

Collaborative feedback and reflection for professional growth: preparing first-year pre-service teachers for participation in the community of practice

Graham R. Daniel*, Greg Auhl and Wendy Hastings

Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

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Teaching has been described as an emerging community of practice. Within such professional communities, the processes of reflection and collaborative dialogue, or critical transformative dialogue, are central to the maintenance and improvement of professional practice for individuals, and the field. This paper reports on the challenges experienced by a group of first-year pre-service teachers engaging in a process of reflection and critique with peers, as they participated in a program focused on the development of core practices of teaching. These pre-service teachers' responses indicated their growing understanding of the importance of engaging in ongoing critical dialogue, as part of the "unnatural" aspects of teaching. The paper concludes with a reflection on the value of feedback from the earliest stages of professional learning.

Keywords: collaboration; communities of practice; critical transformative dialogue; pre-service teacher education

Introduction

In becoming teachers, pre-service teachers enter a profession where ongoing critical reflection and learning are ideally embedded as part of everyday professional practice. Critical reflection enacted by teachers typically includes daily personal reflection by individual practitioners on their teaching and student learning, and collaborative reflection with colleagues on policy and practice. Engaging in reflective processes enables educators to refine their practice, in response to the contextual circumstances of their work, and supports continuous development of effective pedagogy, processes and policies in schools in response to changing knowledge in the field. Engaging in critical reflection and dialogue contributes to the establishment of teaching as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and its ultimate recognition as a profession.

Despite its importance, critical dialogue with colleagues presents a challenge to professionals in education as they confront strong discourses that discourage this inter-professional dialogue (Carver & Katz, 2004; Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009; Pomson, 2005). Accordingly, critical dialogue represents one of what Ball and Forzani (2009) referred to as the "unnatural work" of teaching. This paper describes the experiences of a group of pre-service teachers as they engaged with their peers in a process of collaborative reflection and critique, as part of a program focusing on the development of what some researchers (Grossman & McDonald, 2008) referred to as core skills, or pedagogies

*Corresponding author. Email: gdaniel@csu.edu.au

of enactment, of teaching. As part of the program, pre-service teachers were provided with models of practice by academic staff and practising teachers, and received feedback for discussion from these mentors and peers as they rehearsed these skills. The implications of these experiences for teaching as a professional community of practice are explored.

Communities of practice and the role of critical transformative dialogue

Wenger (2006b) described communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (n.p.). In Wenger’s (1998) view, such communities have three characteristics that distinguish them from other groups: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Accordingly, the shared repertoire of a community of practice comprises the knowledge base and practices of the community, and serves as a “common conceptual framework for action” (Bain, Lancaster, & Zundans, 2009, p. 336), or schema for the community.

Within a community of practice, feedback forms the basis of regular critical reflection and allows for ongoing examination of current understandings in the domain, expanding the knowledge of the community and contributing to its future development (Han, 1995; Hatton & Smith, 1995). In considering feedback, the community endeavours to draw on the collective experience and understandings of individuals within it, along with theory and new information, to critique current practice, in order to improve and progress its knowledge base and practices. Trede (2010) referred to professional engagement in critical discussion as critical transformative dialogue.

Engaging in critical transformative dialogue provides a mechanism of rigour in the development of the knowledge base and practices that constitute the shared repertoire within a profession. Such conversations allow members of the community to constantly reconsider, challenge and renew the quality of practice in their field. Critical transformative dialogues facilitate ongoing management and renewal within the joint enterprise of a community of practice. By engaging in critical reflection on current and new practice, a community of practice thus becomes self-organising (Scott, 1991), managing and enhancing its body of knowledge, skills and practices.

Regular dialogue within a community of practice also provides group members with a set of common understandings and a shared conceptual language, or “pattern language”, which represents the “terms that the community uses to express itself to organise its models and practice” (Smethurst, 1997, p. 1). Pattern language is defined by Smethurst (1997) as a community’s “own way of expressing and discussing the unique qualities of its chosen art” (p. 1). Such *shared conceptual language* enables communities of practice to build, reassess, and modify their conceptual understandings and practices. Accordingly, pattern language is both “the product of a schema and a necessary condition for agents in a system to carry out and develop their schema” (Bain, 2007, p. 47).

Consequently, a community of practice both manages and renews itself in response to the ever-changing internal and external environment. Ongoing feedback and critical reflection thus become crucial processes within these communities of practice (Cushion, 2004). As such, critical reflective capacities are considered by Walkington (2005, p. 59) to represent a “core activity” in professional practice, in a similar way to those described by Grossman and McDonald (2008) as core practices in teaching, but at the level of professional engagement.

In the case of newcomers entering a community of practice, critical transformative dialogue forms part of what Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 29) referred to as “legitimate

peripheral participation”, where new members participate fully as part of the community in the process of making meaning. Here, newcomers engage with each other, and more experienced members of the community in situated learning, where knowledge and practices are learned in the relations and activities of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In constructing their identities as practitioners, dialogue also enables those joining the community “not to learn from talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn to talk as a key” to full engagement within the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 109). That is, new members engage in constructing pattern language as a mechanism for their own conceptual development, and contribution to the field.

Thus newcomers to the community learn through their immersion in the practices and language of the community. Rehearsal of skills and practices in situations that approximate an authentic context are encouraged as being useful in preparing newcomers for entry into a community of practice (Schell & Black, 1997). Collins (1988) referred to this process as situated learning, “the notion of learning knowledge and skills in contexts that reflect the way they will be used in real life” (p. 2).

Stehlik (2005) described how situated learning “encompasses three related notions . . . that knowledge is embedded in the circumstance of its application, that learning is a social process, and that activity is central to the organisation and development of knowledge” (p. 138). Drawing on these notions in preparing teachers to integrate technology in their classroom, for example, Willis and Cifuentes (2005) asserted that:

Instruction must be situated in an authentic context that resembles that of the classroom teacher to enrich their learning process by providing realistic experiences that more easily transfer. (Willis & Cifuentes, 2005, p. 61)

It is worth noting that communities of practice models are not without critics. Issues of uneven power are often unattended in these models (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). Genuine partnerships recognise and embed the valuable contributions, as well as the needs, of all participants, and highlight the role for learners in actively supporting the learning of others in co-participation rather than in an individualistic model. In this regard, Hodkinson and Hodkinson noted that newcomers to the community can bring with them their own expertise and experiences. In contributing these to the community, the renewal of knowledge becomes a process of co-production (Dunston, Lee, Boud, Brodie, & Chiarella, 2008). The legitimate peripheral participation of newcomers thus includes both their orientation to the community, and the recognition and inclusion of their potential contribution to the field.

Similarly, Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, and Unwin (2005), in their critique of Wenger and Lave’s interpretation of communities of practice, recognised that all members (new and experienced) of the community potentially can contribute, and bringing in newcomers is a valuable strategy in enhancing the ongoing learning in a community of practice. In this framework, all stakeholders are seen as “necessary, expert and generative co-participants and co-partners” (Dunston et al., 2008, p. 40). By building skills of critical dialogue as part of the development of skills of practice, the aim is to facilitate the entry of pre-service teachers into the community of practice of schools.

Wenger (2006b) described teaching as an emerging community of practice, in the process of establishing its shared repertoire and processes of mutual engagement within its joint enterprise. Teaching’s nascent pattern language was cited by Wenger (2006a) as an indication of its emerging, but not yet established, development as a community of practice. As an important factor in this, the skills of engaging in the critical transformative dialogue present a challenge for the field of education.

The challenge of critique

While reflective practice has been encapsulated in contemporary understandings of teaching, such as in the practice of action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), and in professional standards (see for example Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2011; New South Wales Institute of Teachers, 2005), engagement in critical transformative dialogue faces substantial challenge from at least two discourses dominant in the construction of teaching identities.

Firstly, teaching has historically been practised as predominantly a solitary act (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Pomson, 2005). This notion encourages “norms of professional autonomy” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, p. 2) that demand individual responsibility and self-reliance in the profession. The continuance of a culture of independence is in part related to extant professional socialisation, and to school structures that perpetuate notions of teaching as a private act, with accountability within schools hierarchically organised and teachers working on their own within their classrooms. This solitary nature of teaching is visible in the “traditional culture of teaching in which colleagues do not tell each other what to do” (Carver & Katz, 2004, p. 460).

More recently, the isolation of the individual teacher has been further entrenched in structures that emphasise increased competition between teachers, for example in notions of performance-based pay, and between schools for recognition in publicised league tables. In a system of competitive individualism, knowledge is at risk of becoming a private rather than shared capital, further limiting the collaborative progress of the profession. Practices where teachers are responsible for and focused on teaching in their own classrooms, isolate individual practitioners from collegial support, and limit the opportunities for growth that can evolve from the more collaborative approach of a community of practice.

A second challenge to the engagement of collaborative processes of professional critique, particularly in the context of working with younger children, is a discourse that constructs care and nurturing in terms of “niceness” (Clandinin et al., 2009). In these circumstances, critique, when it involves the possibilities of criticism, runs in opposition to this construction of the teacher. Teachers therefore avoid engaging in criticism as part of maintaining their identity as supportive and caring (Hastings, 2009).

These discourses of individualism and care are reproduced as new teachers enter the profession. In a study of pre-service teaching supervision, for example, Hastings (2010) found that in assessing pre-service teachers who were at risk of failure in their professional placement, their associate teachers reported an internal conflict between their notion of caring and their roles in assessing pre-service teachers. Hastings (2010) reported that:

... site-based teacher educators found the idea of criticism and dissonance to be, in the majority of cases, so antithetical to their identities as teacher/carer that they avoided it. (p. 227)

However, as Galman (2009) noted, “dissonance plays an important catalytic role in the teacher education process” as it enables pre-service teachers to experience transformative learning, while practice that avoids dissonance restricts the opportunities for transformative teaching (p. 468). Hastings (2010) argued that this avoidance of criticism as a part of critique comes “... at significant cost” to the pre-service teacher, the associate teacher, and “ultimately the profession” (p. 58). As Galman claimed, learners may be happier but the potential for significant development is limited by removing any source of dissonance. Site-based educators who seek to avoid confronting difficult issues do not do pre-service teachers “any favours” in the long run. Accordingly, teacher education programs would be

enhanced by exploring pre-service teachers' experiences of dissonance rather than merely remediating them (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008; Galman, 2009).

These constructions of teaching work to marginalise rather than encourage engagement in collaborative dialogue at the critical level between practitioners. According to Le Cornu and Ewing (2008), teacher education needs to break down "individualistic cultures where teachers spent much of their working lives" in isolation (p. 1805), and being concerned about others' perceptions of their mistakes or "shortcomings". Teacher education is, according to Hastings (2010), "an appropriate place for pre-service teachers to explore the discourses that shape and often constrain the work of teachers" (p. 230).

It is important then that teacher education courses not only prepare pre-service teachers for reflective practice, but also construct a context in which they can develop the skills of critical dialogue as part of professional practice. That is, that teacher educators prepare pre-service teachers for the professional processes as well as professional knowledges required in teaching. In the research reported here, the experiences of a group of pre-service teachers engaged in a program developing core practices of teaching (in this case the skill of reading) were investigated. In particular, this research explores the participants' experiences of engagement in processes that challenge cultures where supportive critique is constructed as being limited to affirmation, and where the teacher is produced as a solitary figure.

The program

As part of their studies, a group of pre-service primary teachers in the first semester of their degree ($n = 65$) were engaged in a program aimed at developing core practices of teaching or "pedagogies of enactment" (Grossman & McDonald, 2008). These practices, such as the skills of reading to children for different purposes, or teacher questioning skills, are described by Grossman and McDonald (2008, p. 189) as encompassing the "craft and skill" of teaching practice.

The program was comprised of two sessions of two hours' duration each week, implemented over 12 weeks with a total commitment of 48 hours over the semester. The first series of activities focussed on skills required for reading to children at different ages, for different purposes, and from differing types of books. Examples of the skills on which the pre-service teachers focussed included: eye contact, body-language, expression, pace and rhythm, questioning skills, introduction and conclusion techniques.

Each week the focus skill was introduced and modelled by experienced classroom teachers. The demonstrations were accompanied by explicit discussion of the features of the focus skill. In the second two-hour session of the week, the pre-service teachers rehearsed the skills in small groups of two to four, video-recording their presentations for review and self-reflection.

In the week following the modelling and rehearsal sessions, these smaller groups were combined to form larger groups of up to 12. Each group was paired with an academic and a practising teacher as mentors. The skills were then presented by each pre-service teacher to this larger group. Following each presentation, oral and written feedback, structured around the current and already rehearsed skills, was provided by the academic and teacher mentors and other pre-service teachers in an open discussion. The presentations were filmed for later self-analysis in response to the feedback.

An important aspect of the program was the involvement of peers in the process. Research by Bullough et al. (2003), Manouchehri (2002), Smith (2002) and Walsh and Elmslie (2005) provides strong evidence that working with peers affords an opportunity to greatly enhance the outcomes for pre-service teachers from the professional experience

program. Manouchehri (2002) suggested that peers provide enhanced opportunities for reflective inquiry in the development of professional knowledge. Smith (2002) found that members of the student pairs were able to articulate their craft knowledge with each other more so than with their experienced mentor. In addition, the Bullough et al. (2003) study revealed that pre-service teacher pairs appreciated the value of working closely with others, were more willing to take risks and develop interesting and more challenging lessons, and that each invested significantly in the partner's development and success.

As each skill was "mastered", it was recorded in a student logbook by the mentors attached to the group, with completion of the skills acting as a record of participation and completion of the program. Satisfactory completion of all aspects of the program was a prerequisite for obtaining a practicum placement in the following semester. In providing an environment that approximated the context in which these skills were to be practised, it is important to note here that the rehearsals did not involve working with children, as the intention was to enable the pre-service teachers to rehearse their skills in a non-assessable environment, prior to their entry into the classroom context.

Initially, the students thought that "reading" was something they could just do, and were unsure of the need for such attention to it as preparation for their placement in schools. By deconstructing this core "practice", it quickly became apparent that reading as a "teacher" for the purposes of "learning" was an unnatural act that they didn't already know about nor how to do – rather "as something that must be practised and refined, reflected upon and tried again" (Reid, 2011, p. 304). Accordingly, students needed coaching and welcomed the opportunity to practise and reflect to enhance their skill of reading aloud.

In preparing pre-service teachers for the feedback process, the nature of critique as being both affirmative and formative was explained. The importance of professional dialogue as part of their ongoing development as future teachers, and as part of professional practice, was also highlighted. A structured feedback framework was provided to scaffold their critique, focusing on the specifics of the skills being rehearsed.

The design of the program meant that reflective practice was embedded, with peer and mentor feedback provided to inform the individual and group as they constructed an understanding of the skill, and moved toward mastery of it in their own practice. In addition, other essential elements of a community of practice were also being constructed, including the pre-service teachers' awareness and use of pattern language, engagement in the co-production of knowledge, awareness and preliminary development of their teacher identities in schools, and other elements of best practice required to support the core skill. Thus, in conjunction with the focus on the particular core practice, pre-service teachers were engaged in a program which effectively contested existing constructions of teaching as a solitary act, as well as reconstructing their notions of feedback and critique as part of a professional skill of individual and collaborative reflection (Friend & Cook, 2010). The program therefore represented a practical pedagogy which, as suggested by Grossman, Hammerness, and McDonald (2009):

[is] organized around a core set of practices in which knowledge, skill, and professional identity are developed in the process of learning to practice during professional education. (p. 273)

Though participation in the program of skills development was compulsory, permission to make the data available for research purposes was voluntary. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, students who submitted their data selected their own pseudonyms, and

submitted their forms through an employed research assistant. Ethics approval for the research was granted by the sponsoring institution, and all participants were provided with an overview of the research and written documentation. Students were made aware of their right to not participate in the data collection, and to withdraw their participation at any time, without consequence for their progression in their study program. In total, 52 of the 65 pre-service teachers submitted completed questionnaires in the first survey, and 54 in the second wave of data collection.

The data collected for the research program included copies of the weekly feedback documentation and two questionnaires (completed early in the program and again towards the conclusion of the semester). Pre-service teachers were asked to provide brief responses to a series of open-ended and Likert scale questions exploring their perceptions of their participation in the program. The survey included specific questions focussing on the pre-service teachers' experiences of providing and receiving feedback, and its value in their professional development. They were also asked to rate the overall value of the program on a 5-point scale in both surveys.

Results

Student responses indicated that they experienced challenges in receiving and providing feedback from their peers. Early comments also questioned the value of the process of engagement in critical transformative dialogue at this stage of their professional development.

Value of the program

In their initial feedback, 34.5% of the pre-service teachers reported being either unsure of the value, or seeing little or no benefit, of the program for their professional learning as pre-service teachers (Table 1). One student expressed these doubts and their early uncertainty about the complexity of teaching, commenting the program was: "So annoying! Clearly if we got into uni we can read a picture book. It's pointless." However, 42% were seeing some benefit and 23% reported that the program was very beneficial in their learning. The mean ranking (3.71) represented a rating of towards the lower end of "some benefit" with the standard deviation of 1.02 showing a strong clustering around this level of response.

Feedback

Initially, pre-service teachers reported that they found the collaborative feedback process challenging, with several comments questioning its value. In expressing their doubts about the value of peer feedback, pre-service teachers in the early phases of this project also questioned the legitimacy of their peripheral participation as members of the community

Table 1. Student descriptions of the degree to which they had found engagement with the program beneficial early in the session.

	Very beneficial	Some benefit	Unsure	Little benefit	No benefit	<i>n</i>
Data	23	42	19	13.5	2	52
Point 1 (%)						

Notes: $x_1 = 3.71$ $sd_1 = 1.02$.

of practice. Participants expressed concern that they and their peers lacked the necessary knowledge or expertise to give valuable and meaningful feedback, commenting:

I don't like criticising, however constructively this may be, when I am not an expert on the subject myself.

Useless. Your friends aren't going to give you the feedback you need because they too are unsure and don't have the knowledge needed to properly assess you.

I have felt horrible about giving feedback when I'm probably making the same mistakes and I don't have the qualifications to make judgements.

Receiving feedback from peers

Some students also reported being initially confronted by the challenge of receiving negative feedback, expressed by one student who noted they felt "a bit intimidated". This particularly related to becoming comfortable with the "disappointment of negative feedback" or "realising how badly I went". The experience of disappointment was a common response in this first part of the program.

Despite these reservations, pre-service teachers found the feedback they received both uplifting and helpful. Exceptions were few, and related to where pre-service teachers expressed self-doubt, "I have a bit of confidence issues in that", or where comments were perceived as derogatory. Only two of the pre-service teachers reported experiences of receiving disparaging feedback. Several comments indicated an emerging recognition that this acceptance of critical feedback was a skill, and that the challenge was to realise "people aren't trying to be mean, they are helping me become better". That is, to accept "negative feedback realising it is constructive feedback". Even where pre-service teachers questioned comments made by their peers, they perceived these as worthy of consideration in their own review of their performance:

Feedback is great because it allows for better understandings and direction/help.

You feel bad or a bit intimidated but also it is helpful.

In receiving feedback, pre-service teachers did not express an overall expectation that their peers would only provide positive comment. That is, the discourses of care as niceness, identified as prominent in the teaching community, were not dominant in the expectations of these pre-service teachers in terms of their peers' feedback and dialogue. However, such discourses were very prominent in the initial responses around the provision of critique for peers. Here pre-service teachers strongly indicated how their identities as nice peers and nice people were challenged by the process of collaborative reflection and critique.

Offering feedback to peers

When providing critique, pre-service teachers were being asked to contest common notions of niceness. The perception of "being mean" was a major concern to several of the participants. Participant responses indicated that despite their appreciation in receiving feedback, including critique of their performance, they found it difficult to provide critical feedback to others. In part this may have been related to the pre-service teachers' need to establish themselves as part of the wider community of their peers.

Responses indicated a widespread concern about not wanting to be nasty, not wanting to be perceived as nasty, and not wanting to perceive oneself as nasty. Concerns expressed by participants that they did not wish to “upset”, “hurt”, or “discourage” their peers as they practised and developed the core teaching skills included:

I don’t want [to] offend anyone.

Not really wanting to tell them the “cold” feedback to save embarrassment.

Not wanting to intimidate others e.g., negative feedback.

These pre-service teachers also indicated their concerns that others may not only take offence, but may perceive those giving feedback as being unhelpful. This was evident in some of the pre-service teachers’ comments that they did not want to be “taken the wrong way”, “sound offensive” or “seem critical”.

I don’t like saying bad things.

I feel horrible giving negative feedback. I found it really hard. You don’t want to put people down although it will help them.

This last comment gives an indication of an emerging recognition that engaging in critical feedback and reflection are important aspects of the role of the individual in a professional teaching community. There is clearly a tension for these pre-service teachers between the discourses of care as niceness, and professional discourses of critique.

The second data point

By week 11 of the program, the pre-service teachers were expressing greater understanding and satisfaction with the value of their experiences. Student feedback indicated an increased understanding of the role of critique in their own and others’ learning, and in contributing to the community of teaching. Peer feedback was appreciated as valuable for professional learning in relation to the core skill being rehearsed, and in its value as a means of preparing them for entry into the teaching profession.

I am continually learning new skills concerning being a teacher.

It has been extremely helpful in learning how to teach.

One student observed the transformative aspect of collaborative reflection, noting that in observing and critiquing others’ performance, it also “makes me a better judge of my current skills”.

The follow-up survey asked participants ($n = 54$) to rank the value of the program over the semester of study. The proportion of pre-service teachers reporting being either unsure of the value, or seeing little or no benefit was 18.5% (down from the original 34.5%) with none of the pre-service teachers reporting seeing the program of little or no benefit (previously 15.5%). Significantly, 81.5% of participants reported the program as being of either some benefit (48%) or very beneficial (33.5%). This represented an increase from 65% from the initial feedback. The contraction of the standard deviation from 1.02 to 0.71 indicates a greater level of clustering around the mean, showing a greater certainty

Table 2. Student descriptions of the degree to which they had found engagement with the program beneficial.

	Very beneficial	Some benefit	Unsure	Little benefit	No benefit	<i>n</i>
Data Point 1 (%)	23	42	19	13.5	2	52
Data Point 2 (%)	33.5	48	18.5	0	0	54

Notes: $x_1 = 3.71$ $sd_1 = 1.02$.
 $x_2 = 4.15$ $sd_2 = 0.71$.

in the value of the program. On the ranking of benefit scale, the results outlined in Table 2 below were obtained.

The changes across time in the pre-service teachers' understandings of engaging in critical feedback and dialogue, and their appreciation of its importance, were evident both in their comments and in the degree of benefit reported (Table 2). Their appreciation of the process for their own learning, and the learning of others, was strong, and was reflected in the finding that none of the pre-service teachers reported seeing little or no benefit in their experiences. An emerging appreciation of the importance of critical transformative dialogue for the building of effective practice was also evident in the recognition of the greater impact reported, by a number of participants, on their development of "professional knowledge" beyond the specific skills being rehearsed. The effect on the students in terms of establishing their identity as a teacher was evident in the observation that the program was also:

helping us shape a teacher-like style. It is getting us prepared for the school environment.

Discussion and implications

The professional preparation program associated with the study reported here, situated in the first year of a pre-service teacher education degree program, involved pre-service teachers in rehearsing core skills of teaching, as part of their preparation for their roles as legitimate peripheral participants in schools. That is, the program prepared these pre-service teachers to enter a new "community of practice" that was different from others that they may inhabit as parents, athletes, shop assistants (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004) and even as students in schools.

As part of this preparation, pre-service teachers were engaged in the process of collaborative critical reflection. Although collaboration and engagement in critique of peers presented some initial problems for many students, particularly in providing critique of others' performance, they indicated an appreciation of the benefits of receiving such feedback in preparing them for their placement in schools.

In wanting to perceive themselves as a nice person, colleague and friend, the participants indicated experiencing their provision of critique to others as the antithesis to their own self-image. Their need to belong was also challenged by their engagement in critique, as they also did not want others to see them in this way. This was expressed in terms of feeling that in providing critical feedback they were themselves doing something "bad". In this, these pre-service teachers expressed similar concerns to those identified in mentor teachers by Hastings (2010), and of the unnaturalness of teaching (Ball & Forzani, 2009), where ongoing critique with peers forms part of the professional role.

Though participants' responses indicated strongly the challenges of critique, the participants also demonstrated a growing awareness of the importance of critique as part of their professional lives. Their awareness of the benefits of receiving critical feedback also encouraged them to provide meaningful critique for others, recognising its value in their own and others' learning. This growing awareness offers a challenge to the discourses of autonomy (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) and niceness (Clandinin et al., 2009) that currently restrict engagement in critical transformative dialogue within the teaching profession. It could be asserted that engagement in rehearsal, supported by the processes of critical transformative dialogue, also provided some preparation for the pre-service teachers to be legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the teaching environment.

The program also offers some insights into the benefits of situated learning in contexts that resemble the practice environment, with the students becoming more comfortable with engaging in the process of critical transformative dialogue, and the context of receiving feedback when on their professional placement. The success of this, however, requires further research following these placements. In relation to their development of the core practices, pre-service teachers noted both an increasing understanding of the skills of reading to children, and their skills of being a teacher, or the craft knowledge of teaching (Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Parry, 2001).

As first-year pre-service teachers in their initial semester of their course, part of the program was to expose the participants to the pattern language of teaching. While pattern language is an important aspect of a community of practice, the pre-service teachers involved in this study did not experience a deep immersion for an extended period of time in the actual context of schools. More intensive immersion in the community of practice of schools may potentially facilitate the adoption of the pattern language of the community of practice. Although some terms were evident, mainly focused around the actual skills being rehearsed, this aspect of the program requires further investigation as the participants progress through their course of study.

Limitations

The findings of this research are limited to understanding the early experiences of this group of pre-service teachers, and the potential implications of these experiences for teacher education. With these pre-service teachers just entering the profession, and having not experienced their first professional placement in schools, it would be unrealistic to expect them to be fully aware of the ways in which the profession works, and its needs in terms of sustaining and improving practice. The findings from this initial study of pre-service teachers' experiences of early engagement in critical reflection, however, indicate an appreciation of this process in terms of their own professional learning and development.

Establishing and maintaining relationships is an important part of any community of practice. As first semester students, these pre-service teachers were concurrently engaged in establishing themselves as part of a community of learners who would be their peers for the next four years. In building support networks within the learning community, the establishment of relationships is important. This may conflict with processes of critique, where trusting relationships required to support processes of critical transformative dialogue are still being formed.

While it is hoped that these experiences will lead to the development of strong professional identities, these outcomes remain to be investigated as the pre-service teachers move through their degree. Follow-up studies will be needed to investigate the success of the program, drawing on student experiences and reports from their professional associates

in schools. Further, in considering the value of the program in developing a community of practice in this context, research examining the co-production of knowledge for other participants, such as teacher mentors and university staff, would seem useful. The contribution of the program to longer term change in the profession also remains for future investigation.

Conclusion

Engagement in communities of practice potentially promotes renewal in the profession in that it provides opportunities to respond to the individual circumstances of the classroom, as well as creating new knowledge in the educational field. These pre-service teachers were challenged to reconceptualise the role of critique as part of their participation in a community of learners, and its apparent conflict with the discourses of individualism and care as niceness reported in the professional literature. In doing so, discourses such as these, which currently restrict the establishment of teaching as a community of practice, were also being challenged, in an attempt to create more critically reflective practitioners.

The participants' engagement with collaborative feedback and reflection, embedded in a program of developing core practices of teaching, generated a context in which the pre-service teachers were able to focus on the development of their knowledge and skills of teaching. Further, the program contributed to their emerging identities in the journey toward becoming teaching professionals. To this end, this project represents a small, and initial, contribution towards the future of effective teaching and teacher learning, where individual practitioners and the profession (re)present a culture of renewal in their shared understandings and repertoire in the domain of education. The participants in this research demonstrated a developing awareness of the role of collaborative and critical reflection, or critical transformative dialogue, as they worked through the challenges of confronting existing discursive constructions of critique as being the antithesis of care and relationship-building (collegiality).

Feedback, as an essential component of reflective practice, is critical to the ongoing refinement of an individual teacher's pedagogy, and the development of a shared corporate or community knowledge, based on a continuous cycle of informed professional learning. The capacity to provide and receive critical and constructive feedback is fundamental to the growth of the teaching profession, and pre-service teacher education is a most appropriate place for it to be investigated and enculturated.

Notes on contributors

Graham Daniel lectures in educational psychology at the Bathurst campus of Charles Sturt University. His research interests include family-school partnerships and teacher education.

Greg Auhl lectures in inclusive education at the Bathurst campus of Charles Sturt University. His research interests include inclusive education, course design in tertiary settings, and teacher education.

Wendy Hastings is an adjunct member of staff (having recently retired) at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst.

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