate and reveal what students say that they are learning through their authentic experience in a professional education setting as part of their teacher education coursework.

Keywords: Teacher education, Work-integrated learning, Self-study methodology, reflective practice.

### **Introduction**

School settings offer abundant opportunities for partnerships that foster Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) learning and engagement in authentic environments where real work corresponds with real life. Traditionally in teacher education, authentic professional settings have been utilised as sites of learning for teaching practicum using a ‘singleton model’ where a PST works in a classroom under the close supervision of an experienced teacher. PST learning as part of university coursework can also be undertaken in school settings. The underpinning premise of such programs,

sometimes referred to as ‘Service Learning’ or ‘Work-Integrated Learning,’ is that ‘learning is deepened by expanding the notion of the traditional classroom to include real people and actual situations in the community’ (Munter, 2002, p. 153), in this case, with students in schools.

This paper investigates three curriculum initiatives, conducted in the School of Education at the University of Ballarat where authentic school settings are utilised to promote PST learning as part of coursework. The curriculum initiatives are designed to supplement and complement, not replace, existing practicum arrangements. The selected curriculum initiatives at the university are imbedded within specific courses and local schools provide time, space, and access to children so that PSTs can engage in ‘hands-on’ learning. In order to be welcomed into various schools we looked for partnership opportunities where PST activity might ‘add value to the host organisations’ by ‘enabling work that might not otherwise be done’ (Harris, Jones & Coutts, 2010, p. 459) rather than be burdensome to the schools, take time away from regular school curriculum programs or add to teacher workloads. The partnerships between the university and the individual schools provided opportunities for PSTs to refine their own professional practice while offering significant learning opportunities for young students that mainstream teaching cannot always provide. Importantly, these initiatives differ from a teaching practicum in that it is the course lecturer, rather than the classroom teacher, who takes responsibility for structuring the learning experience, scaffolding learning and assessing learning.

### **Rationale for research**

Three curriculum initiatives currently offered in the School of Education as part of the courses *Becoming a Teacher II*, *Schools Experience Seminar* and *Young People and their Worlds* are investigated in this paper. These school-based initiatives aim to promote pedagogical learning for PSTs through engagement with young people in a range of authentic school settings, whilst providing opportunities for learning by the student participants. The three initiatives are:

1. *Pathways to the Adult World (PAW)*, a program that is taught by second year *Bachelor of Education [Physical Education] (B.ED [PE])* PSTs over 6 weeks to year 7 and 8 students at a local secondary school as part of the undergraduate course *Becoming a Teacher II*. The PAW program, which focuses on developing social and emotional intelligence, was designed by teachers at the school.
2. *The Youth Festival (YF)*, a learning task where *Graduate Diploma of Education [Secondary] (GDE[Sec])* PSTs organise a mini-conference for senior students in two local secondary schools as part of the course *Young People and their Worlds*. The PSTs, in small teams, identify a youth issue that is drawn from their involvement in a youth focus group. Each team then develops and teaches a workshop that is designed to be engaging, appealing and informative for a targeted group of young people.
3. *Alternate Learning Experience (ALE)* was conducted in one of three local schools in the course *Schools Experience Seminar* in the *Bachelor of Education (Physical Education)*. Each small group of secondary PSTs is required to develop a specific project with primary school students. The programs require the PSTs to work in areas outside a traditional secondary PE environment. The programs vary and include reading recovery/literacy support, numeracy learning, physical education

programs for children with learning and behavioural disorders, fundamental motor skills development programs, fine and gross motor skills programs, art programs, inquiry based learning for 'gifted' students, cooking and healthy eating programs, gardening projects, book club and 'super coach'/football skills development.

Our initial summation of the three curriculum initiatives was that they all appeared to be highly successful on a number of levels in facilitating PST learning. Furthermore, the secondary and primary schools involved had expressed their satisfaction with the accomplishments of their students and staff through the various arrangements with the university. Overall, the partnerships appeared to have been worthwhile and to have led to a number of 'wins' for both institutions (the university and the school) in terms of their respective students' learning and engagement. No comprehensive inquiry, however, had been conducted into PSTs' learning through the curriculum initiatives.

McIntyre, Byrd and Foxx (1996) highlight the necessity for research that investigates whether field experiences actually contribute to preparing 'thoughtful, reflective teachers' who 'are more effective in the classroom than those prepared in more traditional, apprentice-type programs' (p. 173). The PSTs involved in all three initiatives had completed coursework assessment tasks that involved reflective writing. Their self-study assessment pieces had provided some evidence of learning and also of some of the difficulties the PSTs had encountered. We decided to analyse the students' reflective writing in a research project that investigates their learning in authentic professional settings.

### **Literature review**

Darling-Hammond (2008) explains that, in order to contend with the modern world and the shifts that it will undergo in the future, it is essential that learners are assisted to learn in 'powerful ways':

[E]ffective education can no longer be focused on transmission pieces of information that, once memorised, constitute a stable storehouse of knowledge. Education must help students learn how to learn in powerful ways, so that they can manage the demands of changing information, technologies, jobs, and social conditions (Darling-Hammond, 2008, p. 2).

It is apparent that opportunities for deep learning are essential for PSTs as learners in contemporary tertiary education. The three curriculum initiatives that are examined in this paper appear to meet several of the requirements for effecting meaningful learning, as described by Darling-Hammond, specifically, 'creating ambitious and meaningful tasks that reflect how knowledge is used in the field', 'engaging students in active learning, so that they can apply and test what they know', 'providing ... opportunities for work', and 'encouraging strategic and metacognitive thinking, so that students can learn to evaluate and guide their own learning' (Darling-Hammond et al, 2008, p. 5). Berry and Loughran (2002) concur, further recognising the importance of authentic learning opportunities in facilitating pedagogical learning. These authors state that 'learning about teaching must be imbedded within meaningful experiences if such learning is to be more than a search for a recipe or the simple use of learning procedure' (p. 28).

Harris and her colleagues (2010) point out that Work-Integrated Learning has the potential to build capacity for student learning partnerships between universities and host organisations. Furthermore, from their research into Work-Integrated Learning in the community services sector, these researchers conclude that when universities and host organisations collaborate they are able to produce conditions conducive to learning that benefit both institutions and help to forge a strong, collective community of practice. Work-Integrated Learning also provides opportunities for PSTs to exercise 'individual agency', by taking responsibility for their 'actions, decisions and continuing learning' (Walkington, 2010, p. 177). The varied environments in which students can work also serve to provide opportunities for rich and contrasting learning situations and experiences.

Work-Integrated Learning seems to offer particular opportunities for facilitating powerful learning experiences, as Walkington states: 'integrating university study and the workplace offers a unique experience for developing authentic professional behaviour' (Walkington, 2010, p. 177). We are particularly interested to examine if the learning experiences undertaken by our students are contributing to their deep professional knowledge and, furthermore, what the benefits are for the PSTs when structured learning experiences are conducted in authentic professional settings. In this paper we provide examples of what we term 'powerful learning experiences that develop authentic professional behaviour'. These examples will be drawn from the PSTs personal reflections on their learning at the completion of their involvement in the learning initiatives.

### **Methodology**

As this research attempts to uncover evidence of 'meaningful learning' by PSTs, a self-study methodology is adopted. Self-study methodology, is 'a natural progression from the concept of reflective practice' (Loughran & Russell, 2002) and can provide a 'basis for knowing' (Bullock, 2009, p. 291) about teaching and learning. Furthermore, as Russell (2010) recognises, self-study methodology can provide 'powerful insights' into one's own practice as a teacher. As succinctly expressed by Bass, Anderson-Patton and Allender (2002) a self-study is reflexive in nature and specific to a particular context: 'Self-study suggests that our understanding of teaching and learning derives from contextualised knowledge, by a particularly reflective knower in a particular teaching situation' (p. 56). Furthermore, a pedagogy of tertiary education can be constructed through 'sustained, systematic and careful inquiry into one's own practice' (Bullock, 2009, p. 291) to look at what we do as teachers in a 'probing, professional way' (Myers, 2002, p. 130). In this paper we endeavour to outline examples where our students appear to 'see beyond practice alone' (Loughran, 2006, p. 98) thus indicating some of their learning about teaching as they engaged in self-study.

Reflective practice is imbedded in a constructivist framework that 'emphasises the growth of the prospective teacher through experiences, reflection and self-examination' (McIntyre, Byrd & Foxx, 1996, pp. 171-172). McIntyre, Byrd and Foxx explain how PSTs construct learning through personal reflection:

Constructivist programs recognise that teachers are primarily persons who enter the program processing values and beliefs that form the foundation from which they make professional choices. Student teachers, within this framework view teaching as ongoing decision making rather than as a product or recipe. These student teachers learn that significant education must present learners with relevant problematic situations in which the learner can manipulate objects to see what happens, to question what is already known, to compare their findings and assumptions with those of others, and to search for their own answers (McIntyre, Byrd & Foxx, 1996, p. 172).

Thus, problematic situations can provide PSTs with circumstances to probe, question and make decisions, contributing to their professional growth and learning. Schools, as authentic workplaces, potentially offer rich settings for such ruminations to occur.

## **Method**

PSTs who were enrolled in one of the three selected courses in 2010 were invited to contribute their assessment piece to be analysed for the research project. Ethics approval for the research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Ballarat. During and after their involvement in one of the curriculum initiatives, all PSTs completed reflective diaries, reports or portfolios for their assessment. A total of 56 participants out of a possible 96 in the ALE provided written consent for their assessment to be analysed in the study, 23 PSTs out of 63 for YF, and 54 out of 105 of those involved in PAW. Qualitative data derived from the assessment tasks as completed by the PSTs, and set out in the respective course descriptions, were subjected to thematic analysis by the two researchers. Each of the authors of this paper read through the PSTs' assessment tasks and identified chunks of data that provided evidence of learning. We then identified themes that pertained to the PSTs engagement in their learning and their learning about learning, learners, self and others. We revisited the data and manually coded the chunks of data into separate tables according to these themes, combining data from each of the three initiatives.

We used each other as 'sceptical colleagues' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 113) to choose the data for this paper. This required each of us to draw examples from each of the themes that supported the concept of powerful learning and to provide justification to the other for why the particular example fitted within the concept. In the limited space available in this paper we will provide examples of what we identify as 'powerful learning that contributes to authentic professional behavior', as articulated by our students in their reflective writing. We consider that this deep learning is unlikely to have taken place during coursework in the confines of the university classroom.

The metaphor of 'stepping back' is used by two of the PSTs to describe their active observation of their students' learning. Edward (PAW) states: *'I really enjoyed team teaching as it allowed me to take a step back and watch'* while Nellie (ALE) describes the dual function of the reflective process (reflection on her own learning and reflection on her students' learning) as one of 'stepping back':

*Being a teacher allows you to step back and not only look at the students you teach, and how they can learn best, but it also allows you to step back and understand your own learning better (Nellie, ALE).*

The comments by both PSTs (Edward and Nellie) encapsulate ‘stepping back’ as the focus of this paper.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Powerful learning: Alternative Learning Experience (ALE)***

While there were numerous examples of ‘powerful learning that contributes to authentic professional behaviour’ identified in the data from the ALE initiative, selected examples will be offered here. Nina and Alice explain the challenge ALE presented to them as beginning teachers (physical educators) who had no knowledge of how to teach a child to read. Prior to commencing her ALE, Nina instigated her own professional development by visiting the classroom of a local teacher who was considered a literacy expert. She worked alongside the teacher, learning how to teach young children to read. She then developed a specific reading program that she implemented with a prep student in her ALE:

*Overall the biggest challenge was teaching something we had not been trained to do. I am trained to teach students health and physical education but I am not trained to teach a grade one student how to read and write. It was a bit weird to be thrown into the task but I think I handled it very well. To accommodate, I researched the topic myself by going to a reading recovery session at [another] primary school and I collected resources and advice off my mentor teacher (Nina, ALE).*

Nina’s learning stems from a self-identified lack of knowledge to complete the learning task, so she finds a way to enhance her competence. The authentic nature of the task is likely to have encouraged Nina to take these steps. Alice was also required to implement a reading program with a young learner but her reflection focused on self-concept of learners. The experience prompted her to empathise with the emotional aspects of learning to read:

*I haven’t had to deal with teaching someone to read before. By going through this process with someone has helped me see how hard it can be for someone to learn to read, and also the embarrassment and angst that people go through when learning to read. It has helped me come to grips with how some students, even at a secondary level, struggle to read, and may not have had the opportunity for one-on-one work to help build these basic skills (Alice, ALE).*

Alice has drawn parallels between the student she worked with and her future secondary students and how one-on-one assistance might be beneficial in enhancing their future confidence as learners. Seb, Marcia and Archie sum up what they learnt about the importance of students learning by working things out for themselves:

*I didn’t realise just how important it is to teach these students how to actually figure out problems for themselves (Seb, ALE).*

*I am ... good at ‘spoon feeding’ my students and they will happily have me do everything for them (Marcia, ALE).*

*I have learnt the importance of providing a lesson that allows the student to discover on their own instead of using direct instruction all the time. Using guided discovery is a great way for students to be independent learners (Archie, ALE).*

Their words provide a salutary reminder for teacher educators of the importance of rich experiences that allow learners to learn by drawing on their own resources – a basic premise that illustrates the one of the fundamental advantages of learning for PSTs in authentic professional settings.

### ***Powerful learning: Pathways to the Adult World (PAW)***

There is some evidence that the PSTs who were involved in the PAW program were able to develop deep professional knowledge through their engagement in unique teaching and learning experiences. Some PSTs found themselves questioning their values. Henry and Edward describe the new learning opportunities they experienced and how reality was quite different to what they had expected:

*Group discussions often lead to students telling their own stories, and how events made them feel. I got an insight into their adolescent world, and it was a lot different than I thought it was (Henry, PAW).*

*I learnt a lot from the PAW program because I was able to teach in a new area. Focusing on feelings rather than PE....It was a nice change. It opened my eyes to the range of maturity levels of students and their varying levels of ability (Edward, PAW).*

These PSTs articulated that education is not simply an end product of the transfer of knowledge, but rather an ongoing process that involves complex learning relationships that encourage independent thinkers and questioning minds. Education of the whole person is facilitated through examining and encouraging the development of Emotional Intelligence (EQ). The value of these ideas and concepts is raised by Carlos and Annie:

*'PAW has been fantastic for me as a developing teacher. Working with other PSTs and being aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses has been a good eye opener as well as working with the students. I believe that developing a greater awareness of EQ would probably be the most beneficial aspect of being a successful and respected teacher' (Carlos, PAW).*

*This is strongly related to student achievement due to the student feeling happier and confident in the classroom i.e. better listening and behaviour. Being aware of the emotional needs of students allows the emotionally intelligent teacher to use this sensitivity to create more authentic learning opportunities that extend beyond the simple transition of knowledge. This is what I learned through my involvement in this program (Annie, PAW).*

### ***Powerful learning: Youth Festival (YF)***

Some of the PSTs involved in the Youth Festival described aspects of their teaching that didn't go according to plan. Nonetheless, on reflection they were often able to describe how another approach may have evoked a different response from the learners they were working with. Jasmine and Meg explain:

*I was a little disappointed at how much insight I got from the focus group aspect of the Youth Festival – perhaps I was expecting to be blown away by all these opinions and perspectives that I was completely unaware of, or perhaps I was expecting to come away from the focus group having an idea of the sort of things we could run as a workshop. I feel we didn't ask the right kind of questions and pursued superficial answers.... a few different approaches might have encouraged deeper reflection, or at least would have evoked a slightly different reaction (Jasmine, YF).*

*The continuum didn't work as well as it could because most students seemed to follow the crowd. You had to watch closely for any signals that they were not happy with their positions but were not brave enough to move because they would be put on the spot as to their choices. These were quite confronting topics so it is understandable that some students would not want to be singled out, but it did make the continuum idea a little more difficult (Meg, YF).*

Careful observation of their learners enabled both Meg and Jasmine to think about why they didn't get the responses they were expecting. Jasmine attributed the questioning skills of the PSTs as a major factor, while Meg looked at the group dynamics and confidence of individual learners.

## **Conclusion**

From the examples provided in this paper, we can see that some of the PSTs who took part in this study were able to clearly articulate their learning and how it has contributed to their development as teachers. Through self-study 'small shifts of awareness were made visible' (Bass et al, 2002). Work-integrated learning provides opportunities for creating partnerships between teacher education institutions and individual schools where PSTs can explicitly connect theoretical and practical learning while student learning in schools is enhanced. While the PSTs may have engaged in some of the learning described in this paper within the university classrooms, it is our belief that the learning is less likely to have been as powerful and as personally relevant to our PSTs as it was in the school settings. The authentic classroom settings seem to call for accountability by PSTs, in that there was a necessity to successfully complete an authentic, meaningful task, and importantly, to develop and build learning relationships with young people in schools.

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