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Practice-based education (PBE): Teacher Educators' understandings, applications and implications for future practice

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Abstract

Practice-based education (PBE) has potential benefits for all stakeholders, including the prospect for students to apply, enrich and refine their discipline, operational and interpersonal knowledge, build networks, and source future employment (Billett, 2001; Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Harvey, Geall & Moon, 1998). While PBE is applied in a variety of courses throughout institutional contexts, academics' understandings of the term will implicitly influence how they design curriculum and facilitate PBE opportunities for their students. The aim of this paper is to explore Teacher Education academics' understandings, and applications of the term PBE at a regional NSW university.

Using the qualitative lens of phenomenography (e.g., Marton, 1986; Svensson, 2007), a sample of purposively selected academics were interviewed to identify their understandings of the term PBE and investigate where and how PBE opportunities were positioned in their subjects. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone, interviews transcribed and data analysed using inter and intra-textual thematic analysis (Mayhurl & Morehouse, 1994). The findings indicate that participants perceived PBE to be related to students engaging in workplace-relevant learning activities that assist in preparing them for their "day to day practice" as teachers. Results also showed that teacher educators applied PBE throughout their subjects through demonstrated lessons, case studies, web quests, electronic portfolios and learning tools. With the call for teacher education to be (re)focused on practice (e.g., Ball & Foran, 2009; Reid, 2011), PBE may be one pedagogical approach employed in tertiary settings to prepare students for the world of teaching.

Key Words: *phenomenography, Practice-Based Education (PBE), teacher education*

Introduction

Increasingly higher education institutions are being called to prepare work-ready graduates who can assume a valued role in a professional context upon their initial employment (Billett, 2001). Pre-service teacher education has traditionally adopted the model of professional experience placements to prepare graduates for the real-world tasks of their occupation. However, as Reid (2011) points out:

Students on practice placements are expected to practice their developing teaching skills in a setting or classroom, reflect on their practice and work to refine their skills with support and feedback. However, the fact that their *practice* in these placements is actually assessed as *performance* means that our students have had little opportunity to practice before they enter the field of *practice*. (p. 305)

Taking this tension into consideration, the authors of this paper offer the notion of Practice-Based Education (PBE) as a way to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop, rehearse and refine their pedagogical and discipline knowledge within the relative safety of the tertiary context, before *performing* in the high risk assessment environment of professional placement.

As part of CSU's strategy (2007-2011), the Education for Practice Institute (EFPI) was established to build on the university's strong tradition of preparing highly employable graduates for work in many professions and occupations. The mission of EFPI is to advance the quality of practice-based education at Charles Sturt University and beyond. This mission operates on several levels including supporting policy development, strategic planning and infrastructure, resource development, and further involvement in research and development projects. Given the current elevated profile of PBE within CSU, and the acclaimed benefits of PBE in the literature (Clarke & Burgess, 2009; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005; Fenton-O'Creevy, 2005), the purpose of this paper is to report on the findings relating to the following research questions:

- i) What do teacher education academics understand by the term PBE?; and
- ii) How do they apply these understandings to their practice?

Defining and exploring Practice-Based Education

The Education for Practice Institute (2011b) outlines that PBE is best understood as a curriculum framework that can be manipulated to fit particular situations as "practice-based education refers to education in goals, content and strategies that direct students' learning towards preparation for practice roles post graduation" (p. 4). PBE encompasses multiple pedagogical approaches such as problem-based learning, workplace learning (WPL), blended and flexible learning and inter-professional learning in a variety of learning contexts including on-campus, distance, workplace, e-learning and self-directed. It can be seen that PBE is more than a professional placement with industry: it encompasses a multitude of pedagogical strategies that can be real or simulated, performed on or off campus, synchronously or asynchronously, individually or in cooperative learning teams, for formative or summative assessment purposes and can be either academic or student facilitated (Education for Practice Institute, 2011a).

The adoption of PBE is framed in the argument that expertise does not "arise simply by absorbing a body of knowledge nor out of the mastery of theory" (Fenton-O'Creevy, 2005, p. 2). Expertise in a profession is characterised by the ability to transfer knowledge and skills to unfamiliar contexts (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005). Therefore PBE is presented as an approach to teaching that requires the learner to draw on academic knowledge and theory as a means of scaffolding for learning about the reality of occupational practice. Practice Based Education (PBE) assists in providing an interpersonal and pedagogical space for students to rehearse their declarative, procedural and ethical knowledge in a non-threatening learning environment (Clarke & Burgess, 2009). Furthermore, PBE provides authentic opportunities for students to connect theory and practice (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Therefore in order to provide a nexus between discipline knowledge and real-world occupational tasks, academics need to intentionally design PBE experiences that are sequentially scaffolded, and increase in difficulty, responsibility, initiative, and depth of knowledge as the student progresses through the course (Clarke & Burgess, 2009). PBE experiences create rehearsal spaces for future career skills that assist in transitioning students into the professions.

Little is known in regard to teacher education academics' understandings or meanings of PBE and their resultant applications of these understandings in designing and facilitating these experiences in their practice.

Method

Research Paradigm

This study employed a phenomenographical approach (Hitchcock, 2006; Marton, 1986; Svensson, 1997). Phenomenography emphasises description in order to develop an understanding of knowledge as a matter of meaning and the similarities and differences in meaning (Marton, 1986;

Svensson, 1997). As such, this research investigated the different ways in which individuals experience something or think about something. Qualitative data was gathered as researchers explored the different ways the participant sample, teacher education academics, understood and experienced PBE using a semi-structured interview guide approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Patton, 2002).

The significance of adopting this methodology is that the participants' enactment of PBE in their courses or subjects is derived from the meanings, definitions and concepts of PBE held by the participant. The object of the study is not on the phenomenon *per se*, but rather the relationships between the academic and the phenomenon (Bowden, 2005). Thus in this case, the research focuses on the academics' relationship with the concept of PBE in their practice.

Participants

As this paper is part of a broader research project, the participant sample consisted of 10 academics, four male and six female, from across the four Facilities including Arts, Business, Education and Science. Purposive sampling was adopted as the researchers needed to exercise judgment to select a sample that they believed, based on prior information, presented the data they required (Burns, 2000; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Participants' interest and willingness to be involved in the research was gauged by the researchers initially emailing academics using contact details gained through the staff contact database. Academics were provided with an information sheet and consent form to complete and provided with time to consider their participation in the research. The targeted participants in the sample had a range of experience, spanning 20 years in their respective profession before entering the academy and further, as an employee of the institution (4 years to 25 years). The participants were situated across a number of campuses. This paper reports on qualitative data collected from two participants from the Faculty of Education.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participant sample as they offered greater flexibility and enabled the academics' perspectives to be explored in-depth. These interviews were digitally recorded via speaker phone and an MP3 device. Each participant was interviewed once for approximately thirty minutes. Each interview began with the participant detailing the context of their teaching, outlining information about the Faculty and School in which they were situated, the courses and subjects which they taught and the nature of the student cohort. The interview schedule opened with the question: "What do you understand by the phrase practice-based education?" and participants were then prompted to provide both general and specific examples of enactment of PBE in their teaching context. This provided opportunities for the participants to engage in further discussions of their application of this approach to learning in higher education. The responses to the interview questions provided data relating to participants' academic context, understandings of the phrase PBE, *how* and *where* their knowledge was created regarding PBE, and their enactment of PBE in subjects and/or courses. As a secondary data source, participants supplied examples of teaching materials that illustrated the implementation of PBE in their teaching.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, and read several times by the researchers. Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) intra- and inter- analysis approach was used during this stage of the research. The intra-analysis approach involved the initial coding and identification of raw themes within each academic's transcript. Thematic aspects that arose included understandings of PBE, applications of PBE, specific examples of the enactment of PBE, and key words. The inter-analysis phase of data analyses involved examining the common themes across the data set with similar raw themes linked together, irrelevant themes dropped and higher order themes (more refined concepts) developed that specifically addressed the research questions. Participants were

grouped according to faculty area of Arts, Business, Education and Science. To facilitate consensus and verification on the representativeness and interpretation of the codes derived from the interviews, ongoing discussions among the researchers occurred, enabling critical reflection on the emergent themes. Teaching materials acted as confirmatory support for academics' understandings and applications of PBE and were matched to the themes identified in the interview data.

Results and Discussion

Each participant is presented in the study by the inclusion of the participant profile; the participant's understandings of PBE; and examples of the participant's application of PBE in their teaching practices.

Participant Profile 1: Meet Jennifer

Jennifer is an early career academic in the School of Education. During her two years in the School she has taught subjects relating to technology in education and more generally in the Technology and Applied Studies degree. Jennifer teaches at both undergraduate and postgraduate level with the majority of subjects being facilitated in distance education mode.

Understandings of PBE

During Jennifer's interview she described PBE in terms of "learning on the job", "work-based and placed" and learning "relevant to the workplace". It is evident from her responses that she connected PBE with the future profession and occupation of students. When asked "if you had to explain the term practice based education, what's your understanding of it?", Jennifer stated that "when [PBE] comes up ... students on prac, so it's sort of students out in the workplace, you know, in the field I guess and learning on the job". Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) can be used as a theoretical framework to unpack Jennifer's understandings of PBE. The concept of 'learning on the job' equates to Lave and Wenger's (1991) 'apprenticeship of observation'. In other words, the pre-service teacher acts as an apprentice as they observe and participate in the variety of real-world tasks required of a teaching professional. According to Wenger (1998), initially the legitimate peripheral participants contribute to the shared repertoire of the community of practice in a minimal way; however, it is in the learning process, in undertaking the tasks and participating in the conventions and rituals of the community, that the LPP moves from peripheral to full participation and essentially fashions their identity as a "master practitioner" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 111). As pre-service teachers experience the breadth of activities required of them in their future practice they more fully understand the role and function of the master teacher. Thus by designing a multitude of PBE experiences that reveal the complexities of the teacher's role, pre-service teachers can be more fully socialized into the occupational cultural community of teaching (Clark, 1996).

After initially working through her ideas, Jennifer expanded her explanation of PBE:

... as I've sort of become more involved with that sort of stuff, I've realised that what I do even in distance subjects is quite related to the idea I suppose because what my subjects are really around is you know the sorts of things teachers do in the workplace and the sorts of activities and the things they need to learn to be practising in the workplace, so I guess roughly that's my understanding, is things that are relevant to their workplace and relevant to the actual practices and the things they do in that workplace.

This response illustrated the notion of PBE as an umbrella term encompassing a variety of learning approaches and strategies that develop students' skills in preparation for their application in the

workplace. Jennifer's responses further indicated that she understood PBE in her context, to be concerned with "the sorts of things teachers do in the workplace and the sorts of activities and the things they need to learn to be practising in the workplace". Jennifer's understandings of PBE acknowledged that students were learning through activities in class time that emulated tasks undertaken by a professional in their practice.

The principles of PBE that are crucial to this research relate to practice. It is important to acknowledge firstly, the role of the learner as PBE is informed by a constructivist view of learning: one in which the learners construct their meaning of experiences in relation to the context (Wertsch, 1991), and secondly, the recognition that learning is socially constructed through participation in communities or groups (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Jennifer's understandings of PBE illustrate that she is aware of the importance of the context and the practices that need to be undertaken in that context. In the school context, learning is constructed in classrooms, staffrooms, during formal meetings and 'corridor conversations'. This learning happens because teaching occurs in social groups or communities. Similarly, in the tertiary setting, pre-service teachers are participants in social learning contexts in tutorials, and the offering of PBE experiences assists pre-service teachers to learn the skills of their profession.

Examples of PBE in practice

Jennifer's interview response illustrated specific examples of application of PBE in her teaching practices. She indicated that her practice was underpinned by the perspective and that she was "teaching my teachers what they need to do in the workplace... what they need in their day to day practice". Jennifer stated that her application of PBE attempted to make learning authentic for the student by first linking to workplace practice and skills and then exploring "...the theory that backs that approach up".

Jennifer indicated that she used PBE to teach pre-service teachers how to most effectively select a technological tool to teach syllabus content. Figure 1 illustrates how Jennifer embedded PBE in her teachings of technology education by creating a card game that required her pre-service teachers to most effectively align technology, with content and pedagogy. The card game acted as a PBE opportunity for her pre-service teachers as it provided them with a task that would be required of them in their future teaching contexts: preparing lessons that employ the use of technology to enhance student learning outcomes.

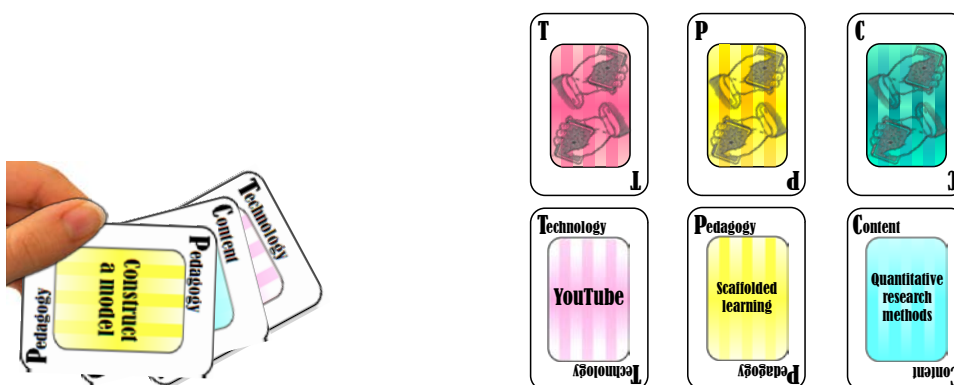


Figure 1: Card game

The design of the card game illustrated Jennifer's understandings of PBE as linking to the profession, developing skills for the profession, offering an authentic real life experience; and as an example of a pedagogical approach to PBE.

Participant Profile 2: Meet Trudy

Trudy is a lecturer in teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in the Faculty of Education. Although, Trudy does teach a small internal cohort of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course she predominately teaches via distance education mode.

Understandings of PBE

Trudy understood PBE as being concerned with the “practical” of a profession and “real examples”. When defining PBE, Trudy stated:

When I hear practiced based education I think of practical things, so my initial thought is that it's, in schools, it's like an apprenticeship, I guess, more like that. Because you're practicing and you're being educated at the same time, but considering it gets talked about at university, it's more, maybe, real examples of classroom practice in the teaching and learning activities. So that would be something, like, you give them examples of what you might do in a classroom and then you get them to make their own examples or to use those strategies and people run around saying micro-teaching. I'm not entirely sure what it is but I imagine it's mini teaching.... They pretend that they're in the real classroom and you give them examples from real life classrooms so that it's authentic.

Trudy's response highlighted that PBE not only involved students practicing in their professional setting (e.g., a school environment on professional experience placement) but also encompassed learning experiences in the tertiary setting constructed by teacher educators. Trudy too likened experiences of PBE to an apprenticeship and recognised that pre-service teachers needed to participate in authentic PBE experiences such as micro-teaching. Rehearsing teaching skills in a supportive learning context such as the university provides an authentic and valuable site for PBE. Ensuring that learning opportunities are intentionally planned, well designed and effectively supported will contribute to the quality of the learning that takes place in the workplace (Lave, 1993). Trudy further articulated that the benefits of PBE are:

... that it relates to the real world. Rather than being a big theoretical concept that's out there, it brings it into their real, every day working life ... and makes everything more relevant too. If I can't make the connections for the students between what they're learning and how they are going to use it then I'm not doing my job.

Here Trudy acknowledges the nexus between theory and practice and illustrates that PBE offers opportunities for learning to be made meaningful and relevant by considering and practicing the activities that will be required in the real world of teaching.

Trudy further offers benefits of PBE in her practice with pre-service teachers:

...having PBE embedded within subjects and courses should theoretically bring about better trained teachers – teachers who are prepared for the classroom. They are more prepared for the field, cause they've had experience and they have knowledge. It's not just from a book ... they've actually physically done it so when they are faced with a situation in the classroom it's easier for them to recall that knowledge and work with it because they have had a chance to rehearse it.

Brown, Collins, Duguid (1989) argue that the acquisition of knowledge and learning of skills should occur under conditions that are authentic. Authenticity requires students to apply their knowledge to cope with real tasks or problems that naturally occur in the workplace. Therefore PBE opportunities need to assist students to respond to tasks which are relevant, contextual and involve the synthesis of knowledge and skills rather than merely the application of procedural and

declarative knowledge (Biggs, 1995). Trudy recognises that by presenting pre-service teachers with real world problems and tasks provides opportunities for transferability of their knowledge and skills to unfamiliar contexts.

Trudy offered an array of examples of PBE in practice in her classroom including demonstrated lessons, case studies, web quests, scenarios, micro-teaching, and programming.

Conclusion

The findings of these participant profiles indicated that they perceived PBE to be related to students engaging in workplace-relevant learning activities that assist in preparing them for their “day to day practice” as teachers. With the call for teacher education to be (re)focused on practice (e.g., Ball & Foranzy, 2009; Reid, 2011), PBE may be one pedagogical approach employed in tertiary settings to prepare students for the life world of teaching.

In summary it was found that the two participants understood PBE as an umbrella term which could be used to engage pre-service teachers in variety of professional knowledge and skills necessary for professional practice. Further, the results showed that the participants perceived that PBE could be employed in teaching education through a range of approaches such as games, case studies, scenarios, programs, and micro-teaching.

The findings in this study are significant as they report on teacher educators’ application of PBE to prepare pre-service teachers for their future profession. While there were a limited number of participants in the study, the results have highlighted a need for further investigation of if, how and where PBE is adopted in teacher education courses and subjects and the perceived effectiveness for preparing pre-service teachers for the life world of teaching. Further research needs to consider how other teacher educators understand and apply PBE and their justification for doing so.

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