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Partners in professional experience: A collaborative model

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Abstract: Professional placements are an important component of many tertiary degree courses yet require significant collaboration between Universities and employers to assure relevant, quality experiences. This paper describes how the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania (UTas) is strengthening its relationships with the schooling sectors in Tasmania through the Partners in Professional Experience initiative, with the central purpose of providing cutting edge professional experiences for pre-service teachers. The initiative recognises that preparation of teachers for the 21st century requires a significant re-think of how the theory and practice of teaching can be integrated in innovative ways.

Keywords: Professional Experience, Partnerships, Teacher Education

Introduction

Preparation of Professionals through professional degrees and post-graduate programs is an important role of tertiary institutions. Education of novice professionals in a holistic manner, however, presents many challenges and increasingly includes significant periods of time spent in supervised professional work placements. The importance of these experiences are well documented and include: socialisation into the chosen profession, learning from first hand experience (Lizzio and Watson, 2004); and developing ability to reflect on practice (Schon, 1983). Without relevant, quality professional experiences graduates may well be underprepared upon graduation.

In Australia, teacher preparation is currently the subject of an Australian Government House of Representatives inquiry. This has followed calls from some quarters that graduating teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the ever changing demands of a complex profession and the reality of practice (Eyers, 2005). Teaching however, is not singled out in this respect, a quick scan of the literature in other fields uncovers similar issues in Medicine (Williams, 1998), Psychology (Reynolds, 1997) and Business (Arnold, Loan-Clark, Harrington and Hart, 1999).

Key issues for professional preparation centre around systematic integration of theory and practice, explicit connections between University coursework and what is experienced in the field setting (Arnold et al, 1999); quality of supervision and mentoring (Haigh and Ward, 2004) and availability of relevant quality experiences in an era of growing student numbers (Lizzio and Watson 2004). Considering the field of teaching, Thomson (2000, p70) writes that the 'Theory (University) and Practical (School) binary works to render relatively invisible their similar concerns, shared beliefs and sociological practices'. This boundary struggle affects the exchange of ideas between the two institutions (Thomson, 2000). Clearly a collaborative approach is necessary to move towards resolution of these issues.

Traditionally schools have collaborated in Teacher Education as hosts of the practicum however this involvement has not necessarily represented a partnership in any real sense. The idea of educational partnerships is not new, with relationships between Universities and public schools existing for over 100 years (Greene and Tichenor, 1999). Exploration of the potential of partnerships to enhance and transform teacher education and schooling, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon (Brady, 2000) and, internationally, a range of partnership models have proliferated (Greene and Tichenor, 1999).

Professional Development Schools with a clear and systematic mission to prepare teachers in a community of learners dedicated to quality teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster and Cobb, 1995) have been developed, particularly in the United States, and are the subject of ongoing evaluation (Greene and Tichenor, 1999; Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton and Doone, 2006). Other models, focussing on in-school mentoring have also been implemented. Examples include the model adopted at the National Institute of Education in Singapore (Wong and Chuan, 2002) and the compressed primary teacher education course offered at the University of Auckland (Hope, 1999).

Recent Australian research in the field of teacher preparation (Skilbeck and Connell 2004) has demonstrated that collaboration between Faculties of Education and schools is essential if graduates are to be adequately prepared to take their place as confident beginning teachers. This recognition is reflected in a wealth of research focussing on evaluation of partnerships between Universities and the school sector (see Smedley, 2001; Brady, 2002). These papers describe partnerships with individual schools (Beck and Humphries, 2000; Carpenter, 2002) and school districts (Krieg and Sharp, 2003), commonly long-term in nature (Brown and Havlat-Lancaster, 2004) and often project based (Peters, Dobbins and Johnson, 1996). The partnerships aim to enhance communication, provide links between theory and professional practice for pre-service teachers and to develop collaborative opportunities for research and professional learning.

The continued interest in partnership models reflects not only their importance, but the difficulty in developing, implementing and sustaining them. The work of Peel, Peel and Baker (2002) identifies several qualities of successful partnerships. These include; support from leaders of all organisations, a history of respect and trust, cooperatively planned course design and delivery, flexibility and financial support, rewards and recognition. A high level of commitment and shared purpose is therefore required from each partner, including the willingness to embrace change.

The UTas initiative

Cognisant of the research and the current climate of renewal of Teacher Education, the Faculty of Education and the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE) saw great benefits in entering into more formal cooperative arrangements in the Teacher Education process than had occurred in the past. As the sole University based in the state of Tasmania, a close but informal relationship had been built between UTas, Faculty of Education staff and practitioners in schools. However, on a broader scale the opportunity for University – Government/Industry partnerships, shared research and reciprocal professional learning was also possible, but under-developed.

The formation of the Peak Education Action Committee (PEAC) in 2003 was an important step forward, gathering senior personnel from both the Faculty and the DoE for regular

discussions of policy, practice and vision for shared goals, in particular Teacher Education and Professional Learning. Jointly chaired by the Dean of the Faculty of Education and a Deputy Secretary of the DoE, this committee sparked common interest and forged alliances which led to open and frequent discussion between stakeholders in teacher education in Tasmania.

In 2004, an innovative appointment, Director of University Liaison was made jointly between the DoE and the Faculty of Education. At Executive level, this appointment clearly demonstrated the value placed by both institutions on working collaboratively and facilitating partnership initiatives. Contemporaneously, the dissolution of PEAC occurred giving rise to two specific focus groups convened to advance agreed priority areas. The first was to consider Professional Experience, the second to look at Innovative Teaching. The Chairmanship of these committees was undertaken by the Deputy Secretary of the DoE and the Dean respectively. The Director of University Liaison acted as Executive Officer to both committees.

The new committee structure broadened stakeholder participation to include the Catholic sector (through the Catholic Education Office [CEO]) and the Independent schools (through the Association of Independent Schools, Tasmania [AIST]). This level of stakeholder interest came at a time when the Faculty was also undergoing a significant review of its own programs. The opportunity for transformation within a collaborative, partnership environment became tangible. Support from leaders of all organisations and a history of respect and trust, identified as being so important to successful partnership (Peel, Peel and Baker, 2002) have been hallmarks of the collaboration, together with opportunity for continuity of leadership through the Director of University Liaison.

Following initial meetings of the two focus groups, the inextricable nature of Professional Experience in teaching programs, together with the cross-over of representation, the committees amalgamated to form the Partners in Professional Practice and Innovation Working Group (again jointly chaired with the Director of University Liaison as Executive Officer). An initial output from the committee was an agreed set of principles underpinning the work of the partnership. These principles were then interrogated to articulate how they would be enacted by the partners in any collaborative venture (Table 1).

With Professional Experience being a central component of Teacher Education, and one where collaboration is most beneficial, this became a starting point. A consideration of collected evidence; administrative data (numbers of placements, pre-service teachers per school and districts, colleague teaches); student feedback (through Student evaluation of Teaching and Learning questionnaires and School Experience coordinators); colleague teacher feedback; research projects and current Faculty initiatives (via the Faculty wide School Experience working group) followed. This determined key issues to be addressed:

- Finding placements
- Commitment from schools
- Communication from the university to schools
- Quality of supervision
- Selection of colleague teachers
- Recognition of colleague teachers
- Protocols for dealing with difficulties
- Making explicit/relevant theory-practice links

Table 1: Agreed principles of the partners in professional practice initiative

Agreed Principles	Partners will enact these principles by:
Respect, recognition, collaboration and cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognising and utilising the relevant skills, understandings and expertise of staff in the Faculty and in Tasmanian schools, and of pre-service teachers, to improve the outcomes of professional experience. ▪ Implementing professional experience programs that integrate theory and practice in meaningful ways. ▪ Valuing communities of learners, utilising their strengths and recognising the opportunities they offer. ▪ Collaborating in the design, implementation and review of pre-service teaching courses.
Shared commitment to reflection and review in a context of continual improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encouraging and supporting principals, colleague teachers and faculty staff to reflect on and further develop their skills as mentors and coaches of pre-service teachers. ▪ Providing accredited and non-accredited training for colleague teachers. ▪ Engaging in joint professional learning experiences in leading edge pedagogy and curriculum. ▪ Promoting an inquiry-learning approach to the practical component of pre-service teacher development. ▪ Providing professional experience opportunities for pre-service teachers that are varied, outcome-focussed, well-planned, and appropriately supported.
Responsive, flexible, negotiated action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensuring that consultation is conducted in timely and accessible ways. ▪ Putting feedback processes in place and taking action to implement constructive suggestions. ▪ Establishing processes that are flexible enough to enable a variety of pre-service teacher pathways and interests to be pursued. ▪ Recognising the needs and potential of each community and cluster of schools.
Diversity and equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Taking account of diverse contextual factors in clusters, schools and Faculty programs. ▪ Matching professional experience expectations to different stages of pre-service teacher development and to various educational settings. ▪ Identifying and supporting the individual learning needs of pre-service teachers. ▪ Facilitating access to a range of professional experiences for individual pre-service teachers. ▪ Aiming for consistent high quality professional practice for all pre-service and colleague teachers.
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Establishing efficient, coordinated processes and documentation. ▪ Limiting the number of points of contact ▪ Communicating effectively ▪ Streamlining the placement process and reducing the need to negotiate placements for every pre-service teacher on every occasion. ▪ Clarifying roles and responsibilities ▪ Resourcing the program appropriately
Commitment to enhancing the professional status of teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Working together to implement leading edge approaches to pre-service teacher practicum. ▪ Articulating pre-service teacher education course outcomes clearly and assessing them rigorously. ▪ Reviewing and critiquing practice regularly. ▪ Promoting and collaborating for ongoing professional growth ▪ Exploring innovative joint research and teaching possibilities.

Two partnership initiatives were then planned with the aim to address the key issues identified above.

The cluster model for professional experience

This project will centre around groups of schools (Clusters) for the placement of groups of pre-service teachers. The clusters comprise both Primary (K-6) and Secondary (7-10) schools, with some also having K-10. The latter are predominantly in rural areas. These clusters are a recognised structure within the DoE, with each having its own Principal leader and support services. As these Clusters sit within a geographic and social community there is potential for

access to diverse placement options across the age and ability range, educational institutions other than schools, as well as the urban/suburban/semi-rural/rural spectrum.

Using a cluster of schools rather than single schools should increase the likelihood of finding exemplary practice in most, if not all, key curriculum areas. Access is therefore increased to leading-edge practice across key teaching and learning areas such as literacy and numeracy; inclusive practice; utilising ICT; managing students, curriculum implementation; assessment; reporting to parents.

Pre-service teachers will be allocated to a cluster for a whole year, this connection offering more continuity and stability for pre-service teachers, colleague teachers and students than is currently possible. For pre-service teachers, building and maintaining relationships with a class, a school and a Cluster over a longer time frame will be more realistic and supportive than being placed in four different individual schools over the course of their pre-service course. Familiarity with the demographic characteristics of the cluster, the support services existing within the cluster, together with the ability to participate in cluster-based Professional Learning initiatives will help facilitate this. Pre-service teachers will also have the opportunity for much greater access to their school or group of schools than had previously occurred on allocated practicums. The possibility for students to work on special projects or to complete elements of university coursework in schools is possible. It will also give unprecedented opportunity to strengthen theory-practice links in coursework, including in-school delivery, by having large groups of students in geographic proximity. Involving school personnel in coursework is also possible through on-site tutorials or workshops.

On a practical level the cluster model can also streamline coordination and liaison. Faculty staff will be allocated to the cluster and a cluster (school) based coordinator will also be appointed. Information sessions will be provided for all school leadership teams and colleague teachers by Faculty staff prior to the start of Professional Experience. Clusters will have more say in the numbers and placements of pre-service teachers and therefore have more control over when and where pre-service teachers are placed. This will increase predictability for schools.

A cluster model can also help facilitate cluster-level professional learning for principals and colleague teachers and debriefing for pre-service teachers. Opportunities for research and professional learning can also be identified and delivered jointly by the cluster and Faculty staff.

Graduate Certificate for colleague teachers

The colleague teacher is recognised as being a key factor in successful teacher education (Connor and Killmer, 1995, Beck and Kosnik, 2000), however, this is not always positive (Zeichner and Gore, 1990). Although there is significant research being carried out on the pre-service teacher-colleague teacher relationship (for example Jones, Reid & Bevins, 1997; Hastings, 2004) very few colleague teachers undergo formal training or formal evaluation.

This Graduate Certificate was initially conceived to address these issues. In essence, the program has three broad purposes – firstly to strengthen the relationship between the Faculty and the profession; secondly, to provide appropriate support to the colleague teachers in their work with pre-service teachers hence raising the quality of the Professional Experience program; and finally; to provide relevant professional development to enhance career options for experienced teachers and building social capital for the profession as a whole. This

program will also open a pathway into further study and professional development for practising teachers and offer an elective pathway to develop skills in Action Research.

A core unit of the Graduate Certificate Program will address specific issues in coaching and mentoring pre-service teachers. The unit has been co-constructed by Faculty and experienced colleague teachers and will be offered for the first time in 2006. The factors identified by Connor and Killmer (1995): a collaborative approach (including willingness to share ideas, materials but allowing freedom to experiment); inclusion of current research; enhancement of inter-personal communication skills (including feedback techniques) and clearly stated and shared expectations are therefore cornerstones of the Graduate Certificate course.

Conclusion

It has been recognised nationally and internationally that there are aspects of becoming a teacher that are more effectively learned in the field (Darling Hammond and Baratz-Snowden, 2005) yet this does not diminish the role of the University, rather it strengthens the necessity for shared understandings and goals.

In Tasmania, the possibilities to develop close working relationships between all Education stakeholders has been recognised and deemed important. With high level support, an agreed set of principles underpinning the collaboration has been developed. These, in turn, are guiding two specific initiatives which will be implemented in 2006. An evaluation plan is being built in to the initiatives and will be overseen by the Partnerships in Professional Practice committee. Regular communication, exchange of knowledge and a more shared responsibility for pre-service teachers' learning are already in evidence. Enhancing ongoing professional learning for teachers in schools and identifying research opportunities can now be collaboratively explored.

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