Critical Reflective Practice and Workplace Learning : Impediments and Possibilities in Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Professional practica are an essential part of teacher education and other professional education programs, but university staff often express concern that prac experiences are fundamentally conservative, emphasising preparation for the status quo rather than for what might be. In recent years other forms of workplace-based university learning have been devised, where staff have sought to build units of study around a core of reflective practice, action research and professional development. This paper describes one such initiative, a final semester internship for fourth year education students which enabled them to design and negotiate their own professional development plans in any one of a wide variety of educational settings. These included educational publishers, seniors programs, mining companies, environmental education projects, grief counselling, performing arts and community literacy programs, among others. The Internship was conceived as a collaborative action research project, so the experiences of all participants including our own have been used as part of the ongoing process of shaping and improving the Internship as an opportunity for self-directed personal-professional development.

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes as its focus the contradictions, tensions and dilemmas that we faced in promoting more critical and reflective teaching in our pre-service teacher education program. We are in agreement with Smith and Zantiotis (1989, p.110) when they argue that

> *'the work of teacher educators is a form of cultural politics in which "truth" about schools and teaching is produced and contested; they have political and economic as well as educational roles to play'.*

Our understanding of critical reflective practice draws on Brookfield's (1994, p.204) three interrelated processes:

(1) the experience of questioning and then replacing or reframing an assumption, or assumptive cluster, which is unquestioningly accepted as representing dominant common sense by a majority; (2) the experience of taking a perspective on social and political structures, or on personal and collective actions, which is strongly alternative to that held by a majority; (3) the experience of studying the ways in which ideas, and their representations in actions and structures are accepted as self-evident renderings of the 'natural' state of affairs.

Carr and Kemmis (1983, p.43) argue that

> *"teachers 'become critical' – not in the sense that they become negativistic or complaining, but in the sense that they gather their intellectual and strategic capacities, focus them on a particular issue and engage them in critical examination of practice through the 'project'".*

In the first section of the paper, we explore some of the impediments to fostering critical reflective practice of this kind within a workplace-based teacher education initiative. We consider the ways in which the inherent conservatism of teaching and teacher education is reinforced by the changing nature of the new work order, and the implications this has for critical reflective practitioners. In the second section, we chart our motives, experiences and reflections about introducing an alternative Internship model of workplace experience as a means of teaching against the grain (Ng, 1995). In the final section, we discuss two emergent themes in our practice with student teachers– the challenge of creating shared meaning within a dominant practical-professional discourse and the potential of "personal troubles" as a means of engaging with critical reflective practice.

IMPEDIMENTS TO CRITICAL REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Research on the nature of teacher education indicates that it is typically a conservative enterprise. Hursh (1992, p.150) contends that the

> *"discourse, practices and organisational structures of teacher education, by reflecting liberal individualism, depoliticises teaching and schooling and naturalises current practices".*

Beyer (1987, p.21) argues that the dominant discourse of technical rationality leads to a particular orientation whereby

> *"techniques of teaching often become ends in themselves rather than a means to some reasoned educational purpose".*

Traces of this discourse are strongly evident in our students' discussion and written feedback during their Internship experience. They often spoke of "refining their skills", "collecting useful resources" and "achieving positive learning outcomes" for themselves and others. Bullough & Gitlin (1994, p. 70) likewise draw attention to the way in which these approaches are

> *'fundamentally conservative, emphasising fitting into current institutional patterns and practices rather than thinking about and criticising them'.*

They argue (1991, p. 38) that the training orientation to teacher education:

> *... maintains a set of structures and embodies a cluster of ideologies which encourage the following: a constricted view of teacher intellect through emphasis on teaching as technique, an extreme form of individualism, teacher dependence on experts, acceptance of hierarchy, a consumer or 'banking' view of teaching and learning (teacher is 'banker'; learning is consuming), a limited commitment to the betterment of the educational community and a conservative survivalist mentality among novice teachers.*

Consistent with this argument is the biographical research on student teachers and teacher educators. Adler (1991, p.78), for example, argues that

> *'preservice teachers have been students of teaching for most of their lives and expect that teacher education will prepare them for success in existing school structures'.*

Waghorn and Stevens (1996) study of ten preservice teachers in New Zealand confirms that

> *'student teachers usually comply with the status quo and carry out actions and routines preferred by their supervising teacher'.*

Day's (1985, 135) study on student teachers initial experiences of schools depicts a process of two-way struggle between 'espoused theories' and 'theories in use'. He argues that new teachers

> *'who compromise and adapt to school culture do so, in a sense, unconsciously and in all innocence'.*

Maxine Green (cited in Hursh, 1992, p.3) captures this argument well:

> *Their schools seem to resemble natural processes; what happens in them appears to have the sanction of natural law and can no more be questioned or resisted than the law of gravity.*

In the case of teacher educators, Grundy and Hatton's (1995) study of teacher educators' ideological discourses highlights a 'lack of concern for social transformation' (p.21-22). A follow-up analysis (Grundy & Hatton, 1998) on the influence of biography upon teacher educators and student teachers understanding of their work suggests why this may be the case. They found that at a

> *'general level, both teacher educators and student teachers are limited in their capacity to recognise or comment upon the way in which their lives and work are being influenced by their class, gender and ethnicity' (p.133).*

Where there is an acknowledgment, it is typically because of some sense of the discriminatory operation of these social constructs in their own lives. Their study found a range of responses across a continuum from 'denial of influence', 'non-recognition/non-acknowledgment', 'unproblematic recognition/not personal knowledge', unproblematic recognition of influence/untheorised but connected to practice and social understanding', 'problematised recognition through retrospective analysis' (p.124).

The evidence indicates that the dominant "discourse of practicality" (Smith & Zantiotis, 1989, p.110) so evident in teacher education programs reinforces the status quo and suggests why the task of developing critical reflective teachers is so difficult. Furthermore, our experience of the Internship project alerted us to the ways in which student teachers' professional identities are increasingly being shaped and regulated by modern corporate workplace culture. It seemed to us that we were struggling not only against the conservative tendencies in teacher education itself but with a whole new set of technologies of regulation and control characteristic of contemporary workplaces. This line of argument is articulated well in Gee, Hull and Lankshear's (1996) book entitled the *New Work Order* where they argue that

> *'new social identities or new kinds of workers are being created to meet the needs of global capitalism' (p. xiv).*

According to them,

> *'these workers must be prepared for lifelong learning and the need to continually adapt, change and learn new skills, very often on site while carrying out the job' (p.6).*

In taking on a workplace learning project we found ourselves grappling with the tension between our espoused commitment to critical reflective practice and the largely conservative forces driving the workplace learning movement. Work-based university learning has been defined by Margham (1997, p.2) as:

> *That learning which ... [utilises] opportunities, resources and experience in the workplace. It will, in general, have outcomes relevant to the nature and purpose of the workplace ... the learning achieved will include appropriate underpinning knowledge and will be tailored to meet the needs of the student and the placement.*

This movement in part reflects the desire of governments of all persuasions to turn Australian universities into corporate annexes. As a result, there is increasing pressure to forge more intimate partnerships with business, industry and the professions. Our own institution's strategic plan provides evidence of this sort of thinking:

> *[Work-based learning will] strengthen the interface between the professions and ECU [Edith Cowan University],*

> *test students' abilities in the marketplace, and ensure that the curriculum is relevant and appropriate to market needs (Edith Cowan University Strategic Plan, 1999-2001, p.15).*

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 'education is an important tool in the process of restructuring the Australian economy and making it more competitive, through: producing more 'flexible' and 'responsive' forms of labour; fostering greater participation by the private sector in higher education, especially through research; and requiring that higher education operate more like the private market' (Smyth, 1995, p.3). According to Kenway, Bigum and Fitzclarence (1995, p.37) fast capitalism requires 'new definitions of jobs, new qualities and skills from workers and those who educate them'. They point out, that 'it is not sufficient for students or workers as learners to just 'past tests'. They must develop 'higher order thinking', 'real understanding', 'situated expertise', the ability to 'learn to learn' and to solve problems at the 'edge of their expertise'. As a result, 'education is less and less a means towards self-expression, cultural and social responsibility and aesthetic, critical and creative sensibilities. Its purposes become increasingly utilitarian'.

THE PROFESSIONAL EXTENSION PROGRAM (PEP)

Against this backdrop, our decision to develop a workplace-based Internship for final year teacher education students was an attempt to challenge some of the assumptions and practices of the current technicist push in university course design. In other words, we wanted to see if we could develop units that had the relevance and practical application of workplace experience, yet encouraged students to think more broadly and critically about educational issues. With this in mind, we established the core features of the Internship: students would have the freedom to design their own professional development project and negotiate their own placement; critical reflective practice would be built into the unit through seminars, readings and appropriate learning tasks; and finally, assessment would be as authentic as possible, so students would create

a project portfolio and share their projects in an end-of-semester conference.

Each of these features was based on certain principles that have informed our own practice in developing site-based teacher education over the past five years. The use of self-designed projects enables students and teachers to identify and explore educational problems that are of genuine concern to them. In this model, educators begin to develop confidence in their capacity to generate and sustain their own professional development, rather than simply consuming the expert knowledge of others. We also hoped that the process of planning and negotiating their own placements would build a range of skills that graduates would be likely to draw on in their working lives, and that evidence of these would form part of their teaching portfolios. Importantly, we negotiated key aspects of the Internship with the students themselves as well as taking advice from other stakeholders such as teachers, principals and prospective employers.

In so doing, we were conscious of the ways in which many of these ideas can be appropriated in support of corporate organisational goals. To help avoid such cooption, we sought to embed the project in what Bullough and Gitlin (1991, p. 40) call an "educative community" characterised by 'dialogue, reason and the ethic of caring'.

We deliberately encouraged students to take a broader view of education than that offered already in their extensive practicum experience. We invited them to consider educational settings other than schools and classrooms as potential sites for their professional development projects. Education can thus be conceived as something that happens throughout the community and across the lifespan, rather than being limited to children and teachers in traditional classrooms. We hoped that placement in non-school contexts might help students to break away from the expectation that this was just more "prac" and provide a challenge to some of the taken-for-granted aspects of their current educational thinking and practice. To provide theoretical support in this task we drew extensively on the models of critical reflective practice proposed by Smyth (1989) and Tripp (1997). These we used as the basis for the students' project design.

Most of the 21 students involved in this program responded to this challenge with enthusiasm and creativity. As we shall demonstrate later, many of them used the opportunity to explore issues that were personally meaningful, or had troubled them in some way in the past. While some students chose to work in classrooms, they did so with a particular investigative focus such as the need for fairer assessment processes, or the challenge of integrating information technology with very young children. The majority of students elected to step outside the conventional classroom for their Internship, and their projects showed great diversity. For example, we had students placed in community policing, environmental education programs, drug and sex education initiatives, newspapers in education, a children's literature centre, parent education, sports coaching, a grief and loss program for children, seniors learning to use computers, adult literacy and an integration program for disabled adolescents. Because the students shared their learning experiences, both in process and in their conference presentation at the end, this diversity was in itself a valuable means of broadening the group's perspective on the nature and role of education in the community.

The students were required to complete the equivalent of four weeks placement, and they could negotiate this in any way that fitted in with their other course requirements and the preferences of the placement organisation. In addition, they participated in a series of four workshops designed to build their knowledge of reflective practice and practitioner research, using their own developing projects as a basis for shared critical reflection. Each workshop examined a particular question: What is reflective practice? What strategies are effective in promoting reflective practice? How can reflective practice improve teaching and learning? What does a good case study look like? Prior to each workshop students were given a set of readings and asked to prepare a written piece to share with the group. The workshops commenced with a reporting back session where they spoke about their reading and their particular PEP.

It was during these monthly workshops that we systematically collected information from participants using group interviews and written responses to questions about their experiences and their professional learning. In the sections to follow we want to discuss two key emergent themes:
1) the challenge of creating shared meaning within a practical-professional discourse; and (2)

the potential of "personal troubles" as a means of engaging with theory that preoccupied much of our collective work. The four workshops provided us with the space to collectively share and explore these emergent themes.

PRACTICAL-PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS: THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING SHARED MEANING

Because of the innovative nature of the PEP for the students involved, we were especially conscious of the need to make explicit the set of values and processes underpinning the program. At the time we did not see this as presenting a serious problem, given our own commitment to and experience of critical reflective practice in teacher education. For over four years, student teachers at Edith Cowan University, South West campus (Bunbury) have worked with us on a range of site-based teacher education initiatives at both graduate and undergraduate level. We could certainly lay claim to 'relevance', as we have sought to locate students' professional learning in real contexts and around real educational problems. In all cases, we have designed units around a common core of reflective practice and action research. Our teaching and learning approaches both on campus and in schools have invited students to challenge taken for granted assumptions about schools and teaching, and to initiate change where possible (Hogan & Down, 1998). Despite our previous experiences, we found ourselves grappling with the challenge of creating shared meaning with the students involved in this particular project. Several reasons for this emerged from our reflection on the PEP.

Firstly, we wondered whether the students were in a position to engage with the more political aspects of reflective practice at this stage of their professional learning. Their preoccupations seemed to be very different from our own, reflecting, perhaps, the kinds of developmental stages identified in Brady, Segal, Bamford and Deer's (1998) longitudinal study of a cohort of teacher education students. In this model students progress from a concern for personal survival, through a focus on lesson preparation to an emphasis on meeting the needs of individual children. While elements of all three stages were evident in our students' PEP projects, there was also evidence that many of the students had

moved beyond these technical concerns to consider issues relating to their professional identity and learning, one of the key aims of this particular project.

Secondly and despite our intentions, the professional identities students constructed through this process reflect what Smith and Zantiotis (1989, p.108) describe as the "realist genre":

> ... which is concerned with valorising teacher work and knowledge so that teachers will be better prepared to act professionally. Professionalism in this context is essentially centred on teachers making their own decisions about curriculum and pedagogy.

The language of the realist genre is evident in students' rationale for their choice of PEP placements. For example, Tony was interested in building his teaching portfolio, collecting evidence of his credentials, new skills and experience:

> The Internship program was very successful ... as I received the Level 1 coaching certificate as well as the Class 3 soccer referee certificate. It enabled me to develop new teaching and management skills that had not previously been attempted, fearing the possibility of failure. It was also a great opportunity to experience teaching in a setting other than the classroom with children of all ages and backgrounds.

Georgia focused on building her professional knowledge base:

> I am still wondering what a 'good" drug education program looks like and how to establish effective communications within the community and school in order to teach children about drug use and abuse.

Jodie was similarly interested in building her professional knowledge but her emphasis was on the processes of mentoring and modelling in relation to her own development:

> I think this setting offers many opportunities for my learning and preparation for my first year of teaching. I think that learning from an experienced teacher who is striving for best practice allows me to draw upon

that knowledge and form my own philosophy of teaching.

It became clear that amongst themselves students had a strong sense of shared meaning and that this reflected the conservative discourse of the teacher as practical-professional as distinct from the critical discourse that we had intended them to "share". Workshop discussions kept coming back to these practical-professional concerns despite our efforts to introduce a more political dimension to students' enquiry. At this point we were forced to confront our own assumptions that critical reflective practice was good for student teachers and that they would share our enthusiasm for engaging in it. During a workshop entitled 'Critically Reflective Practice' one of our student teachers asked the question 'Why bother, I just want to get on with my project? We should not have been surprised at this, given that our own roles, personal histories and work experience situate us very differently from our students. Our students politely resisted what Brookfield (1994, p. 205) describes as

> *'"the inspirational rhetoric that surrounds discourse on critical reflection"*
> *in favour of strategies that met their more immediate needs.*

Finally, as Shor argues, it is important to locate the problem of fostering critical thinking in a broader context:

> *"interferences to critical thought must be conceived as social and pervasive, not as personal problems or as isolated pedagogical ones" (1987, p. 48).*

The practical professional identities being adopted by student teachers in this workplace learning project are reinforced by modern organisational culture which constrains critical thought in particular ways. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) describe how modern organisations have

> *'adopted a new set of tools and procedures, designed to change social relations in the workplace, a form of socio-technical engineering' (p. xv).*

In this new fast capitalist workplace there is a whole new ethos, orientation and discourse. Workers are turned into

> *'multi-skilled partners; the values of trust, co-operation, partnerships and teamwork are the buzz words as people become committed to the corporate vision/culture/mission'.*

The worker is now a 'partner' and the 'boss' is a leader or 'coach', no longer telling people what to do, but giving them a vision and coaching them on the job that they control, understand, and actively seek to improve (p.29). In this "enchanted workplace", according to Gee (1994, p.7) we find:

> *And, indeed, our fast capitalist texts are aware of the tensions between workers who are in control and thinking for themselves and the possibilities that they might question the very ends and goals of fast capitalist business themselves, which would make them very poor fast capitalists indeed. But, then, what sort of 'freedom' and 'empowerment' do workers have if they cannot question the 'vision', values, ends, and goals of the new work order itself?*

The paradox is that workers do not have the power or freedom to question the 'vision', values, ends, and goals of the new work order itself. Workers rarely have the opportunity to influence the content of those ends, let alone play an active role in their formation. As McIntyre (1995) (cited in Rees, 1995, p.24-25) concludes, claims about effectiveness and efficiency are about means of control, the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour'. In his words, managerial fundamentalism

> *'is apparent in its dogma, intolerance of critics and gratitude for compliant staff'.*

Thus the rhetoric of worker involvement is hardly matched in practice. While elements of the rhetoric sound seductive, the reality is that unilateral control on the basis of managerial prerogative is the prevailing norm. Buchanan (1995, p.65) claims that

> *'in many ways it is simply the reworking of old concepts dressed up in contemporary jargon'.*

PERSONAL TROUBLES

Fecho (1994, p.181) argues that most teachers begin systematic research because they are unhappy about some aspect of their own practice. For many students, the starting point for enquiry was personal experience, often an incident or problem that had confronted them during their teaching experiences or within their own or their family's schooling. Mac an Ghaill (1996, p.299) affirms the potential usefulness of

linking students' local and personal issues with public issues and globally based structural changes. Because the Internship model enabled students to make choices about their context and the nature of their projects, many of them used the opportunity to explore such issues further:

> *I wonder how parents want their children to be taught [drug education] and how I can do it without encouraging them to take drugs. (Georgia)*

> *My younger brother is having trouble adjusting to high school especially maths. I wonder if there is a mismatch between primary and high school maths. (Clare)*

> *I feel that the time I spent at PEAC [a program for gifted students] in primary school was beneficial to me but that my classmates who did not attend missed out on interesting and stimulating activities. (Michelle)*

Such significant incidents or problems typically arise when students feel a sense of dissonance between their experiences, and their deeply held (though often implicit) pedagogical values. Frequently the experience is an affront to the "ethic of care" that permeates liberal progressive discourses of education and schooling. Thus Clare is troubled by a system that fails to support her brother in his transition to secondary school; Georgia seeks out an approach to drug education that genuinely reaches young adolescents; while Michelle wonders why the stimulating learning experiences developed in "gifted" programs shouldn't be available to all children.

Hursh (1992, p.5) believes that such moments might generate an alternative perspective to that provided by technical approaches to teacher education. The value of caring about students, which is often the primary reason given for becoming a teacher can lead, as Noddings (1984) has argued, to analysing and reforming classrooms and schools. In our experience "personal troubles" provided one of the few opportunities for challenging students' taken-for-granted views about teaching. While all students had a desire to improve their own skills and knowledge and to create good educational experiences for others, personal troubles highlighted instances where students were unable

to live out their ideals. We found that the students were at different stages of development in the reflective process, depending on the workplace context and the kinds of questions they were asking.

Maria, for example, spent her PEP at both local and metropolitan newspapers where she developed her own professional writing skills, learnt more about motivating children to write through the use of real world texts, and collected valuable classroom resources which she shared with the other students in the course. The beginnings of critical reflection were evident in Maria's project though her focus was clearly on the more practical aspects of personal-professional learning:

> *I feel that as teachers we should teach children by keeping in mind the learning processes we naturally undertake ourselves. The ideas of catering for individual differences and flexibility (being open to creativity, student interest etc) are things that need to be considered in the classroom context. ... Teachers need to be good role models by being active learners as well.*

The challenging nature of Rebecca's experience necessitated a deeper exploration of her situation in order for her to survive professionally. Rebecca worked for four weeks as a relief teacher in a particularly difficult set of circumstances. She was forced to confront the insufficiency of "caring for kids" as a solution to the problems she faced. She describes her feelings at one very low point as follows:

> *...I reached a dilemma where I was feeling terribly guilty that I wasn't giving the "good" students my time and assistance. I was quite heartbroken, as I so wanted to help these students who would look at me with longing eyes for some peace and order in their classroom. ... I was feeling emotionally battered from the negativity and the fall from excitement and hope I had for these students. (Journal)*

The intensity of Rebecca's emotions became a catalyst for examining more critically the social context and history of the class and her own beliefs and values. As a result she was able to

move beyond blaming herself and/or the students, to establish a healthier classroom environment based on mutual respect and shared problem solving.

Julie's placement forced her to confront issues at two levels as she tutored a young woman with an intellectual disability. One was the need to rethink the dependency relationship between teacher and taught:

> *"... the first change I had to make as a teacher [was] actually not being in control of what is learnt all the time. As Linda's trust in me grew I felt we became a partnership and solved many of the problems together." (PEP report).*

The other was the connection between her student's situation and broader issues of institutional power and social disadvantage. She considered for example, the potential of pre-packaged competency based programs to alienate and disempower certain groups of students. Julie's project is a good example of Kincheloe's (1995, p.71) argument that

> *"educational problems are better understood when considered in a relational way that transcends simple linearity".*

These examples also reinforce the notion of a continuum of critical insight as suggested in the Grundy and Hatton (1998) study described earlier in this paper.

These stories illustrate the crucial importance of context in determining the extent to which students felt the need to engage with more theoretical explanations of educational problems. As argued earlier, the notion of practicality, while providing a crucial reminder of the complexity of teachers' work, actually operates to disempower teachers by leaving them with little time for creative and reflective thought and action (Giroux, 1985). Furthermore, as Kincheloe (1995, p.76) argues

> *"the culture of technicist teacher education has tacitly instructed teachers across the generations to undervalue the domain of theory while avoiding questions of the ideological, psychological, and pedagogical assumptions underlying their practice".*

Carr and Kemmis (1983, p.45) argue that, "critical analysis is only possible when both theory (organised knowledge) and practice (organised action) can be treated in a unified way

as problematic - as open to dialectical reconstruction through reflection and revision". Personal troubles seemed to us to be the most promising starting point in bridging the theory-practice divide and creating a felt need in students to pursue a more rigorous and critical form of enquiry.

In rethinking the Professional Extension Program we intend to acknowledge and build on the importance of students' personal troubles, encouraging them to develop a line of socially critical enquiry out of issues that really challenge them personally and professionally. This involves generating different explanations, illuminating aspects of education that remain hidden and questioning the taken-for-granted. In so doing, we agree with Carr's (1982) point that

> *'the only task which 'educational theory' can legitimately pursue is to develop theories of educational practice that are intrinsically related to practitioners' own accounts of what they are doing, that will improve the quality of their involvement and allow them to practice better'.*

Our experience indicates that workplace culture tends to reinforce the notion of practical-professional and is unlikely to engage students in the sorts of critical reflection we have in mind simply by locating them in a new work setting. In our view, personal troubles can provide the space and place for making

> *"the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical" (Giroux, 1988, p.127).*

In this way we might begin the task of challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning the current obsession with workplace learning.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have considered some of the impediments to critical reflective practice in the context of a workplace-based Professional Extension Program (PEP). We have discussed these around the themes of conservatism in teacher education and the pressures of the new corporate workplace culture. We have raised some concerns about the direction of workplace learning and its emphasis on credentialism, technical training, and worker compliance. Our project revealed some of the tensions and dilemmas in attempting to develop more thoughtful socially critical practice in a context

that reinforces a view of the teacher as practical-professional. As a way forward we have identified personal troubles as a key strategy in developing socially critical forms of enquiry. This should provide the impetus for enquiry rather than assuming students' choice of work locations will raise critical questions and generate a context in which these can be pursued.

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