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FORGING A SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP FROM A TEACHER EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper describes an innovative cross-institutional learning partnership that was designed to foster the learning of both Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) and students and teachers from a local regional Secondary College. Around 150 Grade Nine (13-14 year old) students took part in a purpose-designed activity day at the university that was organised and conducted by 34 second year PSTs as part of their teacher education program. This project was designed as an authentic teaching experience for PSTs that would enable them to translate theory from their teacher education course into teaching practice. At the same time the secondary students were offered a range of learning experiences informed by school-derived curriculum. These specifically focused activities contributed to the students' school based learning programs whilst also encouraging them to think of university as a future option.

In this paper reflections, utilizing a self-study methodology, are provided by the lecturers who developed and implemented the program. The lecturers describe and discuss what they observed about the learning of the PSTs. Many of the PSTs indicated strongly that they were able to engage in a scaffolded, authentic teaching experience as preparation for their initial school placements. Overall, the evidence suggests that the initiative offered a powerful learning experience that enabled PSTs to connect theory with teaching practice.

Keywords: Theory-practice nexus, youth aspirations, teacher education, school-university partnerships, authentic learning.

INTRODUCTION

A criticism that is sometimes made of teacher school-based practicum is that the experience mostly benefits university students and not the schools in which it takes place. One aim of the project I describe in this paper was to find a way to offer a valuable and desired learning experience for secondary students at the same time that university Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) were able to practice their teaching skills. Building a relationship with a school that seeks to add value and richness to the school curriculum and is mutually beneficial to learning at both institutions, is paramount to a fruitful school-university learning partnership.

In this paper I provide a self-study of a cross-institutional, community teaching and learning project that my colleague (Anitra Goriss-Hunter) and I developed in the first semester of 2012. The learning project was developed as a partnership between the University of Ballarat and a local secondary School to promote learning for both PSTs and grade 9 secondary school students. This initiative involved 34 PSTs in planning, organising, coordinating and implementing hands-on learning experiences in their teaching method areas as part of a whole day program, called *WillUB12?*, to which the Grade Nine students (aged 13-14 years) were invited. The program provided an opportunity for authentic teaching and learning experiences for the PSTs as they conducted activities for the Grade Nine students who, in turn, were able to participate in a structured learning program.

The PSTs were undertaking their second year of a four-year undergraduate secondary teaching degree in the School of Education and Arts at the University of Ballarat, a regional university in Victoria. All PSTs were enrolled in one of four Joint Degrees in education: Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Education; Bachelor of Mathematical Science/Bachelor of Education; Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education; or Bachelor of Visual Arts/Bachelor of Education. The Joint Degree students are required to undertake their first 15-day teaching practicum in their third semester of study (of a total of eight semesters). Before undertaking their first practicum, Joint Degree students have already studied two education courses in their first year of study, and a third course, *Designing for Learning*, in which this project was situated, is a compulsory course undertaken in semester one of the second year of their program structure.

Theoretical underpinning

I have an on-going interest in developing and implementing community-based pedagogies that facilitate powerful learning for PSTs (Burke & Wheatland, 2011; Burke & Goriss-Hunter, 2012). Constructivist learning principles emphasise 'the growth of the prospective teacher through experiences, reflection and self-examination' (McIntyre, Byrd & Foxx, 1996, pp. 171-172). Within a constructivist learning program '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). Berry and Loughran (2002) further recognise 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). This is the premise that underpins the design of the learning experience for the PSTs and for the secondary students. The activity day idea was presented to the PSTs as a problematic situation that was expected to allow them to probe, question and make decisions that contribute to their professional growth and learning.

METHODOLOGY

It was in an earlier discussion about pedagogies that might bridge the theory-practice divide for Joint Degree PSTs that we (the authors of this paper) conceptualised the cross-institutional learning project. This paper is written as my (Burke) personal, professional reflection and, accordingly, a self-study methodology is adopted. My colleague, Anita Goriss-Hunter, has adopted the role of a 'sceptical colleague' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 113) and has acted as a sounding board for my reflection as the teacher-practitioner. As 'a natural progression from the concept of reflective practice' (Loughran & Russell, 2002) self-study methodology has the potential to provide a 'basis for knowing' (Bullock, 2009, p. 291) about teaching and learning and, as Russell (2010) recognises, can provide 'powerful insights', (as I have attempted) into my own practice as a teacher. Bass, Anderson-Patton and Allender (2002) describe a self-study as reflexive in nature 'by a particularly reflective knower' (p. 56) and specific to a particular teaching context. The self-study outlined in this paper is specific to the context of the particular learning project that was conducted with the PSTs as part of the *Designing for Learning* course.

Project design

To provide an opportunity for the PSTs to engage in a meaningful learning experience that enabled them to apply their theoretical learning about learning, teaching and planning for learning in a structured way, as the lecturer of the course *Designing for Learning*, I sought assistance from a local Secondary College. The Secondary College was interested in developing programs and opportunities to help direct the future aspirations of its students towards tertiary education. The school indicated that about half of their students went on to study at university or TAFE after completing year 12. In the state of Victoria and across Australia, young students from regional (non-metropolitan) areas are less

likely than their urban counterparts to enter universities on completion of their secondary schooling (Howard, 2009; Marks, Fleming, Long & McMillan, 2000). Anecdotal evidence from the Secondary School suggested that some of the Secondary College students were unaware that there was a university in their city, let alone in a neighbouring suburb, and others were unsure of the possibilities this offered for them personally. The staff at the school chose to run the program with Grade Nine students as they were of the opinion that this was when students would benefit from considering options for their future beyond secondary education.

In consultation with the school we decided that around 150 year nine (13-14 year old) students would take part in a day of learning activities at the university that were organised and conducted by the 34 second year PSTs. One of the agreed aims of the project was that it be mutually beneficial for the learning of both PSTs and secondary students and designed to fit with their respective curricula. The university course *Designing for Learning* for the Joint Degree students required them to engage in learning about curriculum design, pedagogy and lesson planning. The activity day with the secondary students offered the potential for the PSTs to design learning experiences targeted at the particular cohort of secondary students and then to apply this learning by teaching the students. When I took the idea to my university class, I allowed the PSTs to vote on whether the idea should go ahead. I was surprised that the PSTs voted unanimously in favour of the project, and that they enthusiastically welcomed and embraced the opportunity to teach secondary students as part of their coursework.

Collectively, the PSTs and I developed a concept and design for the visit to the university by the secondary students. The activity day was named *WillUB12?* (pronounced 'will you be one too?') by popular vote of the PSTs. The title hints at the possibility of future tertiary study at the university and 'UB' is a commonly-used acronym for 'University of Ballarat'. The PSTs formed a total of 12 small teaching teams according to their teaching methods and each group was required to cooperatively design and develop a lesson in their method area that complimented the existing secondary school curriculum. Cooperative learning principles (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) were explicitly taught to the PSTs as part of their coursework. Each lesson was to be taught three times by each small teaching team. For example, the students were learning how to structure an argument in their English classes. The English teaching teams designed lessons for the secondary students that were based on the skills of structuring an argument.

The school requested that, as well as the opportunity for university orientation, the learning sessions be engaging, interactive and include experiences that students would not have at school. The final timetable allowed for a whole group assembly at the start of the day followed by a campus orientation activity, *The Amazing Race – UB*. This activity, designed by the PSTs, required small groups of 5-8 students to navigate their way around the university and find answers to set clues. Four 45-minute structured lessons followed, where each large group of 25 students was taught by four separate teams of 2-4 PSTs. Morning tea and lunch in the university cafeteria was seen as an important experience for the students and the PSTs organised awards and prizes to be distributed to the students during this break time (Fig 1: *WillUB12?* Timetable).

Fig. 1: *WillUB12?* Timetable.

	9A1	9A2	9A3	9B1	9B2	9C1	9C2	9R1
9.30	Opening ceremony and briefing H101							
9.40	The Amazing Race -UB							
10.20	Morning tea – cafeteria							
10.35-11.25	<i>Probability</i> F312	<i>Ethics in society</i> H122	<i>Generating Electricity</i> P811	<i>Optical Illusions</i> T317	<i>The Argument Game</i> C902	<i>Reconstruction Art</i> T208	<i>Koala Evolution</i> H124	<i>Memory</i> T210
11.30-12.20	<i>The Argument Game</i> C902	<i>Probability</i> F312	<i>Ethics in society</i> H122	<i>Generating Electricity</i> P811	<i>Crime Statistics</i> T203C	<i>Industrial Revolution</i> H127	<i>Memory</i> T210	<i>Koala Evolution</i> H124
12.20-1.00	Lunch – cafeteria							
1.05-1.55	<i>Who eats who?</i> T203a	<i>The Argument Game</i> C902	<i>Crime Statistics</i> T203c	<i>Japanese</i> H127	<i>Generating Electricity</i> F312	<i>Optical Illusions</i> H124	<i>Reconstruction Art</i> T203B	<i>Industrial Revolution</i> P811
2.00-2.50	<i>Japanese</i> H127	<i>Who eats who?</i> T203a	<i>Optical Illusions</i> H124	<i>Crime Statistics</i> T203c	<i>Memory</i> C902	<i>Koala Evolution</i> F312	<i>Industrial Revolution</i> P811	<i>Reconstruction Art</i> T203B
2.50	Buses depart							

The PSTs worked collaboratively in their tutorial sessions over eight weeks to develop the *WillUB12?* program and activities as well as their teaching team lessons. The *Designing for Learning* course content was explicitly linked to the planning they were undertaking. For example, the course material examined curriculum policies and frameworks, designing and structuring lesson plans, catering for student diversity in the classroom, teaching and learning using ICT, student motivation and engagement, and monitoring and assessing learning. On a practical level, problems associated with designing learning experiences were encountered and pondered by the PSTs, solutions and compromises were sought and implemented. For example, the need for a timetable that fitted with the available resources was presented to the PSTs in their tutorials as a problematic situation. They needed to find a way to make it work within existing constraints, such as room availability and the suitability of particular available spaces for learning. Coordination with the bus company offered a further challenge. Budgetary considerations were also tabled in class and some big, expensive ideas needed to be reconsidered to fall within the assigned budget.

The Secondary College teachers were required to play an integral role by providing the PSTs with written feedback on their teaching. The PSTs were also required to design a student feedback tool and to collect feedback on their teaching. All PSTs elected to undertake an administrative task that contributed to the organisation of the day. As part of their assessment for the *Designing for Learning* course each PST was required to submit, within two weeks of the *WillUB12?* event, a reflection on their teaching and learning, that was informed by feedback from the students and supervising teachers.

A week after *WillUB12?* was held, the PSTs took part in a focus group exercise known as *ordered sharing* in their tutorial. Ordered sharing requires all class participants, in turn, to respond to a set question. Participants may elect to 'pass' when it comes to their turn and participants are encouraged to discuss their responses after everyone has contributed their response. The process ensures that all participants have an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Of the 34 PSTs, 32 took part in this session. I posed the question 'What did you learn by taking part in *WillUB12?*'. I reflected on the PST ordered sharing responses and the ensuing group discussion, as well as my observations of the PSTs as they worked progressively on the project over eight weeks, and on the day of *WillUB12?*. Furthermore, my conversations with some secondary teachers and some students on the day of the event have informed my reflections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the ordered sharing exercise, there was general discussion and agreement amongst the PSTs that the *WillUB12?* project provided a valuable lead-in to the professional teaching placement that they were to undertake at the start of the following semester. The four main themes that emerged were: the authentic nature of the learning experience; the application and translation of theory into practice; the repeated teaching of each lesson combined with sequential experienced teacher feedback, and the utilisation of cooperative learning teams for planning and teaching lessons.

There was strong consensus on the high value that the PSTs ascribed to the authentic nature of the learning experience. The opportunity to teach 'real' kids and to interact with them as 'real' teachers was timely and highly valued. This offered them a refreshing change from the usual, mostly theoretical, education studies and provided an authentic focus for their learning. Various factors that impacted on their teaching such as class size, the effect of the time of the day on student behaviour, attentiveness and motivation, and differences between particular groups of learners and the specific group dynamics of various classes were raised by the individuals in the ordered sharing exercise and discussed as important factors that PSTs noticed and learnt from. On the whole such factors and the way they impacted on teaching practice were unanticipated by the majority of PSTs and had not been factored into their planning.

The theory-practice connection through structured lessons applied to an authentic teaching experience was widely discussed. During the planning phase, the PSTs needed to find ways to overcome the constraints provided by the university timetable, the school curriculum, the potential class sizes and availability of suitable materials and classrooms. These constraints were deemed to provide an authentic planning experience for the PSTs as they were thought to be similar to those faced by practicing teachers in regular secondary school classrooms. Furthermore, there was a general consensus that the *WillUB12?* project allowed PSTs to utilise and experiment with some of

the pedagogies that were introduced to them as part of the *Designing for Learning* coursework. Feedback from the students indicated that they saw this as an authentic, applied experience that made the *Designing for Learning* coursework more meaningful and purposeful to them and allowed them to make connections between the theoretical aspects of the course and the practical aspects of teaching such as organising and managing students and planning learning experiences.

These observations and experiences were facilitated by the groups of PSTs being able to teach the lesson three times to three different groups of learners. The repeat teaching of each lesson was seen by the PSTs as a particular strength of the *WillUB12?* structure. Many PSTs reflected on how their confidence grew with each successive class and how this happened much more quickly than they expected – four students admitted to being ‘nervous’ or ‘scared’ at the start of the day, feelings that receded as the day progressed. Being able to interact with experienced teachers who acted as mentors and were supportive and encouraging was considered important. As one student stated, ‘they gave us a lot of good ideas and were really encouraging’.

One of the advantages of the way the project was structured, according to the PSTs, was that they were able to work collaboratively in small teaching teams. For many, this group focus effectively scaffolded their learning, particularly with respect to the planning and implementation of learning experiences. They were able to draw on the views and ideas of their group members, and support each other throughout the project, and particularly in their classrooms. Team meetings were held in class to overcome problems associated with PSTs finding time outside class to meet. Attendance in class therefore held authentic professional accountability as PSTs became accountable in very obvious ways to their colleagues. While attendance in class was very strong, poor attendance or unplanned absence by some PSTs created problems for their teaching teams. The cooperative learning groups seemed to operate successfully in all but three instances. Of the 12 teams of PSTs, I eventually disbanded one team due to protracted insurmountable interpersonal issues that arose between the group members that could not be satisfactorily resolved, despite my attempts at conciliation. Two other teams experienced difficulties associated with work load distribution and particular group members who did not deliver on their promised contributions. I anticipated the later problem, as this is a typical occurrence for cooperative learning groups, but a valuable learning opportunity for professionals who will need to develop strategies for working collaboratively and cooperatively in the future. I utilised a constructivist learning approach in these instances and counselled students and assisted them to develop and implement strategies to overcome the problems as they encountered them. These types of issues arise in professional working relationships between qualified teachers so I requested that students work on developing interpersonal and time-management strategies and attempt to overcome their difficulties together. The students were required to reflect on the success of these strategies and approaches and how they contributed to their professional learning.

Prosser and Trigwell (1999) identify that “differences in the ways individual students experience learning ... [are] evoked by the learning situation experienced by the students” (p. 2). In a deep approach to learning, these authors state that students aim to understand ideas and to seek meanings. “They have an intrinsic interest in the task and an expectation of enjoyment in carrying it out (p. 3). To me, a certain intrinsic interest was evident in the way the PSTs in my class approached and embraced the activity day as a learning task and seemed to experience genuine pleasure in carrying it out. I have not noticed similar apparent enjoyment and engagement in my conventional classes at university. For most them, from the evidence provided in this paper, the project resulted in deep learning about teaching. PSTs were asked to complete a university implemented *Student Evaluation of Teaching* (SET) feedback process on the *Designing for learning* course in response to the question “Overall, how would you rate this ‘course’?”. The total score of 4.8 out of 5, aggregated from 32 PSTs who completed the survey, is a quantitative measure that is reflective of the high regard the PSTs held for the course and the learning experiences imbedded within it.

Overall the school provided very positive comments as expressed to me by the Secondary School students and teachers. Even though the lecturers had established connections with the Secondary College and the PSTs had incorporated Key Learning Areas from the school curriculum into planning the lessons, it was not anticipated that the beginnings of a very real, rich and vibrant, community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) would become evident. The foundations of such a community of practice have been laid and we plan to build on this in the future. Some teachers commented that they were surprised by the high enthusiasm demonstrated by the secondary students about taking part in the project and the competence and creativity of the PSTs. Additional spin-offs, arising from the school-university collaboration included the establishment of opportunities for part-time paid work

as teachers aides in the Secondary School for two of the PSTs, offers of teaching experience places, and inquiries about studying higher degrees from two secondary teachers. Further inquiry into the views of the secondary students about their aspirations would be valuable. Discussions have ensued regarding further learning collaborations between the university and the secondary school.

Conclusion

While the project appears to have been highly successful in promoting learning on a number of levels, in this paper I have focused on the learning by the PSTs. The pedagogies, that I adopted that most powerfully promoted the learning of the PSTs are identified as: “the utilisation of cooperative learning groups for planning and teaching lessons; the problem-based approach to the organisation of the event; the application and translation of explicitly and sequentially taught theory into practice through a linked, authentic teaching experience; and the repeated teaching of each lesson combined with sequential experienced teacher feedback, and group analysis and reflection by the PSTs” (Burke & Goriss-Hunter, 2012, p. 3024).

The positive consequences from this project far exceeded my expectations. The feedback from the secondary college and its students and teachers, and the PSTs is extremely encouraging and the strong good-will and high enthusiasm displayed by all participants was unexpected.

We intend to repeat the project in 2013 and will seek to more closely interrogate the learning and opinions of those involved, particularly the secondary students, and the secondary teachers. Further research that utilises purpose-designed research tools to capture the views of participants prior to, during and after their involvement in the project would further illuminate understanding. We plan to investigate if involvement in the program promotes the engagement of school students from regional Victoria and assists them in developing their future aspirations, particularly with respect to tertiary education. This knowledge is likely to be of national and international interest to regional and rural universities. There is evidence, outlined in this paper that innovative programs such as *WillUB12?* have the potential to build capacity for student learning partnerships between universities and schools and to facilitate meaningful learning of those who take part. When universities and school collaborate it is possible to produce conditions conducive to learning that benefit both institutions and help to forge a strong, collective community of practice.

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