Australian Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 25 | Issue 1 Article 1

2000

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Recommended Citation
Blunden, R. (2000). Rethinking the place of the practicum in teacher education.. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 25*(1).
http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2000v25n1.1

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol25/iss1/1

RETHINKING THE PLACE OF THE PRACTICUM IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the author's 25 years of experience in teacher education and on a number of course evaluation questionnaires administered over the last three years to students in the one-year full time Graduate Diploma of Vocational Education and Training (and its predecessors) at the University of Melbourne. It is argued that the bifurcation between practice and theory (and theory and practice), between teaching and training experience and thinking about such experience within theoretical frameworks is a division that should be sequentially organised rather than concurrent as in most initial teacher education programs. It is claimed that data from the questionnaires tends to support such a position. Also, it is suggested that the Master of Training and Development, a course recently developed at the University of Melbourne, provides a useful sequential model. This course, conceived as an initial teacher education degree requires two years of workplace training experience prior to entry and does not offer a practicum as such. The arguments that conclude this paper suggest that education would be better served if the initial training of teachers were undertaken directly by workplace trainers (and in the schools sector by school personnel). More radically still, it is suggested that universities should recognise workplace training experience or teaching experience more generally (say two years experience) as equivalent to a practicum. This would leave universities to get on with what they do best – the development of philosophical, historical, ethical, sociological and psychological perspectives on teaching and learning.

STRUCTURE OF THIS PAPER

This paper draws on a number of questionnaires administered over three years. A lot of detail is given within more general discussion. Responses to questionnaires are woven into the author's personal viewpoint developed diachronically. A viewpoint based on experience as well as on the data specifically provided by the research and, more generally, the relevant literature.

INTRODUCTION

There are many problems associated with integrating workplace experience into initial teacher training. Over time, many different ways of structuring initial teacher education programs have been devised in an attempt to fuse relevance of study with practical experience. Sometimes this has occurred at the macro level. For example, in the shifting of professional education away from workplaces and into universities, though, speculatively, this trend now is well on the way to being reversed. Sometimes, in contrast to macro-level changes, re-structuring occurs at the micro level. An example here is the structuring of courses on the basis of research such as the ground breaking study by Fuller (1969). Fuller's research suggests that the relevance of university course-work is linked to the stages of concern that novices experience (see, Blunden and De La Rue, 1990). Even so, a causal nexus – a constant conjunction between particular experiences and effective teaching – has never been firmly established. This has led, at least in vocational education and training (henceforth 'VET'), to an emphasis on evaluation, rather than on course content and methods of delivery. The question asked is, Can someone do x? rather than the question, What experiences do we provide someone in order that they might learn how to do x? Of course, teaching-by-testing is not new. It is arguable that a great deal of secondary school teaching – as well as behaviourist orientated VET competency-based training – also adopts this strategy, though in a somewhat different guise.

In any case, university faculties of education have experimented with a diversity of approaches to initial teacher education. Looking back on 25 years of personal experience in teacher training a large number of approaches are readily called to mind (also see Retallick, 1994: 2). These include school-based programs,

integrated studies programs, clinical supervision (Yarrow, 1992) and supervisor training. More recently, emphasis has been given to the concepts of mentorship and coaching (Matters, 1994; Field and Field, 1994). Reflective teaching processes, too, have generated a vast literature since the original concept of the reflective practitioner was first postulated by Donald Schön (1983) (also see Mezirow, 1990). Over time, role analysis (Turney, et al. 1982), micro-teaching, skills identification (Battern et al., 1993; Hall, et al., 1991; Australian Teaching Council, 1996; VICAD, 1998) and skills acquisition theory more generally (Eraut, 1994: 123 et seq.; Stevenson and McKavanagh, 1992; Vallas, 1990); competency-based approaches (Kearns, 1992), action research methods (Smyth, 1991) had their supporters. Partnership arrangements (Alderman and Milne, 1998; PEPE 1995; Standards Council, 1995); shifts from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning (from what teachers do to what students do) (cf. Ramsden, 1992); action learning (especially in TAFE) (Murray, 1996; Inglis, 1994), portfolio development (Wagner, 1998) or journal writing (Holly, 1984); the development of narrative (James, 1996; Bruner and Weisser, 1991; McEwan and Egan, 1995; Spence, 1982); psychological theories ranging through behaviourism, constructivism to multiple intelligence (see Merriam and Caffarella, 1991; Blunden, 1997; Fogarty and Bellanca, 1995; Gardner, 1983); problem-based learning (Boud and Feletti, 1991; Middleton, 1994) and, doubtless, many other strategies, theories, approaches and combinations between them have been tried as well.

However, even when structures and organisational mechanisms seem about right, teacher education programs can founder on other difficulties. University staff visits to novice teachers are beset with problems. Finding appropriate supervisors or mentors can be difficult; arranging an appropriate range of experiences is not always possible; university staff can and do complain about the incursions into course-work teaching time that practicum placements often require. Organising an appropriate range of experiences is difficult and dependent on the vagaries of the workplace. The difficulties of graded assessment are morally serious and unresolved (Blunden, 1995). Moreover, the line that divides assignment work in schools, colleges and businesses from research in the same locations is arbitrary and is a continuing issue both for universities and for the Victorian Council for the Practicum in Teacher Education. Although the Department of Education, in Victoria, specifically excludes tertiary students undertaking a practicum placement from the necessity of Department of Education research approval, many ethical and legal questions, such as those involving confidentiality and privacy (see Macmillan, 1995), remain problematic. Student teachers often undertake projects involving classroom observation, journal writing focused on field experience and other standard assignment work as a practicum requirement. But, these requirements are exempted from the methodological and ethical scrutiny of the University's ethics committees and the – one might say, political – approval of the State Department of Education. Scrutiny that is a standard requirement, for example, of post-graduate students or academic staff who undertake field-based research.

In this paper, it is suggested that much university activity in regard to the practicum (or workplace experience) is a rather fruitless exercise because it attacks a problem that is essentially intractable. This is the problem of bridging the gap between practice and theory. Practice involves teaching in schools, colleges, business and industry (where practice is referred to as 'training'). Theory involves the development of understanding and insight and it is what universities often do well. Of course, both of these worlds, practice and theory, are communities of practice, but they are nonetheless very different worlds. They are not easily aligned, as the diversity of approaches taken by university faculties of education attests. The reflective, collaborative intellectual development that occurs in universities requires a kind of conversation between participants. In this potentially anarchic world the interstices of thought are as important as the articulation or formulation or objectification of thought through propositional language. In contrast, the world of teaching is action orientated. Sometimes there is room for the silence of thought, the hermeneutic interchanges within silence, but they are rare moments when they occur. Teachers and trainers interrelate with their students in a highly activated way, often with explicit goals and objectives. There is a need to move in observable and predictable ways, that is, in accord with prevailing norms. Of course, anyone who has been involved in initial teacher preparation will recognise the value that beginners place on their

practicum experience, and this is supported by the review data provided below. Doing teaching is a qualitative experience of a very different kind from talking or thinking about it. Thus, the value of workplace experience is not an issue for this paper. It is taken as a given that such experience is fundamental and necessary. Rather, it is the argument of this paper that practice needs to precede theory in a substantial way. In presenting this argument, I draw on experience within the Department of VET (henceforth, 'DVET') at the University of Melbourne where vocational courses already are well on the way to transforming a traditional practicum.

SECTION ONE: OVERVIEW OF CURRENT COURSES

The Graduate Diploma of VET (GDVET) is a one-year teacher preparation course for participants who already have a degree. It is designed for adult participants who work as teachers in Technical and Further Education Institutes (TAFE) or in business and industry settings as trainers. The course has three Professional Practice Subjects (PP1, PP2, PP3) and in PP1 and PP2 participants are required to have current experience in a workplace that enables them to complete a Workplace Learning Agreement (WLA). They are required to nominate a mentor in their workplace and assignments set in these subjects focus on the workplace. Other subjects include: Learning Principles in VET (1&2); Contexts of VET (1&2); and, Information Technology in VET. Participants are required to arrange their own workplace experience and, indeed, many are employed in the VET sector and have considerable experience in teaching and training prior to entry to the course. Mentors are not paid and university lecturers do not visit teachers or trainers in their workplace locations. The WLA is not assessed. The GDVET thus comprises eight 12.5 subjects. This contrasts with the earlier courses that it replaced – the Graduate Diploma of Education and Training and, before that, the Graduate Diploma of Education. These earlier courses had four 25 point subjects and in the case of the latter included a practicum placement of 45 days in which participants were placed in workplace settings for two days each week on a continuing basis and were visited up to three times by a university lecturer.

Beginning in 1999 participants who have a degree as well as two years of experience in training or teaching are enrolled in the Master of Training and Development (MT&D), the first year of which parallels the GDVET. The MT&D is a two year pre-service professional masters program, similar to an MBA. The main difference between the GDVET and MT&D is that the two years of work experience allows credit for the professional practice subjects (PP1 and PP2). However, even in the GDVET, if participants have completed appropriate Certificates of Workplace Training they are given credit for PP1. Although this may sound somewhat confusing, the main principle is that the Faculty, at least in its vocational courses, recognises workplace experience and workplace certificates as equivalent to our WLAs which are, in turn, what takes the place of a traditional practicum in the vocational suite of courses.

There are many historical reasons why VET courses now have only a token practicum, or none at all, but the important questions to ask is whether such a residual commitment is deleterious to the teacher education enterprise. Something of an answer to this question is provided in this paper.

SECTION TWO: THE 1996 REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This section summarises material drawn from 1996 research conducted into the then Graduate Diploma of Education and Training (GDET), now the Graduate Diploma in VET (GDVET). The 1996 nomenclature has been retained throughout this section.1

2.2 Background

The GDET was first offered in 1996 (it replaced a Graduate Diploma of Education). It was designed for educators drawn from VET settings, particularly TAFE, though there is a number of secondary school teachers, operating at senior levels in this sector, who are enrolled. The course is distinctive in so far as the contextual focus is on communities of adult learners and the participants themselves are mature-aged.

In 1996, the subjects PP1 (conducted in Semester One) and PP2 (conducted in Semester Two)

required participants to undertake a WLA. Participants were required to draft a WLA in consultation with a mentor in the workplace and to specify tasks relevant both to increasing professional competence and to completing the assessment tasks for the subjects. The WLA for PP1 was quite large in scope. It not only required the specification of tasks (from a completely open base) but also required participants to undertake a force-field analysis whereby constraints are identified along with possible solutions to achieving the tasks and goals that are specified. (This requirement subsequently was weakened.)

A time-line was also required, pressing participants to think about time management issues, and there was provision for mentors to provide written feedback.

In order to complete a WLA, participants were required to have at least four hours a week for ten weeks in a workplace setting for both PP1 and PP2, constituting a minimum of 40 hours. This was the core of the practicum. Participants were required to negotiate these placements themselves and to choose an appropriate mentor. This hourly requirement has been vitiated and now participants are required to have access to an approved role in education and training for the equivalent of the subject contact hours (24 hours).

2.3 The Method of Review

At the end of Semester One, 1996, a questionnaire seeking responses from participants regarding the WLA was administered. There were 69 respondents or 51 per cent of the 133 participants enrolled for the course. There were 34 respondents from the TAFE sector, 17 from the industry sector and 16 who listed their workplace as other than TAFE or industry.

Participants also were provided with an opportunity at the end of Semester Two to make some final comments about the WLA. A total of 73 returns were received giving a 54 per cent return rate. Two questions were asked on the comment sheet and these results are provided in **§2.4.2** below.

Toward the end of Semester Two, 1996, a questionnaire was distributed to all field mentors to provide them with an opportunity to comment on the WLA and associated matters. The questionnaire to field mentors was sent to 138 individuals. There was a 30 per cent return rate.

By employment context the returns were: TAFE: 27; Industry: 5; Other: 9 (includes private trainers, public sector employment, etc.). Data is discussed in **§2.5** below.

The 1998 survey method is given in **§3.4** below. Also see note 2.

2.4 Participant Responses

In the following, the findings are presented by citing some of the questions asked of participants, giving the responses made, and providing comment on those responses.

2.1.1 Semester One, 1996

 Question One: *In your own words describe the purpose of the WLA.*

The responses indicated a high proportion of participants – about 30 per cent – saw the WLA as a mechanism for interrelating theory and practice or for putting into practice learning which took place on course. A number of participants thought the purpose of the WLA was to identify problems related to teaching and learning in the workplace and to plan solutions to those problems. About 34 per cent of participants believed the WLA was a means of making mentoring effective, whilst a smaller number thought that the WLA was designed specifically to assist with assignments.

A few participants suggested that the WLA was a means of structuring reflection on performance and viewed it as a kind of journal or diary. Some thought that its main purpose was to ensure feedback (from mentors and colleagues) as a means of providing support and encouragement in the workplace. One participant suggested that its purpose was 'To develop personal epistemology through reflection on teaching and learning', but some participants simply found the purpose unclear.

 Question Two: *How useful did you find the WLA?* Responses were as follows:

Very Useful	11%
Useful	44%
Not Very Useful	34%
Useless	10%

It is surmised from the data that the 44 per cent of participants who found the WLA 'not very useful' or 'useless' did so for one of two reasons. First, many of the participant intake to the GDET and the current GDVET have some, and in some cases, substantial, work experience and find the WLA too elementary and superficial to be of much use. Second, the quality of mentoring varies (see below) and this has a significant impact on the usefulness of the WLA. Certainly, there were some comments about an unsatisfactory mentor relationship or mentoring process, but also many positive comments on mentors, particularly in relation to 'bouncing ideas off them'. The mentor relationship seems to generate either strong support or strong criticism. Sometimes the failing of a mentor relationship is due to personality, sometimes to contextual factors.

A number of participants thought that the WLA should have been reviewed in classes at the university, and there was comment on the fact that the WLA did not attract any marks as part of the total assessment.

 Questions Three: *What are the most difficult teaching/learning problems, which you confront in your workplace?* **And Four:** *Did the WLA help you resolve some of these problems?*

Q4 was important for the purposes of this survey since all workplaces have some problems and the diversity of settings from which participants in this course are drawn make the problems a heterogeneous set. It was important to establish whether the WLA provided a process that resolved workplace problems.

Respondents answered **Q4** in the following way:

Yes: 27 % No: 63 %

Clearly, the WLA has no direct bearing on finding solutions to workplace problems for a majority of participants. Nevertheless, about a third of the cohort used the WLA for direct practical assistance. Others found it to be 'only an extra chore'.

 Question Five

In **Q5** most participants pointed out that the type of problems encountered in the workplace were beyond the scope of the WLA processes to solve. For example, some respondents pointed out that problems they experienced were 'inherent in the TAFE system'. Some participants suggested that university staff needed to develop reflective practice in a different form from that which the WLA attempts. Similarly, some participants suggested that the WLA only be used for course requirements, that is, strongly (and solely) linked to the assessment tasks. Other respondents thought that the WLA lacked direction, whilst some others thought that observations in different classrooms helped them to make important judgments about their own teaching. (One of the assessment tasks related to observation of practitioners at work.)

 Question Six: Did *you have any difficulties in completing the WLA?* Results for this question were:

Yes: 39 % No: 60 %

Once again, though the higher percentage of participants did not experience any difficulties, a significant number of participants did. Some reasons are provided below.

 Question Seven

Q7 asked participants to provide reasons for the difficulties that they experienced. The reasons cited, in **Q7**, for experiencing difficulties in completing the WLA included the following:

Difficulties with workplace or personnel and mentors causing hindrance

- Finding a mentor
- Loss of regular mentor
- Inappropriate mentor
- General workplace circumstances or lack of time
- Working out just what was expected
- Inapplicability of WLA in some instances
- WLA redundant for second assignment
-

One respondent suggested: 'The process of completing these assignments was not so cut-and-dried and easily itemised as the requirements suggest vis-a-vis the calendar, that is, dates, times and number of hours for each step. Too much of the preparation is of a much more informal and *ad hoc* nature – that is, in terms of liaising with a mentor to organise ideas, resources, observation, et cetera. A straight reflective journal might have been better'.

 Questions Eight: *Did the WLA relate to the Assignments?* **and Nine:** (Reasons for answer)

82 per cent of participants answered 'Yes' to this question, whilst 10 per cent, answered 'No'. This was an encouraging result and demonstrated that participants were clearly aware that the WLA needed shaping with the assessment tasks in mind. The reasons given in **Q9** for answering 'No' to **Q8** indicated that in a small number of locations the WLA simply had no relevance.

 Question Ten: *Should the WLA be retained in present form?* Returns indicated the following:

Yes: 52 % No: 42 %

Thus, about half the respondents thought the WLA should be retained in its present form. A small number expressed a 'Don't know' response, and somewhat less than half thought there was a case for changing the WLA. Reasons for and against retention of the WLA in its 1996 form are given below.

Although 52 per cent of respondents replied that they thought the WLA should be retained in its present form in PP1, the breakdown was not so even in relation to industry sector respondents. 63 per cent of non-TAFE respondents were in favour of the WLA **not** being retained in its present form. This is a high enough percentage to make retention for those employed in these sectors an optional requirement. It needs to be added, however, that little correlation existed between answers to **Q4** and **Q10**. That is, some respondents who said the WLA **did not** help them to solve problems in the workplace nevertheless replied '**yes**' when asked whether the WLA ought to be retained in its current form.

 Questions Eleven and Twelve

Reasons cited for and against changing the WLA included:

- There is a lot which can be learnt from a mentor
- The WLA should be introduced in PP2 after teaching skills have been acquired
- The WLA should be optional, maybe replaced with a journal
- The WLA should carry a mark allocation, maybe the mentor should grade the program development assignment initially
- Clearer guidelines required, especially regarding the mentor role
- Choosing a mentor is a problem
- Link the WLA to adult learning and conceptualise it as a self-direction tool
- The WLA is not appropriate for sessional teachers
- The WLA is good for new teachers, but make it optional
- The WLA is unenforceable
- Retain on site supervision by a qualified teacher
- As no one inspects your teaching the WLA should emphasise self-reflection
- The mentor should write one overall assessment at the end
- Make it clearer – how the WLA can work for each participant
- Requirement for lists of dates, times, hours merely invites end-of-term fabrication

Question Thirteen

Q13 asked participants if they had any further comments. A few of these are worth recording:

- Success depends on mentor
- A critical friend is important
- Mentors should not be paid
- The WLA is a good organisational tool
- The WLA doesn't fit with the workplace or with other parts of the course

 Questions Fourteen – Seventeen

The last four questions of the questionnaire focused on the effectiveness of the mentor. The returns demonstrated that some mentors provided very little help from the perspective of the participant, but for other participants it was a 'positive experience'. Some participants pointed out that mentors are too busy (to be effective mentors). Other responses suggested that peer mentoring should be an alternative. There should be, some participants said, a process to guarantee mentoring quality.

Summative Comment for Semester One Questionnaire

The research in this section suggests an uneven quality of mentoring in workplaces – a perennial problem in teacher education, though it is difficult to recommend what might be done

about it, given the economic stringency currently experienced in university faculties of education. (An adequate supervisor-training course is expensive.) Moreover, many mentors do not see the need for training. The research also suggests that the GDET workplace learning model provides significant autonomy and independence to adult participants, particularly in the construction and completion of their WLAs, though this autonomy sometimes is experienced as, and criticised for, a lack of structure. Attention is drawn to the tension between workplace experience as a means of improving practical competence in contrast to the workplace as providing an experiential base on which participants may draw for coursework assignments.

2.4.2 Participant Responses Semester Two

Question One: *Please list three comments regarding the requirement to undertake the WLA.*

Comments included:

- Good for ensuring relevance between study and work
- Helps to navigate the course, give tasks priority
- Verbal and informal communication between mentor and mentee is more useful than written feedback
- Was irrelevant to PP2 Two
- It was not particularly useful to write down how we organised ourselves
- Useful in formalising mentor contact
- Was not sufficiently structured to provide real assistance
- Some mentors saw the WLA as asking them to oversee assignments
- Mentors still expect some kind of external assessment of the quality of teaching undertaken by participants
- Because the WLA was not directly assessed, it was hard to identify its benefits and not being assessable it was not binding, not monitored or reviewed and we were left to our own devices. It should not be a compulsory requirement.

Question Two: *On the five-point scale below, indicate the extent to which the WLAs helped you to improve your professional practice.*

Did not help at all	9%
Provided minimal help	19%
Neither helpful nor unhelpful	11%
Somewhat helpful	9%
Helped a great deal	5%

In a number of returns participants made a distinction between the WLA and their mentor. They suggested that the mentor was very helpful, but not the WLA. Although the purpose of the WLA was to tie the assignments to practice some participants undertaking this course are novice educators and look for guidance in improving their practical competence. A small number of participants, five per cent, found the WLA helped them a great deal in their practice and nine per cent indicated that it helped them to some extent. The eleven per cent who selected the middle of the scale (a common respondent decision in Likert scales) we can take as being non-committal. That is, the WLA was regarded as benign, perhaps even helping to a small degree in improving professional practice.

However, 28 per cent indicated that the WLA did not help at all or provided minimal help. If the participants themselves are taken as a reliable guide on how much help the WLA provided in developing professional practice, then 28 per cent is too high a figure to retain the WLA on the basis of it improving professional practice. This figure is supported by the earlier survey.

In some cases it is clear that the participants were unclear about what was required of them and felt a need to have more explicit requirements in terms of the purpose and layout of the WLA. Some found the WLA a ‘reasonable medium for lecturer feedback and inter-personal correspondence’, but others found it an intrusion on practice.

The major tension emerging from the respondents’ comments is that between the workplace experience requirement as a means to developing or improving the skills of teaching (professional practice) and the WLA as a mechanism by which the mentor provides assistance with the subject-based assignments. Some mentors clearly tried to meld these differing purposes together, but others simply found them confusing.

Although there was very substantial support by participants for the mentor system, a significant number commented on it in a negative way.

There was also considerable support for the concept of a WLA or the principle of a WLA, but criticism of the layout of the current forms. A number of respondents commented that a peer mentor would be more sympathetic and the lack of time for effective interaction as well as the lack of mentoring skills was commented upon.

2.5 Field Mentor Responses

In the following a summary of responses is made along with some comments generated by the general feel for what field mentors were saying.

Question One: *Please briefly describe what you regard as the three most important aspects of your Mentoring role.*

The responses indicated two large overlapping areas that field mentors considered as the most important aspects of mentoring. The first concerns the relationship that needs to be developed between the mentor and the course participant or 'mentee'. In this area mentors often cite such processes as 'giving support and encouragement'. The second large area of concern is focused on the goal of successful teaching and here, as might be expected, a considerable variety of points are emphasised ranging from the need for adequate planning to developing empathy with participants. The areas overlap because mentors often believe that providing specific technical advice to a mentee precisely is a means of supporting and encouraging them. However, this belief depends critically on whether the concerns of the student are aligned with the advice given (see Blunden and De La Rue, 1990). Within a third area of importance fall a number of rather difficult to classify comments such as assisting with course-work requirements. Discussion between the mentor and the mentee regarding course-work was, in some instances, regarded as useful and stimulating, but in other instances regarded as outside the proper province of the mentor's responsibilities.

Question Two: *What did you find to be the three most difficult aspects of Mentoring?*

The most often cited difficult aspect of mentoring was a lack of time to work effectively with the Mentee. One mentor characterised the difficulty not only as a lack of time, but also of judging timing, that is, when to make an intervention. A lack of an appropriate place to meet with the Mentee was also cited as a concern. A lack of structure and guidance from the university was mentioned along with a worry that the mentor himself or herself did not have sufficient knowledge to help the Mentee. Developing an effective relationship was a concern for some mentors, whilst others say they found no difficulties at all in the process.

Question Three: *What did you find to be the three most rewarding aspects of Mentoring?*

Most individuals involved in the supervision or mentoring of novice educators are forced to bring their own practice under reflective analysis and they find this contributes to their own professional renewal and they value it as such. Mentors also find the involvement with and support of others to be personally gratifying. The most frequent responses by mentors included:

- Sharing information/knowledge/teaching
- Interaction/involvement/professional relationship / trust / respect with a colleague
- Viewing developmental growth of Mentee/Seeing 'the lights go on'

Question Four: *What did you find to be the three least rewarding aspects of Mentoring?*

Many mentors replied that there were no unrewarding aspects to mentoring, but a lack of time and energy are identified as significant inhibitors. Administrative paper work and lack of support from the university are identified as negative factors.

Question Five: *What are the five most important skills that you tried to develop in your Mentee?*

A very large and diverse range of skills were identified here, but the skills most frequently cited included:

- Preparation/planning
- Critical analysis/clarifying ideas/reflection/lateral thinking
- Adaptability/flexibility
- Investigation/research skills / researching resources, group needs
- Communication skills/writing skills/listening skills
- Evaluation techniques/self-evaluation

- Self-confidence/keeping an objective perspective
- Awareness of organisation culture and limitations

Some of the answers suggest a lack of discernment. Patience and resoluteness are identified as skills, but in any ordinary sense are not properly so characterised, though, of course, they are very important characteristics for educators and most certainly their absence needs to be identified or their presence acknowledged. Indeed, some skills would seem dependent on these other attributes or personality and temperament. The contemporary shift from behaviourist psychology to cognitive psychology still has not provided teacher educators with a well-developed, plausible and comprehensible theory of character. That is, a theory that might show just how the dispositional aspects of a person's temperament and character act causally on the sort of skills mentors identify at the performance level as important to successful teaching.

Question Six: *What are the five most important attitudes that you value in a Mentee?*

Again, a large number of items were listed. Some of the more frequently cited included:

- Being open to new ideas, philosophy, thought/receptivity to ideas
- Preparedness to try new ideas/willingness to learn
- Enthusiasm
- Cooperation/willingness to ask questions./willingness to express ideas
- Good humour/sense of humour
- Genuine interest in teaching/commitment/dedication

It is possible that the attitudes that mentors value in mentees arise not so much from the evaluation of character per se, as from the contextual requirements. That is, certain kinds of character trait are valued because of their efficacy in certain contexts or because they contribute to the effectiveness of a particular team operation. In any case, a common virtue is that of respect for participants and many of the specific items, such as punctuality and diligence might be placed under the more general heading of respect for persons. A question for teacher educators is how some of these virtues of character may be developed. For example, how do teacher educators develop an ethical approach in the participants they purport to train? The direction of learning is important here. If we take the virtue of punctuality, for example, we can approach it from opposite directions. We can try to develop the character dimensions that will result in a general disposition to punctuality, or we can insist on punctuality in performance and hope that continual performance – habituation – develops the general disposition.

Questions seven, eight and ten are provided here, but no data or comment is provided since they are only tangentially related to the main issue of this paper. However, data for question nine is included.

Question Seven: *What value do you think Mentoring has for your institution?*

Question Eight: *If you experienced any organisational constraints that diminished your effectiveness as a Mentor please say what they were.*

Question Nine: *Did you feel the need for training in Mentoring?*

Yes: 22 % No: 78 %

Question Ten: *Please say what you would like included in a training program.*

No data or data analysis is provided here.

Question Eleven: *In your experience did the WLA serve a useful purpose?*

For Professional Practice One

Yes: 71 % No: 29 %

For Professional Practice Two

Yes: 56 % No: 32 %

The data suggests that mentors regarded the WLA in a better light than did participants.

Questions Twelve and Thirteen: *Please state what the useful purposes of the WLA are*

Answers included:

- To give direction

- Sets level of commitment
- A WLA allows reflection on the past and the opportunity to move forward and change
- Clarifies mentee's purposes
- Sets targets
- Structures mentee's learning program
- Provides a focus
- It was impractical and unrealistic
- Useful to begin with a framework, but we later ignored it
- Communication between individuals with common goals is useful
- Irrelevant paper-work
- Only a formality in PP2

Section Three: The 1998 Surveys
3.1 Introduction

During 1998 three surveys of participants were undertaken as a process of continuing course evaluation and as a means of completing the 1996 research. Firstly, at the end of Semester One, as part of a general questionnaire, participants were asked: How useful was the WLA in facilitating your development as a teacher/trainer? Responses to this survey are presented in **§3.2** directly below. Secondly, a lengthier questionnaire was administered at the end of Semester Two and data relevant to the WLA are presented in **§3.3** below.2 Thirdly, a detailed questionnaire following the format of the 1996 review was administered at the end of Semester Two and some of the results are discussed in **§3.4** below. Thus, data in **§3.2** and **§3.3** provide a contrast between what students thought about the usefulness of the WLA in Semester One when they undertook PP1 and Semester Two when they undertook PP2. §3**.4**, surveying 1998 students, may be contrasted with **§2** above, which surveyed the 1996 cohort.

3.2 Workplace Learning Agreements: PP1 Responses

(How useful was the WPA in facilitating your development as a teacher/trainer?)

A large range of comments was provided, mostly of a positive kind and a selection are provided below.

- Good to get feedback from a more experienced trainer – a chance to apply training theory
- Extremely useful because it forced me to be much more rigorous with my reflection of the whole process. Although, in theory, I might think I'm reflective, this exercise showed up my sloppiness. This showed how much more can be gained by being thorough.
- Very helpful to me as I am new to training – opportunity to get some feedback from a professional.
- It encouraged me to dissect and systematically write a training session to meet learning objectives.
- It was helpful, but I don't think what I was asked to do totally related to the aims of the course.

3.3 Workplace Learning Agreements: PP2 Responses

A general course evaluation conducted in Semester Two 1998 included an opportunity for participants to comment on the Workplace Learning Agreement. Some of the responses are given below.

- It would have been very beneficial if my workplace had supported me. They provided no assistance during the semester.
- Not useful at all, as no real role model teacher/trainer at work.
- No use – didn't access the workplace guider a great deal as I found I got enough information to reflect on my performance from the class discussion and from my colleagues in the DVET class.
- In the first semester this was very useful. This semester, it has been less practical. However, I have made use of other 'mentors' for discussion about different practical applications of the course content.
- I didn't use the WLA at all. The person I chose was a role model at work and would have assisted me anyway and, if she wasn't available, I could have asked other people.
- WLA had limited value for me because of my current location – the only community service person within a hospitality faculty – my colleagues have limited understanding of my skills area.
- The WLA gave me an opportunity to spend time with an experienced trainer who offered (and will continue to offer) feedback and suggestions about improving or developing my teaching.

Generally, participants value interaction with a workplace colleague though formally forcing the issue by making it a university requirement sometimes has undesirable results. In many cases, the interaction takes place as a matter of course, but in a few others the formal requirement does assist in the process. Thus, no clear overall pattern emerges. Some participants indicated that they would value visits from university staff.

3.4 The 1998 Semester Two Questionnaire Results

The survey conducted in Semester Two 1988 largely repeating the questions of earlier surveys, but to a different group of students. The response rate was 86 per cent. Responses within the different categories are:

TAFE 16
(includes: Hospitality; Chemistry; Applied science; Management; Commercial services; Business; Art & Design; Community services; Psychology; Transport;
and Health)
INDUSTRY 30
includes: Retail; Transport; Business/Finance; Logistics; Food manufacturing; Hospital; Community and Human services; Health; Management; Banking; Emergency services; Marketing; Training; Security; and Public service)
OTHER 25
(Includes: Human services; Health; Hospital; Primary teaching; Secondary Teaching; Contracting; Private provider; Higher Ed.; Air force; Public service; Charity; Neighbour house; and Church.)

3.4.1 Findings by Questions

Question 4 *The Workplace Learning Agreement is designed to help you obtain data which can be used in your assignments, that is to 'integrate theory and practice'. To what extent do you think it is helpful in fulfilling this purpose?*

70 per cent of respondents indicated that the WLA was very helpful or helpful (about 35 percent for each category). 22 percent of respondents indicated that it was not helpful or unhelpful.

Explanatory comments included:

- Gave the ability to think about experiences at work
- There wasn't any linkage between the activity and the essay topic
- I was able to use most of the information from the workplace for my assignments
- The reflection would occur whether there was a WLA or not x
- It (the process) assumes a certain theoretical knowledge of the mentor; Difficult to find experienced trainers; no expert in the workplace
- Consultation with the mentor was not needed
- It is extremely relevant (for examining performance)
- Mentor's advice was helpful
- Helpful until the company closed down
- Provided good motivation for deep learning
- Good to have someone to talk to
- A worthwhile experience
- After training for four years – limited value
- Excellent to integrate theory and practice
- As it requires critical thinking it is absolutely invaluable
- Data gathering not always controllable
- Several projects that I was given at work were in direct response to academic requirements
- Mentor can be hard to access
- I already do what the WLA requires
- Needs to be a reporting-back structure
- Feedback gives insight into areas of improvement
- Mentor's assistance more relevant than textbook information

Thus, the WLA is more relevant to some industrial settings than others. Some found the course requirement forced them to critically reflect, but others claimed that they do this as a routine in any case.

Further questions asked for information about mentoring and are not included in this paper.

Question 14 *If we were to make any changes to the Workplace Learning Agreement, what would you suggest?*

Responses included:

- Should be an assessable task
- University staff should visit workplace
- Remove it
- Clearer guidelines re expectations
- Actually get them to view teaching session
- Less formal checking-up
- Students approach it with different degrees of conscientiousness/involvement

Question 15 *Did your pattern of employment (eg. sessional work in different locations) provide you with any difficulties in meeting the requirements of the Workplace Learning Agreement?*

Yes: 14 % No: 84 %

Reasons provided included:

- The assignment could not be integrated
- All staff are sessional
- Nature of work doesn't provide training opportunities
- CBT prevented social interaction
- Working in different locations (from mentor)

CONCLUSION

Prior to 1996, courses offered at the Hawthorn campus had a discrete practicum subject. It was a two-phase model whereby initial teaching competencies could be specified and then assessed as they were demonstrated. Following this, participants could move on to broader and deeper aspects of professional concern when they were ready (which was decided by consultation between the participants, the university lecturer and the field supervisor – a group that was referred to as a 'Triad'. The Triad was convened in workplace settings up to three times a year.)

The current GDVET does not provide for any visits to field locations by university staff. Participant's performance in the workplace is not assessed. This is all to the good given the diversity of conditions and circumstances in workplaces and the variation in quality of supervision as evidenced from the data provided above (see also, Blunden, 1995a and Blunden, 1995b). Indeed, in some of the settings in which DVET participants work, a visitation program would not be feasible due to the sensitive nature of the workplace (health care locations, for example). The Master of Training and Development (MT&D) has gone one step further than the GDVET and does not require a WLA, but participants must have two years of training experience before they are eligible for enrolment in the course.

The GDET was introduced at the commencement of 1996 and the WLA replaced the practicum. At one point there seemed to be such a lack of clarity about the WLA that senior management issued a memorandum on the topic. The memorandum reaffirmed a number of guiding principles for initial training courses including:

- a developmental model of professional growth based on Fuller's stages-of-concern model
- integration of theory and practice;
- practicum as a central focus;
- acquisition of competence within a specific teaching or training context;
- adult learning models.

These principles had characterised discontinued courses which the DVET, and its institutional forebears (see Blunden, 1995a), offered. However, these principles are ambiguous when referring to a course that does not offer a practicum. For example, how can the practicum be a central focus when there isn't one? Probably the intention was to suggest that the workplace and workplace experience should be a central focus for course work, but this is not the same thing as a practicum forming the central focus for a course. The memorandum also identified a number of key issues in relation to subject development – such as the role of the DVET lecturer in the WLA process – and promulgated a policy on the payment of mentors. On this it stated that 'field supervision is an important condition of WLAs. However, in some teaching, industry, clinical and outdoor locations, field supervision may not be possible or desirable and alternative arrangements will have to be negotiated. Nonetheless, in all situations in which field supervision is arranged, the supervisors should be paid for these services'. This payment is no longer made and, thus, an extremely expensive element in teacher preparation courses has been eliminated from the Faculty's VET courses.

It should be acknowledged that several internal (unpublished) surveys over the years have indicated that the participant intake into courses conducted at the Hawthorn campus consists of significant numbers of teachers and trainers who have two or more years of teaching experience prior to commencing a course of training. The university is well placed to help these people develop theoretical frameworks and perhaps it is the experience and maturity of DVET students that distinguishes them from their secondary school counterparts. Indeed, many of these people do not find the elementary focus of a practicum very useful (see §2 above).

Other participants who have little or no prior teaching or training experience are less well placed. Although university staff have a lot to offer such participants, it is not at the technician level – that is, at the level of assisting raw novices to develop elementary teaching, or training, or instructing, skills. Even where this *is* a need, the field mentor or supervisor or field-based organisational Head would seem to be better qualified to develop and assess basic teaching skills and this to some extent is confirmed by the questionnaire data presented above. Whilst the university requirement for a WLA does in some instances help students to obtain a mentor and structure their experience, it often is simply formalising processes that adult learners already have in place.

Nevertheless, some participants who enrol in the GDVET perhaps do so expecting that it is a course – since it is an initial course – that will assist with the development of professional competence. It does this indirectly, one hopes. That is, the development of reflective capacity and analytic competence (which mentors identify as important) when brought to bear on practice ought to assist in the improvement of that practice. But, the difficulty of showing such a hypothesis to be valid and reliable is perhaps one more argument that supports the theory – practice dichotomy.

Another reason for eliminating the practicum from university teacher education courses (but, requiring an equivalent in terms of experience) is the capacity of university staff to provide useful feedback. It is a long time, for example, since most DVET staff have taught in the locations for which they prepare educators and trainers. Few staff have recent substantial teaching experience within a TAFE Institute or in an industrial training setting. This has both advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages, however, attach both to the credibility and relevance of university staff advice in regard to elementary teaching or training skills. Of course, experienced workplace personnel, for many reasons, also can fail to give technically relevant, professionally credible and *morally* defensible advice, a fact that is attested to by some of the data cited above.

In any case, there appears to be an emerging shift in teacher preparation towards increased professional control, rather than university control. This suggests that the development of basic teaching skills rightly is the responsibility of experienced TAFE and industry staff and, *mutatis mutandis*, school personnel for secondary school student-teachers, though the parallels and differences between the sectors will not be argued here. There is no doubt that many professional and industrial difficulties arise from this position, not the least of which is quality control of training over the very large number of workplaces in which teachers gain experience.

When the WLA as a replacement for the practicum was adopted by the DVET as policy this writer thought that it was conceptually flawed. That is, it seemed that the WLA was a Clayton's Practicum, an attempt to have a practicum when, in fact, no practicum subject was being offered. The reservations about a conceptually flawed WLA are somewhat – thought not universally – supported by the survey data presented in this paper. Participants, by and large, adapt the WLA requirement to their respective locations and needs. They have grasped the concept of the WLA as a conduit for the subject assessment tasks, and many have utilised the WLA as a means of structuring their workplace experience in ways that have been beneficial. The research suggests that more flexibility needs to be built into the WLA and the writer has extrapolated from this to more general policy suggestions. Some experienced trainers simply do not need to be burdened with a formal practicum. For others, it seems to have met with a surprising degree of success given the schism between the university and the workplace. Nevertheless, some modification in the requirement is warranted given the research data and, indeed, this modification has been attempted in the development of the MT&D.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide answers to the many questions and objections that arise from the suggestion that universities ought not to enter into initial teacher education until those who participate have achieved two or more years of teaching experience. Some colleagues may see this as the council of despair. Others may see a potential for professionally downgrading the teaching profession. Others have developed partnership arrangements that tacitly acknowledge the primacy of experience for novices and some recent research supports these developments (Lave, 1991; Salomon, 1993; Hutchins, 1995; Brown, et al., 1989; Billett, 1992, 1993; 1996; Forrester, et al., 1995). In any case, on the positive side, the work of universities in teacher education is enormously enhanced if students who enter teacher preparation courses already have a repertoire of basic teaching skills derived from contextual experience.

Notes

1. Parts of an earlier draft of this paper were presented at the Third National Cross-Faculty Practicum Conference in Adelaide in 1997.
2. No statistical breakdown is provided for **§3.2** or **§3.3** as this data is taken from a course evaluation questionnaire that was not integrated into the research program. However, the number of students involved and the return rate may be assumed to parallel that given for the other sections of the paper.

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