

1997

The practice of beginning teachers: Identifying competence through case writing in teacher education

Brenda Cherednichenko
Victoria University of Technology

Neil Hooley
Victoria University of Technology

Tony Kruger
Victoria University of Technology

Rose Mulraney
Victoria University of Technology

Recommended Citation

Cherednichenko, B., Hooley, N., Kruger, T., & Mulraney, R. (1997). The practice of beginning teachers: Identifying competence through case writing in teacher education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 22(2).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.1997v22n2.3>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol22/iss2/3>

THE PRACTICE OF BEGINNING TEACHERS:

Identifying Competence through Case Writing in Teacher Education

Brenda Cherednichenko, Neil Hooley, Tony Kruger and Rose Mulraney

Victoria University of Technology

INTRODUCTION

Competent teachers display common attitudes and behaviours, yet it is apparent to those who attempt to categorise teachers' work, attitudes and behaviours that the identification of competence is extremely complex. This article suggests a rationale for demonstrating competence through case writing. Case writing documents and provides examples of student teachers and beginning teachers at work in teaching and learning situations. These examples of teaching and learning are part of a portfolio of cases of teaching and learning which student teachers, teachers and teacher educators working within the Department of Education at Victoria University have developed. These collections provide 'snapshots' of practice, stimuli for reflection and a public and collective view of teaching and learning experiences. They provide a comprehensive perspective of teacher competence as displayed in practice.

COMPETENCE AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Establishing benchmark practice in teaching, using a performance criterion approach, is a critical element in defining the profession and in professional education (Beare 1992). Education, training and university sectors have developed an increasing emphasis on

performance and links to professions, therefore shifting dramatically from the traditional autonomy of practice which has been the prevailing culture of higher education (Peters 1994). Bartlett (1992) highlights four principal components in professional education:

- ∞ identification of competencies;
- ∞ specification of standards;
- ∞ program construction; and
- ∞ development of assessment technologies.

The first two components are directly related to the current national effort of describing and establishing competency standards for teaching at both the level of beginning teacher and experienced practitioner. This effort has arisen out of economic and political conditions of the middle to late 1980s as governments responded to declining competitiveness of Australian products in local and overseas markets and declining productivity. The accent on improving education and training included determining professional standards and appropriate skill development of all workers (Preston and Kennedy, 1994).

Randall (1993) advocates the conception of the key competencies as being closely related to learning outcomes and assessment and reporting. However, the role of competency

statements is not only linked to the learning outcomes of students but also to the practices and appraisal of the teaching profession (McRae 1994). There is a strong web connecting national curriculum, national profiles and statements, key learning areas, learning outcomes, assessment and reporting, teacher competencies and teacher appraisal. Within this web, utilisation of the competencies for the identification and analysis of learning and teaching is central to the development of an effective structure for teaching and learning.

Several attempts have been made to define essential teacher competencies. Similarly, claims about the shortcomings of describing teacher competence as a number of criteria or behaviours are also prevalent. The Mayer view of competence is 'that performance is underpinned not only by skill but also by knowledge and understanding, and that competence involves both the ability to perform in a given context and the capacity to transfer knowledge and skills to new tasks and situations' (Mayer 1992, p. 4).

COMPETENCE AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Hagar and Beckett accept the desirability of describing competence but propose an integrated view of the practitioner: 'Integrated competence moves beyond the mere listing of tasks (that is the job done), by adding the two holistic dimensions: the practitioner's attributes (what is brought to the doing of the job) and the characteristics of the context, or

situatedness (where the job is done).' (1995, p. 12.).

The application of a set of competencies for teaching has been used to date to identify preferred qualities in beginning teachers, but the need to develop these competencies to address the perspective of proficiency in teaching practice is also important. The National Project for Quality Teaching and Learning (NPQTL, 1996) competencies have been developed after an extensive consultation process with teachers and are recognised nationally, providing the basis for teacher selection in several states, including Victoria and NSW. Kennedy and Preston support a more integrated approach to the understanding of professional competence. They make the distinction between competencies, attributes and performance and describe competency standards as 'the link between personal attributes and actual tasks to be carried out in the workplace' (1994 p. 3).

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY AND TEACHER COMPETENCE

At Victoria University the NPQIL competencies have been adopted because they are embedded in practice and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate theory/practice links, so stimulating more purposeful ways of delivering the P-12 teacher education program within the Bachelor of Education.

In utilising the NPQTI teaching competencies a number of issues are raised. The distinction between competence and expertise is critical,

as is the changing role of the teacher - from reflective

practitioner to researcher of practice. Crittenden (1995) supports the importance of understanding practice through examination and connection to theory as the primary objective rather than competency analysis for the improvement of technical efficiency. Consideration of these issues has been fundamental as we develop our relationships with schools through both the undergraduate program and collaborative research activities.

The practice of the Department of Education at Victoria University has been to become familiar with the competencies and to develop action research projects with teachers which build on the idea of establishing competency indicators, and teaching and learning questions as the focus of inquiry. Additional emphasis is placed on developing the skill of case writing to describe experience from the teacher's perspective and to illuminate and explain attitudes and behaviours which signify competence and expertise. Teachers as lifelong learners is an underlying principle supporting this process. This has most particularly been the focus of the Innovative Links Project of the Western Melbourne Roundtable.

TEACHER RESEARCHERS AND CASE WRITING

The National Teaching Competencies employ the use of cases to illuminate practice and illustrate competence. The writing of cases links closely with action research projects currently being undertaken in collaboration with

teachers. The movement from beginning teacher to expert teacher is acknowledged, although traditionally, experts teachers have kept concealed a good deal of what they do. Giddens (1990) suggests that experts work in such specialised environments that to replicate these is impossible. He suggests that there is a difference between the expert and expertise. Experts can get things wrong, as is often described in teachers' cases, but this does not diminish their expertise, rather the handling of these situations reinforces just that expert status.

LEARNING ABOUT CASE WRITING

The Innovative Links project, a National Professional Development Project, has enabled colleagues from schools and universities to work together to develop research projects and professional development programs which are school-based. Staff from ten schools and the Department of Education at Victoria University have developed cases of teaching and learning in the past two years (Western Melbourne Roundtable, 1996). These are cases of exemplars and dilemmas which teachers experience in everyday practice. They describe learning. The cases have provided valuable insights into the issues and concerns of individual teachers, teaching teams, whole schools and school clusters, networks and systems. These samples of teachers' writing have been a means of reflecting on personal practice with a view to change and improvement, have been the focus of school-based professional development and

have been shared across schools for professional development. They are about to be published and released to a national audience through the National Schools Network.

Case writing represents the teacher's own perspective and involves the description of critical incidents in teaching and learning which provide illustrations of exemplars or dilemmas of teaching practice (Louden and Wallace 1995, Shulman 1992). These cases demonstrate competence on the part of the writer and, while they may not always present perfect situations, they may indeed demonstrate competence, proficiency and expertise as the teacher is able to respond to dilemmas with new strategies and a continued commitment. While the context may not always match that of the reader, the examination of cases calls for the interpretation of teaching and learning situations and allows for connections to the reader's own practice which is subsequently exposed to critique. The discussion among teachers generates reflection on personal practice, judgement and investigation of pedagogy and a sharing of professional ideas with colleagues (Louden and Wallace, 1993).

Accompanying each case may be at least one commentary. Whilst case writing generally involves teachers writing from their own perspective about a critical incident in their professional lives. Commentaries respond to the cases and provide opportunities for others to use the cases to explore their own thinking.

A commentary may take several forms. It may be written by someone who was involved in the same experience and who is able to describe the same set of events from a different perspective. It may also be written by an outsider who uses the cases as an entry to reflection and rethinking practice. In either event, the commentary is an attempt to draw from the case greater understanding of teaching and learning and the many events which shape both theory and practice.

Commentaries do not provide answers to the problem or situation presented, nor do they make judgements about the practices described by the case. Indeed, often the commentary writer may not have all the information which was available to the case writer and it would not necessarily be appropriate to gather this information through interview, for example. In the uncertain context of teaching there are few answers, only the best decision at the time given the knowledge and constraints of the situation, or an ability, after the event, to see a better way to proceed next time.

Commentaries are the deliberations and considerations of issues which the case raises. They very often are personally reflective and empathetic to the complex situations cases invariably describe. They may add a new dimension to or inform the case discussion. The creation of dialogic democracy around the examination of experiences of teaching and learning provides the potential for greater reflection and action.

Inviting a trusted and respected friend, colleague, parent or critical friend to comment on the issues and questions significant to them from the reading of the case can often assist the case writer to see the breadth of their experience, provide new perspectives on the experience and greatly assist the professional development of both writers.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION, COMPETENCE AND CASE WRITING

The intention of the Department of Education at Victoria University in establishing a pre-service teacher education program has been to build on the notions of teacher competence in an attempt to explore the concept of the beginning teacher as a competent teacher. Competence in practice is interpreted as relating practice to agreed frameworks. The NPQTL Competencies enable the establishment of a framework for practice based on teachers' professional judgements.

Cases and exemplars which demonstrate these attributes are developed over the four years of the course. Partnership based pre-service programs, specifically the Bachelor of Education P - 12, use case and commentary writing as a means of representing and reflecting on practice. School based programs negotiated with student teachers and school and university colleagues expose the student teacher to the 'other' real work of teachers. These activities give enhanced opportunities for student teachers to consider and critique a wider range of educational theories and

through substantive practical work, develop new understandings. The demonstration of these understandings will, we believe, be best displayed in the collection of cases in a variety of genres. Graduating teachers each develop a collection of five cases which respond to the National Teaching Competencies.

This case writing and graduating teachers' personal portfolios indicate strong parallels between the demonstration of knowledge and skills by teachers, student teachers and even students:

- ∞ Student learning and learning outcomes are represented and identified through annotated work samples.
- ∞ Student teacher attitudes, attributes and performance are demonstrated through case writing, lesson plans and evaluations.
- ∞ Experienced teachers' expertise and proficiency are exemplified in folios for appraisal, the expression of dilemmas or cases of teaching and learning and the research efforts of teachers.
- ∞ The appropriateness of university teaching and professional preparation is reflected in the links which university students construct between theory and practice through the description, discussion and assessment of practice, so initiating pathways for new learning.

In the fourth year of the Bachelor of Education student teachers have extended placements in schools. The analysis of their work in schools

is focused on the work described in the NPQTL Teacher Competencies. The beginning teacher must be able to demonstrate through their practice an understanding of theory and its connection to practice. To do this, teachers and student teachers need to be able to apply the competencies to their regular practice, i.e. take the notion of competence beyond the theoretical to the functional. Student teachers' cases are used to document, describe and demonstrate teaching attributes and performance. Through these cases which are informed by the indicators and general areas of competence, beginning teachers are able to structure a presentation of their personal attributes and performances which focus on the dilemmas, complexities and exemplary practices of teaching to illustrate, examine and reflect on their own skill and knowledge.

In doing so, beginning teachers are inducted into and become acquainted with the language of the profession. As practitioners they are exposed to a discourse which enables them to enter into debates with other professionals. The language of the National Teaching Competencies and the indicators and descriptors of competence provide the mechanism for such a discussion to take place. By enabling student teachers to engage in the discourse of the practice of teaching and learning with other professionals, the reflections on practice, the opportunities to develop and improve practice and the identification of outcomes are enhanced. The development of this writing is used in

reflective enquiry, discussion and to develop teachers as theorists and as researchers of their own practice. In reading and researching the hundreds of cases written by graduating teachers, we have identified exemplary cases; cases which richly describe and interpret practice. They indicate the development of personal understanding and the construction of personal theories of teaching and learning

The written conversation about the teacher's practice in the teacher's voice (Hargreaves 1994) can be interpreted and discussed by others in the profession. The value of the development of the discourse is in the depth of analysis which can be applied to the examination of practice and consequently competence, proficiency and expertise. Teachers engage in reflection on practice constantly, often assisted by the discourse of teaching and learning which is prevalent in their system. The adoption of a national framework for this reflection and the systematic collection of data about teaching and learning enables public examination and critique of practice, essential for improvement in practice and the formulation of new theories. The documentation of action research is also possible through case writing.

CONCLUSION

The preparation of teachers in the Bachelor of Education P - 12 program at Victoria University includes a substantial emphasis of student teachers moving towards the attainment of professional competence. There

are three dimensions to the attainment of competence:

- ∞ the practice of teaching and learning;
- ∞ the discursive - thinking and theorising about that practice, and connections to broader conceptions of teaching and learning and;
- ∞ the public explanation and critique of practice and its connection to theory, through case representation.

In this teacher education program which is partnership based, case writing has provided a powerful opportunity for graduating teachers to authentically describe, interpret and understand practice and its connections to theoretical perspectives. In researching the case writing of beginning teachers 'best practice' cases have been identified which develop from both exemplars and dilemmas in teaching and learning experiences and stimulate inquiry, reflection and action.

This research is developing and case writing from all four years of the pre-service Bachelor of Education P - 12 is being collected and analysed to investigate connections between university experience, experience in schools and other educational settings. The focus for research in this area in 1997 will be the benchmarking of the Bachelor of Education P - 12 with other institutions using case writing as a significant stimulus for collaborative professional conversations about beginning teacher competence.

REFERENCES

Australian Education Council and Ministers for Vocational Education Employment and Training (1992) *Putting General Education to Work: The Key Competencies Report* (Mayer) Melbourne.

Bartlett, L. (1992) Selected professions observed: competency -based standards and their implications for the teaching profession. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 17(2), 9-25.

Beare, H. (1992) What does it mean to be a professional? A commentary about teacher professionalism. *Australian Journal of education*, 18(4), 65-72.

Collins, C. (Ed). *Competencies: The competencies debate in Australian education and training Australian College of Education: Canberra*

Crittenden, B. (1995) Liberal and vocational education: convergence or confusion?

Collins, C. (Ed). *Curriculum Stocktake: Evaluating School Curriculum Change*. Australian College of Education: Canberra.

Giddens, A. (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity* Polity Press: Cambridge.

Hagar, P. and Beckett, D. (1995). Philosophical underpinnings of the integrated conception of competence. *Educational philosophy and theory*, 27(1), 6-24.

Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing Teachers, Changing Times.- teachers' work and culture in the post-modern age*. Cassell, London.

Kennedy, K.J. and Preston, B. (1994). *Teacher competencies and teacher education: progress report on a research project*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, University of Newcastle, November.

Louden, W. and Wallace, J. (1993). Competency standards in teaching: exploring the case. *Unicorn*, 19(1), 45-53.

Louden, W. and Wallace, J. (1995). *Quality Teaching and Learning: case studies*. Hodder Education: Sydney.

McRae, D. (1994). *The place of appraisal in education reform*. L. Ingvarson and R. Chadbourne (Eds) *Valuing Teachers' Work: new directions in teacher appraisal*. ACER: Melbourne.

National Project for the Quality of Teaching and Learning. (1996). *Teacher Competencies*. Australian Teaching Council.

Peters, M. (1994). 'Performance', the future of the university and 'Post- Industrial Society' *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 26(1), 1-22.

Preston, B. and Kennedy, K. (1994). Models of professional standards for beginning practitioners and their applicability to initial professional education. A paper presented at

the conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education. December.

Randall, R. (1993). Linking key competencies and the National Curriculum agenda.

Shulman, J. (1992). *Case Methods in Teacher Education*. Teachers' College Press: New York.