

Two Cubed: A rationale for creating a community of professional learners at Charles Sturt University Dubbo

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Abstract

Teacher Education needs to move beyond the limitations of existing pre-service and in-service courses. Instead, teacher education should be regarded as a career long process of professional learning 'which takes place prior to and during pre-service, and continues through induction and inservice' (Gore, 1995). An important step in this direction is partnerships between schools and teacher education institutions in initial teacher preparation. Many such partnerships already occur across states and institutions. This paper outlines a rationale for a teacher education course that seeks to achieve a partnership between Charles Sturt University Dubbo and the Department of Education and Training (DET) in NSW within the framework of career long professional learning for teachers.

The existing political climate with the restructuring of the DET bureaucracy as well as the proposed NSW Institute of Teachers presents a serendipitous moment for the establishment of such a course. The course would follow what the author has termed the 'two cubed' model of teacher education. That is, the first two years of teacher education in the university, followed by two years in school based teacher education (SBTE) with the final two years as a beginning teacher mentored by both the training and employing institutions. The initial teacher education course will be the Trojan horse that makes professional learning a formal part of the teaching profession as the interaction between the DET and Charles Sturt University creates professional learning opportunities for existing teachers. This professional learning will be linked strongly to the bioregion of the Murray-Darling Basin, thus addressing both the ecological and social sustainability issues of this region. As well, the qualification gained will be for K-10, addressing the needs of middle school students in central and high schools in the central west of New South Wales.

Introduction

Zeichner (2002) outlines three major contemporary approaches to reform in teacher education as well as one emerging agenda. With particular reference to the US situation these are: the professionalisation agenda, the deregulation agenda, and the social justice agenda. The emergent agenda is said to be an

over-regulation agenda (Cochran-Smith, 2001 cited in Zeichner, 2002). Zeichner (2002) comprehensively details the strengths and limitations of these approaches, with particular attention to their connection with the students that their graduates will teach. It is this contextualisation of teacher education programs that continues to be a focus for stakeholders in the profession including those of use residing in Dubbo.

The call for a reconnection of teacher education institutions and schools is an ongoing mantra in reviews of Australian teacher education (Ramsey, 2000; DEST, 2002). It is a motherhood statement difficult to refute yet scarce in its actual manifestation in NSW. There are some examples of small scale reforms in teacher education that have included some elements of school based teacher education (Scully, 2001; Cambourne, 2002; Kiggins, 2001). The foremost of these in the state of NSW is the Knowledge Building Community (KBC) project out of the University of Wollongong. The KBC innovation is a good model for the two cubed program as it is based on a model of learning that is collaborative and inclusive. Indeed the school teachers involved in the KBC have recorded that the program has been a catalyst for professional learning in their schools (Cambourne, 2002; Rappell and Barnett, 2002). The professional learning aspect of the KBC will inform the Dubbo project.

The establishment of the NSW Institute of Teachers' accreditation program for teachers provides a strong rationale for the two-cubed program. The four key stages proposed for the accreditation process link well with the model of professional learning embodied in 'two cubed'. The program will facilitate the development of suitable **graduate teachers** in the first four years and ensure that they reach a level of **professional competence** in their first two years in the profession. Experienced teachers will be able to demonstrate **professional accomplishment** and **professional leadership** through their involvement in the education of beginning teachers. The NSW Institute's four levels of accreditation are based on a model of whole career professional learning rather than initial registration and certification evident in other teacher registration bodies. This encapsulates Ramsey's (2000) concept of tiers of professional status linked to professional learning outcomes such as the demonstration of competence in the mentoring of beginning teachers. The two cubed program of teacher education would be a significant induction into a culture of continuous professional learning of the kind argued for by Feiman-Nemser (2001).

One very pragmatic justification for a teacher education program that seeks to break down the current pre-service to practice divide is the rate of attrition of beginning teachers in NSW schools. NSW DET schools lose 20% of beginning teachers in their first five years (Ewing and Smith, 2002).

Compounding this rate of attrition is the high staff turnover or 'staffing churn' (Thomson, 2002) in the

western region of the state. A program that facilitates the professional development of student teachers to develop 'contextual understandings and situated pedagogies' (McConaghy, 2002) in the western region might be able to address the disturbing rate of attrition.

The two cubed program would not only teach students and teachers from the region and for the region but about the region. Enhancing this bioregion approach is the recent move by the DET to collapse all of the western districts into one large region that encompasses the Murray-Darling Basin. Our education systems have a responsibility to reconnect people with their bioregion. Awareness of bioregions is integral to the notion of developing a sense of place:

The human and environmental crises of today's world are largely of this lack of a sense of place. We have lost our sense of place primarily because we have little concept of our vital ties to the non-human world: we don't really know the completeness of our immersion in the processes and interactions that characterise the natural world (Berry, 1979 p.79).

Unfortunately, high teacher mobility in the western region militates against teachers developing a sense of place. The existence of the transfer system and bonuses promotes a transient teacher population in the west. A transient teaching population tends to reside in a town (or an adjacent larger town) rather than inhabit an environment. Orr (1992, p.30) describes inhabiting as *an intimate, organic mutually nurturing relationship with a place*.

The first two years: A solid grounding in the disciplines

The first two years of the course would be based at Charles Sturt University Dubbo. By the end of these two years, students would have engaged with seminal educational philosophies, studied the bioregion of the Murray Darling Basin and begun to develop pedagogical content knowledge in each of the six primary key learning areas.

DET requirements

There will be a strong emphasis on the curriculum subjects for the first two years. This means that the students will have sufficient theoretical grounding before they undertake any of their action research in the second part of the course. To maintain the crucial link between theory and practice, students will visit schools one day a week throughout these two years. Students will later be able to attempt to put into practice their learning in the curriculum areas. The first two years are also based on the idea that beginning teachers need to be critical consumers of curriculum packages (i.e. syllabuses) and

pedagogical tools (eg. Quality Teaching in NSW Schools) that are employed in the teaching profession.

NSW universities, including CSU, and the employing agencies (notably the DET) have negotiated *specific competencies* which are currently woven into undergraduate courses such as minimum ICT competencies, Special Education subject. These would be part of the non-negotiable outcomes of this approach to teacher education.

Elective Subjects

The two 7-9 campuses of Dubbo College provide an opportunity to strengthen the graduate base locally in particular, and more widely in the case of Central schools. Elective Studies would provide the curriculum/subject expertise required by the DET, while the projects would ground the theory and practice in particular settings and contexts (McConaghy, 2001). Students would undertake related studies and projects on early adolescence and middle years professional practice. CSU Dubbo proposes to offer specialties in English, Mathematics, and Information and Communication Technologies.

Professional Experience

CSU's commitment to high amounts of practicum has been highly regarded and widely acknowledged (see for instance, Ramsey, 2000). Early engagement with school settings provides an initial 'reality check' for students. While extended and intensive *clinical supervision* is not a desired outcome of this project some positive aspects of extended professional experience have been incorporated.

Mentoring Recognition and Professional Development Schools

Access to quality teacher associates in school settings has been identified as problematic by a wide range of agencies (see particularly Gonczi *et al*, 2003; Gore, 1995). Both the DET's Quality Teaching in NSW framework and the Certificate in Mentoring offer ways of providing a selection framework guaranteeing access to identified and recognised quality practitioners.

In turn these roles offer professional development in pedagogy and leadership that could be recognised by employers and CSU appropriately. The DET could support credentialing towards professional competence and leadership standards. Schools, now with devolved training and development budgets,

could provide strategic resourcing of key personnel to meet personal and organisational needs. CSU could provide access to a range of accredited studies supporting teacher practitioner learning:

Graduate Certificate in Education Studies (Mentoring /Leadership and Change Management/Pedagogy/Curriculum Practice or Assessment/Indigenous Studies)

Masters in Education/Educational Leadership

Access to CSU's professional learning community under the auspices of Professor Bill Green and Professor Stephen Kemmis

Professional Development Schools would be special status conferred on schools with high levels of accredited mentors and quality practitioners. Both DET and CSU would be involved in the recognition process, CSU already having a lead role in portfolio assessment of workplace learning (see Retallick, 2001) and corporate portfolios could be utilised to support school claims for recognition.

The Second Two Years: School Based Teacher Education: learning to fly a plane in a storm blindfolded

Classroom experience in itself cannot be trusted to deliver lessons that shape dispositions to inquire and be serious about student learning.

(Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann, 1988 cited in Gore, 1995)

The title of this section is taken from a comment made by Jenny Gore at a Teacher Education Council meeting in 2003. 'Learning to fly in a plane blindfolded' makes reference to the practical skills of implementing curriculum that are best learnt at the chalkface. Gore made the point that our current practicum programs prepare teachers for working under what might be called normal conditions. However student teachers need to develop the depth and breadth of experience so that they are ready to 'fly the plane in a storm blindfolded'. This storm often is the reality of their first teaching position. We would argue that the present system of practicum denotes a training focus which devalues professional practice rather than an educative process' (Gore, 1995). Sustained practice on a class, or classes, needs to be in the form of action research 'balancing theory with input and experiences in schools' (Gore, 1995) rather than the 'technical rationality' model (Schon, 1983 cited in Gore, 1995) implicitly supported in the present practicum arrangements. In this vein, pairs of students in the first semester of the third year of the course will undertake two 40 hour action research projects on numeracy and literacy in a local school. The action research projects will be the result of negotiation between the school and university based teacher educators and student. For example, a school might

wish to undertake some qualitative action research in follow up to primary Basic Skills Test or secondary literacy test (ELLA) data.

The second semester would involve two 40-hour action research projects in Science and Technology and Creative Arts. These projects would give schools the opportunity to take advantage of the curriculum expertise of the university-based teacher educators. For example, a school with five students might wish to investigate the technology part of the Science & Technology curriculum. These areas could well expand with the recruitment of more TE staff at Dubbo.

The second two years of the project based in schools will give practising teachers the opportunity to contribute to the development of student teachers. The act of passing on professional knowledge requires a teacher to reflect and build on their own practice, thereby contributing to their own professional learning (Carter and Francis, 2001). School based teacher education will also allow student teachers to share their developing professional knowledge. This collaborative learning community would perpetuate the existing strengths of the professional experience programs without the political inequities of the current 'teacher as supervisor' regime. It would also move beyond the model of practicum being imposed as a requirement on schools by universities. Instead, the student teacher would be part of a whole school-based improvement project in the same way as schools sometimes use the present day internship. This involvement in school change represents a more complex role for and conceptualisation of pre-service and in-service teacher development and a better reason for partnership engagement across the University/Schools divide (Gore, 1995).

As the student would be assigned to the school or schools for a period of two years there would be great benefits for both student and schools. Executive staff of schools could identify graduates that they would like to retain and could begin the mentoring and induction process well before the student teacher graduates. Schools could then contribute to a new more complex recruitment strategy in association with the *teach.NSW* unit.

The move to school based teacher education should not be regarded as a move to de-intellectualise the teaching profession. Instead it is a move to disturb the current *top-down, linear/hierarchical view* of teacher education (Green, 2003):

It would be an opportunity to develop a learning-focused and learning-driven practice of curriculum and schooling, linked to pedagogy that is both 'situated' and 'productive', and to the formulation of 'rich tasks' as curriculum integration.

The notion of rich tasks taken from the New Basics innovation in Queensland (EQ, 2000) is integral to both the conceptual and methodological arms of the proposed course. It is our contention that students who take an integrated problem solving approach to their own professional development are more likely to adopt that pedagogy in their own practice. There are a number of promising developments in NSW in this area (see Gore *et al.*, 2001; Kiggins, 2001; Cambourne *et al.*, 2002; Kiggins, 2001; Rappell and Barnett, 2002). The KBC program at Wollongong uses a problem based learning model that is analogous to Rich Tasks. Students negotiate their own assessment tasks that are based on "collaborative analysis of the non-negotiable curriculum, i.e. the subject outcomes which mainstream students are expected to acquire" (Cambourne *et al.*, 2002 p.10). The Rich Task approach would help students "connect the text of their pre-service program to the contexts of contemporary classrooms" (Dalton & Mor, 1996 cited in Feiman-Nemser 2001 p. 1026), while at the same time addressing the DET's requirements (see for example, DET, 1997).

The collaborative teacher education team of university and school teachers would help the students to negotiate the curriculum in these two years. Transformative discourse in the form of Brown and Campion's crosstalk (1996 cited in Lamon *et al.*, 2001), could be utilised to 'redress the current emphasis on technique rather than what is taught and why' (McConaghy, 2002). Scaffolds in the form of competencies, like the four pillars of the KBC project (Cambourne *et al.* 2002), would be required. These pillars or domains of 'teacher professional practice', held to be central to the development of effective professionals (Ramsey, 2000) are described by Kiggins (2001) as:

1. Taking responsibility for own learning
2. Learning through professional collaboration
3. Identifying and resolving professional problems
4. Becoming a reflective practitioner

The beginning teacher competencies developed by various bureaucracies might also be useful here. The three aspects of Bernstein's message system of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment with the added component of school organisation would be a useful base to work from. This model could be used to highlight areas of professional development that students need to work on during this time. For example, if a student was already a proficient teacher of creative arts then they might wish to concentrate on another aspect of professional practice that they need to develop. This professional

knowledge would be developed within the practical constraints of the teaching work environment, hence the title for this section of learning to fly in a plane blindfolded.

The final two years: A professional partnership in schools- Softening the “profession that eats its young” (Manuel 2002)

A high attrition rate for beginning teachers has been identified in studies in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia (Manuel, 2002; Williams, 2001; Preston, 2000, 2002; Ewing and Smith, 2002). Manuel (2002, p.16) cites a study of 10 080 teachers in the US where the total attrition rate over a five year period was 22%. This is close to the figure of 20% over five years identified for beginning teachers in NSW. The US study also noted that the attrition rates rose markedly in high poverty areas (Manuel 2002). The US study concluded that ‘good teachers’ leave for two major reasons, “lack of on-the-job support and workplace conditions such as discipline problems, poor administrative support and poor overall school culture” (Boser, 2000 p.3 cited in Manuel 2002). These findings have similarly been reported for the NSW context (Williams, 2002). Zeichner (2002) argues that some of these issues have their origins in teacher preparation as a result of TE course design and orientation.

High attrition rates in hard to staff areas like Western NSW is not a new issue and there are many existing system measures in place designed to address this issue. These include priority transfer points, climate allowances, extra holidays, rental subsidies and salary incentives. As well, the NSW DET has appointed teacher mentors to schools where high attrition rates have been identified. The two cubed program would build upon these existing measures while working from a privileged standpoint of an established relationship with the graduate teacher. In effect, Charles Sturt University would be extending their duty of care to the first two years of a graduate teacher’s career. This extra two years would build upon the school based teacher education part of the course that in itself would be a powerful induction program for graduate teachers. In an ideal situation, the team of graduate teacher and teacher educators would remain constant over the last four years of the course. Where this is not possible, the university teacher educators would establish new working relationships with the schools where their graduates obtained positions.

Benefits of a closer relationship between teacher education institutions and schools during the first two years of a graduate’s career are many (see Gore, 1995; Rappell and Barnett, 2002). They include mentoring for graduates without the risk of institutional censure, a greater role for university teacher educators in professional development and a boost in credibility for the status of university teacher

educators when they spend more time in schools rather than cloistered away in their institution. Such time could be spent contributing to the professional capacity (Fullan, 2002) of regional and remote schools as the teacher educator acts as a conduit for new theoretical ideas. This could be in the form of professional development seminars or one-to-one mentoring or supporting a variety of forms of research. As well, the existence of the Australian Graduate School of Education at Charles Sturt University would give practising teachers the chance to gain higher formal qualifications in the profession. This approach might well address the criticism that teacher education programs do not actively seek feedback, nor practice quality control on their courses (LearningWorks, 2002; DEST, 2002).

The last two years of the course would be linked closely with the proposed NSW Institute of Teacher's accreditation process. Graduate teachers could be supported on their way to achieving milestones on the road of professional development whilst practising teachers will be able to demonstrate professional competence through leadership in professional development and mentoring roles. The focus of the teaching profession would then be on professional learning to attain status rather than positional jockeying for promotion positions.

Conclusion

Alarming staffing churn in the western region of NSW demands instant strategic response. The current political climate of the DET regional restructure and the development of the NSW Institute of Teachers provide a rare window for a holistic solution to the problem. The establishment of the Two Cubed teacher education program at Charles Sturt University at Dubbo might be one way to forward to address not only attrition rates but also a dearth of professional learning opportunities in the region.

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