Australian Teacher Education Association
Annual Conference Proceedings Archive

A community of practice for teacher education academics

Michael Cavanagh, Judy Adnum, Robyn Moloney, Rod Lane, Kathy Stewart, Pam Furney
Macquarie University

Abstract
This paper reports the early development of the Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP) group created by six secondary teacher education academics. Throughout 2012, we each gave a 60-minute presentation about our methodology unit. The sessions were informal to enable sharing and discussion. To measure the impact of the presentations and consider possible future directions, we each wrote a 500-word reflection on our experiences. A research assistant, who was not a STEP member, interviewed us individually for about 20 minutes. The research assistant analysed the reflections and interview responses in terms of Wenger's (1998) three defining features of a community of practice: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Results indicate that the STEP group enhanced collegiality by enabling a better understanding of the challenges faced by others, strengthened common purpose and inclusion, and provided a rich opportunity to reflect on pedagogy and improve practice. The paper offers positive insight into a collaborative pedagogical culture for teacher education academics.

Introduction
Higher education is in a state of considerable change. Alongside government initiatives to make tertiary study more accessible to a broader range of students, there have also been funding cuts and budget constraints (Lea, 2005). These changes impact on the scope and nature of academics' work and there is a need to develop a more scholarly approach to teaching practices and teacher development in higher education (James, 2007). Stefani (2006) suggests that universities should provide "appropriate opportunities for academic staff to develop their approaches to the scholarship of learning and teaching, through action, reflection and evaluation of their current practice" (p. 121).

In the field of teacher education, there are particular challenges for experienced classroom teachers as they make the transition from school teaching to university teaching. While expert in their subject domains, they are often relative novices in the development of pre-service teachers' professional practice. Yet they are immediately accountable to the institution, where results and student-feedback are critiqued, and where they must produce competent graduate teachers who meet the expectations of professional experience mentors, the teaching profession, and accrediting bodies. The shift from school to university teaching typically involves moving from a shared staffroom to a private office and often working alone in your subject area so opportunities for collegial discussion are less frequent. Moreover, while academics value autonomy, this independence may result in unrealistic expectations about self-reliance and a reticence to seek assistance from peers.

It was against this backdrop that a group of six teacher education academics at Macquarie University formed the Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP) group. This paper reports the early development of the STEP group. Our analysis draws on Wenger's (1998) notion of a 'community of practice' which develops through mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.

The STEP group and its context
The secondary Teacher Education Program at Macquarie University is based on the concept of a scholar-teacher. Its distinctive features include integrated academic, educational and professional studies and a developmental model that provides for a continuous experience in a school, typically one day per week, over the course of the final year. There are major secondary methodology units

(English, Mathematics, Science, History, Economics/Business Studies, Geography, Languages) and some students also undertake second teaching subjects (Drama, ESL, ICT, Legal Studies, Society & Culture). Many pre-service teachers are graduates who have already completed a degree in their teaching subject(s) and have returned to university for one year of teacher education studies. The secondary methodology units are taught mainly by full-time staff who are former secondary school teachers; most staff have completed, or are working towards, a doctorate in education.

The STEP group commenced early in 2012 after a discussion about the need for more sharing of ideas focused especially on learning and teaching. All secondary methodology staff were invited to the first meeting where we discussed how the STEP group might serve as a forum for dialogue and reflection on our pedagogical knowledge, practice and experiences. We agreed to collaborate in developing a structure that could facilitate discussion of common curriculum, purpose, and pedagogy used in our methodology units. Two casual staff members chose not to participate in the group because they were infrequently at the university. One permanent staff member attended one meeting but did not participate further. However, many of the secondary methodology lecturers have attended all of the meetings and contributed to this paper.

Throughout 2012, we each gave a 60-minute presentation on the conceptualisation of our methodology unit, how we developed and implemented the learning and teaching activities, and how we assess our students' work. The sessions were quite informal and there was much sharing and discussion. In 2013 our focus has shifted to identifying concerns of common interest arising from the 2012 presentations. We decided that we would each lead a session focusing on how we might work together to improve our practice. At the time of preparing this paper, we have discussed student assessment and developed grade descriptors and assessment rubrics for tasks such as lesson planning that are common to all methodology units.

Theoretical framework
Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) describe communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and experience in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". (p4) A community of practice is formed when people come together to focus on an issue or concern of common interest. This *mutual engagement* suggests that the members of the community of practice possess a level of knowledge and understanding of the issue that allows them to learn with and from each other.

> Mutual engagement involves not only our competence, but also the competence of others. It draws on what we do and what we know, as well as our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don't do and what we don't know – that is, to the contributions and knowledge of others. (Wenger, 1998, p.76)

This learning through interacting or *joint enterprise* allows members to share information and develop their expertise by engaging in joint activities and discussions. It is through these interactions that members build relationships with each other and gradually form a community around the domain (Gray, 2004).

Over time, the joint pursuit of an enterprise by the community members helps to create a range of resources that can be used to develop and negotiate meaning among the group. This *shared repertoire* of resources might include "producing or adopting tools, artifacts, representations; recording and recalling events; inventing new terms and redefining or abandoning old ones; telling and retelling stories; creating and breaking routines" (Wenger, 1998, p.95).

Fuller (2007) notes that communities of practice highlight how learning takes place through co-participation in the shared activities and practices of the group, since individuals learn through

social relations to other members. In the context of teacher education, a community of practice model for learning about teaching may help to overcome the situation where individual academics often teach in relative isolation, in contrast to the collaborative teams usually associated with research centres (Laurillard, 2006). Our aim in this paper is to demonstrate how the work of one such community of practice, the STEP group, might model a collaborative pedagogical culture for teacher education academics. As Nelson and Robinson (2006) suggest, such an approach can inform the scholarship of learning and teaching since

> … individual stakeholders who 'own' their involvement in a common agenda (teaching and learning), renews and broadens general faculty participation … as more faculty members address more learning outcomes and explore more alternative learning environments, they use increasingly diverse and sophisticated techniques to examine the effectiveness of their educational strategies, making their work more compelling to more colleagues. (p. 80).

We report how the relations within the STEP group were formed (mutual engagement), negotiated (joint enterprise) and sustained (shared repertoire) around the activity of improving learning and teaching.

Method

To explore the impact of the 2012 STEP presentations and consider possible future directions, at the start of 2013 we each wrote a 500 word personal reflection on our participation in the group and discussed the idea of writing this paper. We wanted to investigate the impact of the group activities on our individual practice and see if it might serve as a model for other teacher education academics. We collaboratively developed an interview schedule which included questions about what we had learned through our participation in the group, the impact of the 2012 presentations on our thinking and on our practice, how the STEP group might evolve in the future, and the extent to which the STEP model could be applied in other contexts. A research assistant, who was not a STEP member, conducted 20-minute individual interviews with each of us, which she audio-recorded and transcribed. She analysed the data by a close reading of the texts and transcripts to categorise common themes and identify the quotes referred to in this paper.

In one sense, our written and interview responses provided the data for our study. Equally importantly, they have contributed to the analysis of our experiences as members of the STEP group. The findings presented in this paper are therefore further reflections on the processes of establishing and developing the STEP group.

Results

Mutual engagement (collaborating with colleagues)

> I find these meetings invigorating and exciting. The opportunity to bounce ideas off each other, interact, probe further and actually have time to hear fabulous approaches is irreplaceable. (Judy, personal reflection)

There was a strong sense among the STEP group members that we spent too much of our time working apart from our colleagues. Even though our offices are in close proximity and we see each other regularly, there is rarely an opportunity for sustained conversation about how we teach. As Rod noted in his personal reflection, "Isolation and a feeling of not knowing what you don't know is a challenge! Having a group of colleagues you can discuss common issues with has helped to address this issue".

The meetings have become a forum for deep and rich discussion about how we deal with various challenges in conceptualising and teaching our methodology units. Michael commented in his interview on the benefits he gained from STEP meetings:

> It is refreshing to attend a meeting where the focus is solely on how we can support each other in advancing our pedagogical practice for the benefit of our students.

At the start, we were interested to learn about what our colleagues were doing in their units since we wanted to compare our approaches with theirs. We wanted to "know we're on the right level with everyone else" so we could see if what we were doing was appropriate. In one sense, it was comforting to discover that each of us was experiencing similar difficulties because this "takes the pressure off and you can start enjoying your work". Kathy made the following comment in her interview:

> I've learnt that there are lots of other people in the same boat as me. That makes me feel comfortable about having a work in progress rather than a perfect finished product.

Highlighting our successes and sharing our concerns was an important part of establishing a sense of mutual engagement in the group. The presentations were affirming for the presenters because of the positive encouragement received from our peers. For the audience, hearing in detail about our colleagues' units showed us that we have far more in common than we had previously imagined. Our shared reflections encouraged an honest and open exchange of ideas.

Joint enterprise (learning from each other)

> For me there have been, and continue to be, two areas of learning need: firstly, immediate practical matters to solve, and secondly, the need for broader learning, to make my practice visible against my colleagues' practice, to gain a more complete picture of our shared endeavour. The STEP group has been extremely valuable on both fronts. (Robyn, personal reflection)

Despite the fact that we teach across different subject areas, we quickly discovered that we could learn much from each other. In particular, we noted recurring themes in our presentations that highlighted a variety of practical approaches in the use of technology, methods of assessment, promoting pre-service teachers' reflective practice and encouraging them to share their teaching resources with their peers.

Negotiation was a feature of the joint enterprise, as we were challenged by the different approaches and discourses, in each other's group presentations. Rod noted that some of our presentations focussed on teaching strategies, whereas others' "were more about theoretical justification for our structure". We differed both in the language we used to describe our practice, and in our priorities as shaped by our syllabuses. Robyn and Kathy both noted that this sharpened their sense of difference, even isolation, in their curriculum areas, and Robyn remarked that she was sometimes "struggling to find similarities". At the same time, however, this tension also highlighted to them what was valued in their field: "it made me realise how highly I regard accurate and meaningful content and pedagogical content knowledge" (Kathy). We realised that there is a strong relationship between our area of curriculum content, and our pedagogy in pre-service teacher education. Our individual backgrounds and perspectives shaped our perceptions of our peers' approach. Members felt this made visible their own thinking and practice. Robyn noted that the tension of this challenge "turned out to be a positive growth outcome, in that these extra discourses expanded my teacher education understanding and repertoire".

For example, Kathy spoke in her interview about the relatively heavy emphasis on content in her science unit, which she noticed as the presentations progressed. She started "thinking about whether there is another way to go about it and still address the requirements". Robyn wondered if perhaps she placed too strong a focus on "lesson design and building students' repertoire of practice activities (e.g., games) and sequencing" in her LOTE unit. Michael began to re-evaluate his assessment rubrics and whether they aligned to the learning outcomes for his mathematics unit because "I see now that's something I have to work on more". And Rod noted that "'students reflecting on their own practice' is a theme that came out in many of the presentations and is something I hadn't been flagging quite so much in my units, so I've got my students doing that more".

Our shared endeavour of teacher education was another key focus of the learning which took place in the STEP group meetings. A question which often arose in our discussions was articulated by Kathy when she asked, "In what way can my teacher education students be best prepared to take their place within the profession?" Kathy spoke about the way the STEP activities had helped her "become more responsive to the needs of her students".

Shared repertoire (reflecting on our common practice)

> One of the key benefits of presenting to colleagues in this forum was the opportunity to reflect on my own practice. Presenting to the group gave me the opportunity to think carefully about my own practice and clarify the rationale for my unit design. (Rod, personal reflection)

Everyone in the STEP group commented on the opportunities in meetings to reflect on our individual practice. As Robyn noted, "You can't help but to look at your own practice in relation to other people's". Michael spoke in his interview about how the STEP group activities "allowed me to stand back from my daily work and reflect more deeply on my pedagogy; it has provided me with a space to grow and develop professionally". Reflection occurred as we each prepared the presentations on our units as we identified what we valued most about our units and selected what we thought would most benefit our colleagues. Reflection continued during the presentations which provoked each of us to contemplate our own practice in light of our colleagues' ideas. As Robyn commented in her interview:

> I think it affirmed my practice. It suits my own field, in what I'm doing, so I felt reasonably good about that. But I did think there are some strategies here that I could use.

Individual reflection also occurred in preparing our written responses and participating in the interviews for this paper. These activities have also afforded us the chance to look back on the activities of the STEP group and think about what we have learned from being a part of it. As Kathy commented:

> I began to view my endeavours with students as part of a wider mentoring activity – shared with my colleagues at university and also with the classroom teachers supervising my students.

Importantly, we have also begun to chart some future directions for the group by identifying common issues and concerns. We now want to write grade descriptors for shared assessment tasks, developing some common generic strategies (e.g., use of ICT, group work) and design reading sessions where we each bring an article about teacher education for discussion. This paper also marks a significant milestone in our shared repertoire; as Rod noted, we are now "researching the process of the group itself and what we all learn from the group process".

Conclusion

Our participation in the STEP group has highlighted the encouragement and support that we can offer each other. We now realise how much common ground we have to explore together in enhancing our teaching and enriching the learning experiences we offer our pre-service teachers. The STEP group activities have enhanced our sense of collegiality by enabling a better understanding of the challenges faced by others. They have enabled us to see a common purpose and allowed for greater inclusion. And they have provided a rich opportunity to reflect on our pedagogy and improve our practice. We believe that the STEP model, based on mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, could be readily applied in other teacher education contexts.

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