Reconceptualising professional experiences in pre-service teacher education…reconstructing the past to embrace the future

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Abstract

This paper provides a conceptual framework for developing high-quality professional experiences for pre-service teachers. The paper begins with a discussion of how professional experiences are conceptualised, structured and supervised in each of three orientations, which we have termed traditional, reflective and learning communities. We then describe a number of professional experience initiatives at two Australian universities, which are being reconceptualised around the notion of learning communities. We argue that framing professional experience around the notion of learning communities has the potential to support pre-service teachers to work with their peers and mentor teachers in more collegial and reciprocal ways.

1. Introduction

In a climate where pre-service teacher education is under attack, this article is premised on our beliefs that high-quality professional experiences should have dual outcomes. They are foundational to effective preparation for teaching and also have the potential to be extremely valuable for experienced mentor teachers. High-quality professional experiences we would argue are underpinned by a commitment to professional learning communities where all teachers' ongoing professional learning journeys are prioritised. Our own personal and professional journeys as teachers and tertiary educators over several decades have been characterised by the evolution of a more sophisticated understanding of the need for reciprocal relationships amongst early career and experienced teachers. The following discussion builds on traditional understandings of pre-service professional experiences to offer a reconceptualisation that we hope will move closer to meeting the needs of both pre-service and in-service teachers.

We begin this paper with some contextual information about teacher education in Australia before presenting our conceptual framework for pre-service professional experiences. The framework develops an understanding about where we have come from and where we advocate we need to go in reconceptualising professional experiences for

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Australia's incoming generation of teachers. An argument for positioning professional experiences within professional learning communities is provided as a precursor to our description of current initiatives that are being developed at two Australian universities, the Universities of South Australia and Sydney. Both of these teacher education institutions are attempting to push the boundaries beyond traditional conceptions of professional experiences.

2. Current Australian context

The practicum, or professional experience in teacher education, continues to be a very challenging area in which to work in Australian universities, given the multiplicity of political, professional and economic issues surrounding professional placements. The recent National Inquiry into Teacher Education (2007) stated that, while there was no crisis in teacher education, there were still ongoing concerns about the quality of teacher preparation. The practicum was identified as a key persistent problem area, as can be seen in the following statement:

> The problems with practicum have been outlined in nearly every report addressing teacher education in the last decade. The fact that these problems have still drawn so much attention in this inquiry indicates the need for major reform in this area, involving all major players and all members of the system. (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. 73)

The enquiry concluded that more research funding was needed for the practicum and that it was imperative to investigate alternative ways to develop strong, authentic school and university partnerships. This need for more funding was strongly supported by the Australian Council of Deans of Education. A tension has existed for many Australian teacher educators who have attempted to improve professional experiences in the last 15 years following a worldwide trend advocating practicum reform (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1991; Dobbins, 1993) amidst increasingly tight budgetary constraints.

In addition, despite the continued recognition of the centrality of quality professional experiences in the preparation of teachers in a plethora of recent reports, the placement of pre-service teachers, particularly early in their degree, has become increasingly difficult. The low morale of the profession, inadequate resources, the intensification of teachers' work coupled with pressure from an increasing number of teacher education providers have been cited as contributing factors to this issue (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2007; Ramsay, 2000).

Teaching Australia, a recently established national body for teachers, and the *Australasian Forum of Teacher Registration and Accreditation Authorities* (AFTRAA) have draughted a series of recommendations that will, after appropriate consultation, lead to the national recognition of all approved state programs. AFTRAA's recommendations include a prescribed number of practicum days for 1, 2 and 4 years programs. We consider, however, that mandating the number of days is not the issue: it is practicum *quality* that is most important in teacher preparation rather than its duration. In addition, many of the standards being advocated by AFTRAA focus on the attainment of technical skills, which, although important, need to be carefully contextualised within a sound rationale and philosophy if they are to meet the ever changing needs of school students in the twenty-first century.

The complexities around these issues have been further highlighted by the former Australian government's budgetary decision to offer further funding for pre-service teachers provided that number of practicum days was increased to 120 days for 4-year degrees and 60 for end-on-programs (DEST, 2007). Once again the issue of quality has been ignored and the tensions described above will be further exacerbated by such a highhanded mandate delivered without consultation with teacher educators. A survey undertaken for the New South Wales Teacher Education Council (Nicholson, 2007), for example, estimated that the new funding would require one in every three teachers (including casual teachers and newly qualified teachers) to supervise a pre-service teacher. This will be extremely challenging given that the existing situation requires one in five teachers to accept a student teacher for a professional experience placement and, as discussed earlier, is already in crisis.

3. Conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework for understanding where we have come from and where we need to go in developing high-quality professional experiences for pre-service teachers in Australia is based

on three orientations: traditional, reflective and learning communities. For the purpose of the discussion each will be described separately although we appreciate that in fact they are not discrete entities. Indeed the last two both belong to the 'inquiry-oriented teacher education paradigm' (Zeichner, 1983). In each of the orientations we examine how professional experiences are conceptualised, structured and supervised and the implications for the roles of the various participants.

3.1. Traditional

The traditional view of professional experience is inherent in the language that was used to describe it: *teaching practice*. The widely held view was that student teachers put their newly acquired knowledge from their studies at university into practice during their time in schools. The process of learning to teach was conceptualised using a theory–practice dichotomy, that is, when student teachers were at college or university they learnt 'the theory' and when they were in schools, they 'practised teaching'. The focus was placed firmly on student teachers mastering skills, techniques and methods of teaching. This traditional approach to professional experience stems from what Zeichner (1983) has described as a behaviourist orientation to teacher education. In this performance based or competency approach the skills (or microskills) relevant to the act of teaching are specifically defined.

Given this emphasis, the traditional practicum experience in the 1970s and 1980s was structured around the classroom. Student teachers were assessed on their teaching performance and their ability to implement a range of micro-teaching skills (Turney, Eltis, Towler, & Wright, 1985) including introductory procedures, closure, questioning, advanced questioning and management. It must be noted that not all professional experiences centred exclusively on the classroom. In the mid-1980s Turney, Eltis, Towler & Wright mooted the notion of a 'practicum curriculum', which stressed the need to focus on three aspects of teachers' work—classroom, school and community. Turney et al. (1985) were critical of the traditional practicum, which they claimed was too narrow in scope, concentrating only on the classroom. This criticism was supported in the literature by numerous teacher educators (including Price, 1987; Tisher, 1987; Zeichner, 1990). Nonetheless, the prevailing view was that practicum experiences would be centred on

the classroom, with the role of the teacher being dissected into separate skills.

The traditional supervision of student teachers grew out of the emphasis on specific observable skills of teaching and was conceptualised as 'a process intended to help teachers improve instruction' (Nolan & Francis, 1992). The process was viewed as 'direct, overt surveillance' (Smyth, 1993) with the supervisor taking on the role of 'critic' (Nolan & Francis, 1992, p. 52). Many clinical supervision models were implemented involving university supervisors conducting visits, which included pre-observation, observation, evaluation and discussion and goal-setting phases. Not surprisingly, the roles of the various participants involved in 'prac' reflected these emphases. It was very hierarchical with the pecking order of the university supervisor, supervisory teacher and student teacher. In practice, this led to a focus on observation of a select number of lessons by the tertiary supervisor with the tertiary supervisor being responsible for gate-keeping as the supervisory teacher alone was not able to make the decision to pass or fail a student teacher. Not surprisingly many student teachers chose a 'safe' option when planning for supervised lessons thus keeping risk taking to a minimum.

Such an orientation to practicum was criticised for the passive recipient stance assigned to the student teacher (Dobbins, 1993; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Zeichner, 1990; Hatton & Harmon, 1997). At the same time, prevailing conceptions about teaching as transmission were also under attack. Darling-Hammond and Sclan (1992) claimed that conceptions of teaching and learning varied primarily in the extent to which they viewed learning as either predictable and standardised or differentiated and complex. In other words, teaching was perceived as the mastery of simple routines or as the exercise of informed judgements. They noted that during the 1980s there were a number of reform proposals that discussed the professionalisation of teaching (see e.g. Carnegie Forum, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986, cited in Hammond & Sclan, 1992) (p. 7). In addition, during this time the research on teacher thinking advanced the view of teaching as a 'professional thinking activity' (Calderhead, 1987, p. 1) in place of the earlier technical skills view. This reform was seen as critical if teachers were not merely to reproduce the status quo by replicating their own experiences of schooling (Lortie, 1975). This of course led to changes in

teacher education—both at the pre-service and continuing stages, with an emphasis on reflection.

3.2. Reflective

As teacher education institutions moved to embrace the change from a traditional model to a reflective one, the nomenclature changed in many places, from *teaching practice* to *practicum*. The reflective stance conceptualises professional experiences very differently to the traditional paradigm. With a focus on professional decision-making under the reflective orientation student teachers go beyond a consideration of the technical skills of teaching to consider the moral and ethical issues involved in teaching and learning in a particular social context. As a result the process of learning to teach, in this orientation, has been reconceptualised to include an acknowledgement of 'personally owned professional knowledge', which is gradually built up by integrating learning in a range of university and school sites (Meere, 1993). Professional experiences are seen as opportunities for reflection on practice.

With this view, came a shift in emphasis from an exclusive focus on student teachers' teaching, to their learning and the notion of 'student teacher as learner' (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985). There was a recognition that each student brings a whole 'virtual schoolbag' (Thomson, 2002) of understandings, skills, expertise, experiences or 'institutional biographies' (Richardson, 1999) rather than coming to the profession with a blank slate or tabula rasa. Such concepts contrast sharply with traditional didactic views as they are underpinned by constructivist views (Vygotsky, 1962) on learning (where learners are seen as active participants in the learning process constructing meaning through personal and social experiences). As Marland (1993) pointed out, these new perspectives on teaching and learning clearly challenged the foundations of traditional models of teacher education.

In many teacher education programs professional experiences were restructured to take account of the school/community experience. Student teachers were encouraged to reflect on their learning from within a whole school context. There was an acknowledgement that 'learning to teach' was only a part of 'learning to be a teacher' (Dobbins, 1996). As Rogers and Webb (1991) explained 'All too often teacher education focuses on the 'set of skills to be learned' and ignores the development of educational and ethical decision making, thus missing the heart

of the work that teachers do' (p. 176). Further, while reflecting on teaching behaviour is certainly a start, it has been stressed that if the reflective process is limited to a consideration of teaching skills and strategies, teaching becomes a mere technical activity (Zeichner, 1992). Thus, the importance of the particular context for the professional experience placement was also recognised. Since professional knowledge is always embedded in the complexity of the context, the mastery of a set of skills would not necessarily ensure competence in every situation.

Supervision of teaching experiences was reconceived as facilitation of reflective practice. Many teacher educators argued for supervisors to relinquish the role of critic or judge and 'assume the role of co-creator of knowledge and learning and teaching' (Smyth, 1993, p. 53). Rather than the theory–practice divide, which is prevalent in the traditional view, prospective teachers were assisted to theorise their own accounts of practice and then helped to consider how they might use these deeper understandings to develop their practice. Various supervisory practices were implemented, which required both tertiary supervisors and co-operating teachers to 'let go of their power and control' (Dobbins, 1996). As McIntyre (1991) noted, 'We, as teacher educators, if we are realistic, need to accept that we can only help them in their efforts, not define the enterprise in which they are engaged' (p. 122). In an attempt to capture the shift in emphasis the term 'mentor' began to be used more widely replacing the more commonly used term 'supervisor' (e.g. McCann & Radford, 1993; Stanulis, 1994).

A change in the role perceived for student teachers also became evident as they were positioned to accept more responsibility for their own learning. Student teachers were positioned to 'find their voice', which is very different to the traditional situation in the practicum, described by Canning (1991), who claimed that: 'Student teachers trained to please, to defer to professors and supervisors for good grades and positive evaluations, said that they had a voice, but had learned to withhold it' (p. 19). Student teachers, in a reflective practicum, are no longer passive recipients of the practicum but take control over their learning and accept responsibility for it. With this comes enhanced risk taking and increased professional agency.

New partnerships were developed in the 1990s as university and school-based teacher educators

explored the nature of reflective practice together with student teachers. Moreover, student teachers began to work more collaboratively with each other as the place of dialogue and the significance of peers in supporting reflection was acknowledged (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Dobbins, 1996; Featherstone, Munby, & Russell, 1997; Hatton & Smith, 1995). Hatton and Smith (1995), for example, argued for student teachers to engage as critical friends with each other as an impetus for powerful reflection. More recently Manouchehri (2002), in a study on the development of professional knowledge of prospective teachers, confirmed the value of peer discourse and collaborative reflection in helping prospective teachers develop the capacity to take on new perspectives.

4. Beyond reflective—towards learning communities

Like the reflective model, the *learning communities* view of professional experience is underpinned by a constructivist view of learning but further extends this conceptualisation of professional experience. Building on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1999) who conceptualised communities of practice as particular kinds of networks of people who were engaging in a situated learning process, this orientation remains committed to the notion of 'personally owned professional knowledge' and student teachers being encouraged to reflect on practice. But it goes further. It extends beyond this view, from an individual focus to a shared focus. Sundli (2007) highlighted this aspect when she wrote: 'Recent decades have seen a change in focus on learning and knowledge, from cognitivist to constructivist, from neutral to context-dependent, from individual to group' (p. 211). With the latter emphasis, there is a commitment to reciprocity and reciprocal learning relationships and a deepening participatory process. A different commitment is required from student teachers where they learn to value the learning of others as much as their own. So, for example, when working in a learning community, the aim is not just to develop one's own reflection skills but to facilitate the development of others' reflection skills also. In the reflective paradigm described above, the focus has often been on the student teacher being an individual learner rather than recognising the potential role that each student teacher has to play in others' learning. This is a subtle but important shift of focus and one which more completely

acknowledges the collaborative nature of the teaching profession. As Hanks (in Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.15) argues: 'Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind….it is mediated by differences of perspective among co-participants.'

In this orientation, professional experiences are being restructured to include an emphasis on the development of *learning communities*. Different structures are being implemented depending on people's interpretations of learning communities. For example Sim (2006) described a model of preparation for professional experiences whereby on-campus tutorials were specifically developed around the notion of 'communities of practice' and Mule (2006) highlighted an enquiry-based practicum in a professional development school, which she claimed may make it possible for interns to participate in a learning community. What seems clear is that where institutions value learning communities, student teachers have time and space structured into their professional experiences to engage in learning relationships with a range of colleagues, including their peers, mentors, other school-based colleagues and university liaison. Such relationships are characterised by trust and reciprocity with a strong appreciation of the critical nature of professional conversations for ongoing professional learning. Where professional experiences are framed around learning communities there is the potential for student teachers to be involved in more team teaching and shared risk taking rather than individual teaching and individual risk taking. As Mule (2006) stressed, 'the notion of a learning community contrasts the 'sink and swim' and 'do it yourself' (Britzman, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1994) view of student teaching in the typical practicum' (p. 216).

The practice of 'supervision' also differs in this model. Rather than the university lecturers and/or co-operating teachers acting as 'facilitators of reflection' there is a move to more shared learning and joint construction of what it means to teach. This may take various forms, but at its best, it resonates with the emerging conceptualisation of mentoring as a collegial learning relationship instead of an expert, hierarchical one-way view. Terms such as *co-mentoring* (Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995), *mutual mentoring* (Landay, 1998), *collaborative mentoring* (Mullen, 2000) and *critical constructivist mentoring* (Wang & Odell, 2002) reflect these changes. Reconceptualising mentoring

as a process of co-learning challenges the traditional hierarchical relationship dynamic by positioning the participants differently. The use of 'co' mentoring emphasises reciprocity (Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995, p. 119). Thus, there is an expectation that mentor teachers and tertiary educators will learn from student teachers, and student teachers will learn from each other, as well as the more traditional expectation that the student teachers will learn from their mentors. Moreover, student teachers themselves can be involved in *peer mentoring*, where they can take on the role of being a mentor for one another (see Le Cornu, 2005, 2007; Sundli, 2007). Clearly the roles of all participants involved in professional experience changes under the learning communities' model.

With this latest move, there is also a corresponding change in nomenclature being mooted, from *practicum* to *professional experience*. Ramsay (2000) highlighted the importance of this change in terminology when he wrote:

> A major shift needs to be made in teacher education from the idea of the *practicum* to the concept of *professional experience*, workplace learning which is integrated with academic preparation and educational studies. (p. 61)

As an aside, it is disconcerting to note that the recent government initiative of increasing funding on the proviso that there are increased days of professional experience reverts to the use of practicum in the guidelines provided.

5. Rationale for latest reconceptualisation

Current research demonstrates that a central factor in the ability of teachers to sustain their professional growth and implement ongoing reform is that their school context manifests features of professional learning communities (Day et al., 1998; Ewing, 2002; McLaughlin, 1997; Peters, 2001; Senge et al., 2000). It is therefore crucial that in pre-service teacher education, beginning teachers learn how to participate in such communities. It is also critical if we want more mentor teachers to participate in practicum that we ensure there are professional benefits for them to be involved in initial teacher education.

A shift towards collegial learning relationships is very apparent in the literatures on teacher professional development and school reform (e.g. Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). A recent trend in the literature on teacher professional development is the establishment of professional learning communities that provide a positive and enabling context for in-service teachers' professional growth (McLaughlin, 1997; Peters, 2001). The focus on action learning (Revans, 1982) as a professional learning tool for teachers in many recent Australian Government Quality Teaching Projects is also illustrative of the growing awareness that teachers must be in control of their own professional learning rather than have it imposed on them (Ewing, 2007; Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson, & Manuel, 2004). Teacher learning is facilitated in collaborative cultures, as teachers learn with and from each other reducing feelings of isolation.

By participating in such communities, teachers provide mutual support and challenge for each other to 'learn new practices and to unlearn old assumptions, beliefs and practices' (McLaughlin, 1997, p. 84) as well as actively shape their own professional growth through reflective participation. More recently, Cochran-Smith (2003) proposed 'shared communities of learners' in initial teacher education:

> …in order to work for social change, what we need in teacher education are not better generic strategies for teaching but generative ways for prospective teachers, experienced teachers and teacher educators alike to work together in communities of learners—to explore and reconsider their own assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and cultures that are different from their own and construct pedagogy that takes these into account in locally appropriate and culturally sensitive ways. (p. 24)

Much of the school reform work in the last decade has also focused on the development of schools as learning communities. Recognising that many traditional school organisational structures have impeded teaching and learning has resulted in changing school cultures and the breaking down of individualistic cultures where teachers spent much of their working lives separated from each other. More collaborative situations involving interdependency and team work, more participatory decision-making processes and a commitment to shared goals about teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 1994; Peters, Dobbins, & Johnson, 1996) represent a shift away from the traditional transmission models of schooling, teaching and teacher development and highlight the influence of

constructivist thinking. Central to constructivism is the notion that learners play an active role in constructing their own meaning, while proponents of social constructivism also acknowledge the role of social interaction in learning (Bruner, 1996, p. 84). In such classrooms, there is commitment to participation and on 'pedagogies of co-construction…with their emphasis on reflecting, building, inquiring, talking, writing and project-centred learning' (Holt-Reynolds, 2000, p. 22). Windschitl (2002) stressed the priority given to collaborative activities in constructivist classrooms where 'discourse is valued as a way to help students make ideas explicit, share ideas publicly, and co-construct knowledge with others' (p. 146).

There is no doubt that educators are being challenged currently to work in new collaborative ways with both their students and with each other. It might be argued that there has never been a better time for such opportunities to exist, that is, for educators to work collaboratively with one another. Teaching is more complex than it has ever been amidst the current difficult economic, social and political contexts in Australia. As teachers are being called upon to teach differently there is new learning for all concerned. Consequently, all teachers need support, which differs significantly from the past view, where only novices were seen to need support (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000). There is a growing emphasis in the literature on the affective dimension of educational change as it is becoming clear that the development of learning communities are not without challenges to people's emotional well-being (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Fullan, 1997; Hargreaves, 1998; Little, 2001; Stokes, 2001). Clearly there is a need in the current context for teachers to have access to both personal and professional support, as teachers need to be supported both emotionally and intellectually. Learning communities provide opportunities for this kind of support.

Reported benefits for teachers who participate in learning communities, include teachers feeling more positive about the profession (Darling-Hammond, 1996) and less isolated (Lieberman, 2000). Most importantly, however, learning communities are seen by many as an effective way to support teachers and bring about the changes that are deemed necessary for effective teaching and learning in the 21st century (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, Berry, Haselkorn, & Fiedler, 1999; Lieberman, 2000; Snow-Gerono, 2005).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) for example stressed that teachers who participate in learning communities often become agents of change in the classroom and school.

While it is relatively easy to discuss these notions of collaboration and partnership in theory, there are many issues, which need to be worked through in practice when imagining how these principles may be applied to professional experience models in teacher education programs. Section 6 examines how two teacher education institutions have begun to reorient their programs in light of the need for the reconceptulisation of professional experiences. It should be noted that these changes are ongoing and more summative analyses of their effectiveness will not be available for some time.

6. Fostering learning communities in professional experiences: some examples

At both the University of South Australia and the University of Sydney attempts are being made to reconceptualise professional experience around the notion of learning communities. Changes are also being made to how professional experiences are structured and to the roles of the various participants involved. In this section, we have included some snapshots of these innovations across the two universities rather than providing specific details of individual programs.

6.1. Changes in nomenclature and roles

The term 'mentor teacher' is being used deliberately at both universities in association with the role of the supervisory teacher. The terms 'peer mentor' and 'tertiary mentor' are also used in the different programs. The adoption of these terms emphasise the latest conceptualisation of the term mentor, that is, one which emphasises collegiality and reciprocity. Relationships are highlighted in keeping with Awaya, McEwan, Heyler, Linsky, Lum et al. (2003) assertion that 'mentoring is a relationship rather than a role with a set of preconceived duties'. The focus is also on engagement after Fletcher (2000, cited in Sundli, 2007, p. 205) who wrote 'To be a good mentor there must be personal and professional engagement'. This statement highlights the personal and professional aspects of mentoring, or the affective and cognitive domains. These key concepts are developed with students and staff alike to ensure shared understandings about the role of

both support and challenge if the mentoring experience is to be optimised. Mentor teachers and tertiary mentors need to appreciate that their roles will develop their own professional practice and therefore be enthusiastic about the symbiotic nature of this conception of mentoring.

In a similar vein, both universities are beginning to replace the term 'student teachers' with 'pre-service teachers' or 'early career teachers' wherever possible. It is hoped that with the change in name will come enhanced expectations both from the perspective of the pre-service teachers themselves and their mentors and that this will lead to all involved accepting increased responsibility for their own and other's learning.

6.2. Changes in how professional experiences are structured

All professional experience courses are being restructured with the aim of establishing an intimate link between on-campus, on-line and in-school/setting learning with an explicit commitment to strengthening partnerships with site-based colleagues. For example in one programme, weekly on-line discussion between pre-service teachers and experienced classroom teachers has been introduced alongside the face-to-face university seminars. The classroom mentors comment on the pre-service teachers' responses to readings from their own context and perspective. This enables pre-service teachers to engage with differing teacher perspectives from the beginning of their programme and to appreciate the importance of contexts. In another programme practicum course teams have been developed where each lecturer is responsible for the teaching, learning and assessment of their workshop group of 25 students both on campus and in school. This enables each lecturer to foster a community atmosphere in the workshops on campus even before the pre-service teachers go out into schools. The notion of community is further developed during their time in schools, as they are clustered in school sites, with a minimum of four teachers per site involved. This approach differs markedly from what was done previously where a number of staff would teach the on-campus component of professional experience courses and then sessional/casual staff would be employed to supervise the school component. When this occurred a lecturer visiting a school may not have known any of the student teachers and many of the

student teachers did not know each other either. Moreover, traditionally some schools would only host small numbers of student teachers, which hampered any efforts to foster the notion of community amongst the pre-service teachers.

Professional experience courses are also being changed to incorporate a range of structured opportunities for pre-service teachers to work collaboratively with each other. Such opportunities engage the pre-service teachers acting as critical friends and peer mentors for each other. For example, paired placements are incorporated early on in the programs to enable them to act as critical friends and provide each other with constructive feedback after lessons rather than depend solely on feedback from the mentor teacher. And in the final year of the programs, the pre-service teachers are encouraged to engage collaboratively in critical reflection and ongoing enquiry. All pre-service teachers undertake an action research project, which is negotiated with their mentor teacher and focuses on an aspect of their teaching. A conference is held at the end of their professional experience where the findings of these projects are presented to the whole cohort.

Another new initiative being introduced in a number of course units is that of 'Learning Circles'. Pre-service teachers placed at a particular school meet regularly after school to engage in professional dialogue with each other. Pre-service teachers are informed at the beginning of their practicum courses that participation in Learning Circles requires a dual commitment from them. That is, that the task of each participant is not only to share their experiences and learning but also to listen actively to their peers and ask enabling questions that will assist their peers to explore their own understandings on a deeper level.

Learning Circles and the principle that pre-service teachers must take responsibility for their own learning as well as contribute to the learning of their colleagues during professional experiences do not imply that there is no role for experienced teachers and university mentors. It provides another context to share knowledge and experience and to be accountable to each other. Questions may well be redirected to mentor teachers and co-ordinators and professional conversations developed further. Mentor teachers continue to be pivotal in sharing their often tacit knowledge and understandings about the profession in their learning conversations with the pre-service teachers placed with them.

University mentors still work with their student groups during their university seminars (and in some cases also out in schools) and build up more meaningful relationships with the teachers in their partnership schools and have a deeper awareness of these particular school contexts. Different kinds of relationships can evolve that are not so heavily concentrated on a hierarchy of power.

6.3. New supervisory practices: developing learning partnerships

New 'supervisory' practices are emerging as a result of the emphasis on learning communities. Whilst both universities have previously had a commitment to the notion of strong school–university partnerships, the realities of professional experience supervision militated against this being a reality. Indeed, as described by Martinez (2004), supervision practices of university staff are often perfunctory, involve 'snatched conversations' and allow little time for critique or reflective practice. With the advent of a learning communities model for professional experience, the focus is on the development of 'learning partnerships'. These learning partnerships differ depending on the particular context and nature of the school. However, the emphasis is on developing ongoing relationships and sharing the responsibility for maximising the pre-service teachers' learning. This has resulted in two quite distinct changes.

Firstly, where possible, tertiary mentors work with a cluster of schools in which pre-service teachers are undertaking their professional experience and they maintain their commitment to these schools over time. That is, they work with the same schools for more than one practicum and ideally over a few years. This supports the development of relationships, not only for professional experience but also for shared enquiry and research possibilities. For example, in one institution, where university lecturers have been academic partners for quality teaching projects in schools, this has also automatically extended and enriched the possibilities for close school–university partnerships and ongoing professional learning.

Secondly, we have changed how lecturers work with pre-service teachers and staff in schools. We have moved to a *per site* model of support to replace the *per student* model, where each visit includes the lecturer spending as much time with the mentors and site co-ordinators as with the pre-service teachers. They offer expertise and support to the whole school learning community rather than monitor the individual student teacher in the classroom unless the mentor teacher identifies a pre-service teacher to be at risk. Where it can occur, university staff involve mentor teachers in collaborative learning conversations about the role of being a mentor teacher but this is very contextual as it often depends on whether or not the teachers can be released from their classroom duties.

6.4. Ongoing professional learning amongst professional experience staff

Another way that the notion of learning communities is being fostered at the two universities is directly amongst school- and university-based professional experience staff. Both universities are committed to working closely with mentor teachers and/or school co-ordinators, offering them opportunities to connect with a wider network through involvement in meetings, conferences and ongoing seminars. For example, one university provides a mentor professional learning course for mentor teachers as well as a range of other professional learning opportunities. The other institution offers Learning Circles for school co-ordinators to enable them to come together to pause, reflect and engage in professional dialogue and discourse with peers about the learning to teach process.

Professional learning is also provided for university staff involved in professional experience in the form of structured times set aside for staff to meet together regularly to examine and question old and new practices and explore taken for granted assumptions around practicum. At one of the institutions a 'practicum scholarship group' has been established and involves a group of university-based teacher educators meeting together regularly to engage in reflection and professional dialogue based on selected readings from the practicum literature. This has proved useful for 'both *learning* new knowledge, questions and practices and, at the same time, *unlearning* some long-held ideas, beliefs and practices, which are often difficult to uproot' (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 9).

It is clear that implementing the notion of professional experience as learning communities rather than the traditional or reflective models requires a culture change. We would argue that such opportunities for pre-service teachers to be involved in their own learning communities can play a very

important role in reconceptualising the practicum. We know, from the literature on educational change, that both restructuring (changing the rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships) and reculturing (changing the shared beliefs, customs, attitudes and expectations) are necessary for successful educational reform (Hargreaves, 1994; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Hence we are endeavouring to restructure and reculture the way professional experiences are conceptualised at both universities.

7. Discussion

We have argued in this paper that professional experiences in pre-service teacher education need to be reconceptualised around the notion of learning communities if they are to meet the current and future demands of the profession. We are aware that there are many different interpretations of this notion and indeed, the use of the term has been criticised by some writers as representing vague and ill-defined notions of teacher professional community (e.g. Westheimer, 1998; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). Such claims have led to a need for clarification of what is meant by the term. We are guided by two definitions here as they have provided clarity for us in our application of 'learning communities' to professional experience. Westheimer (1998) for example, identified five common themes in theories of community: interdependence, interaction/participation, shared interests, concern for individual and minority views and meaningful relationships. As applied particularly to the fostering of community in pre-service teacher education, Sumsion and Patterson (2004, p. 622) drew on the work of Beck and Kosnick (2001) to highlight the following central characteristics: collaboration and constructive engagement, shared goals, interdependence and exchanges that foster individual and collective understanding, mutual respect and responsiveness, appreciation of differences within the group and concern for the well-being of the group and the individuals within it. We suggest that the resonance between the definition of community in pre-service and in-service teacher education provides direction for the development of certain capacities that can start in pre-service teacher education and continue throughout a teacher's career.

It has been highly beneficial for us, as teacher educators working in different institutions in two Australian states, to reflect with each other on what we have been learning as we attempt to push the boundaries beyond traditional conceptions of professional experience. The conceptual framework provided in this paper helped us to articulate the differences between past and emerging practices and we hope that it will assist other colleagues working in professional experience. We conclude this paper by identifying explicitly what we have learnt so far and signal a number of implications for other teacher educators who may be interested in reconceptualising professional experiences around the notion of learning communities.

One of the key learnings from our work is the need to foreground the notion of *reciprocity*. In the past, we have argued for the development of practicum experiences, which were underpinned by the notions of collaboration, partnerships and reflection (see Dobbins, 1996; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Le Cornu, 1999). While we remain committed to these concepts we argue that these principles must be extended to highlight the notion of *reciprocity*. By reciprocity we mean the development within learning communities of learners' commitment to and responsibility for their own learning as well as that of other members of the community. As important as it is for pre-service teachers to accept responsibility for their own learning, they need also to learn to accept some responsibility for the part they play in others' learning, if they are going to be able to effectively participate in schools, which are committed to developing as professional learning communities.

Similarly, as important as it is for pre-service teachers to negotiate their way through a practicum setting, they need also to acknowledge their role in helping others do so. There is a dual commitment required from prospective teachers. It is no longer enough to be an individually reflective practitioner. Prospective teachers need to be reflective practitioners who are committed to the development of collaborative learning cultures and to their dual roles in developing and supporting such cultures.

We are learning not to underplay the role of peer support in professional experiences. Whilst it is well accepted amongst teacher educators that mentor teachers have a crucial role in student teachers' learning in professional experience, and certainly the literature has affirmed this, there is also potential for an increased role for pre-service teachers themselves. They have an important role in providing personal and professional support to each other. We know that learning from professional

experiences is challenging. More and more, the literature affirms the complexity of the learning process in the practicum and stresses negotiation of practicum experiences by pre-service teachers as being critical in learning to teach (e.g. Groundwater-Smith, Brennan, McFadden, & Mitchell, 2001; Mule, 2006; Sundli, 2007; Tang, 2003). It is also acknowledged that the experience of 'being a student teacher' has its own dynamic with its own set of relationships, rules, intellectual and emotional responses, judgements and unpredictability (Bloomfield, 2000; Britzman, 1991; Dobbins, 1993; Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Cornu, 2006) as well as some degree of artificiality.

Moreover, the emotional dimensions of teachers' work and learning to teach are being increasingly recognised (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Hargreaves, 1998; Hastings, 2004; Le Cornu & Collins, 2004; Maynard, 2000; Prosser, 2006; Stokes, 2001). Pre-service teachers need to be able to manage their physical, emotional and intellectual resources. One way they can learn to do this is through valuing the support offered by their peers and realising that they too can provide such support.

Reciprocal learning relationships are at the heart of our reconceptualised professional experience framework. By emphasising the reciprocal nature of the learning process and the development of reciprocal ways of working, opportunities exist for very different professional experiences not only for pre-service teachers but also for their mentor teachers and university mentors. If we are truly to move beyond a transmissive model of teaching and learning (Ewing, 1995) mentor teachers and tertiary mentors must value the contribution that pre-service teachers can make to their professional learning. Not surprisingly, our changes have been most successful where the schools in which the student teachers have been placed are themselves professional learning communities (Ewing, 2002). Such communities, according to Snow-Gerono (2005), have shifted away from the prevalent traditions of isolation and certainty. Instead the notions of uncertainty and dialogue are valued. In such cultures, collaborative practices, questioning and risk taking are encouraged. These more tentative practices are central to the notion of professional experience as learning communities because they allow for exploration and acknowledge that teaching is about relationships (Palmer, 1998).

There are many practical challenges in implementing a learning communities framework for

professional experience. For example, in one institution, the formation of the workshop groups (which relied on placing together those students who would be teaching in the same schools) was a significant part in building a sense of community. To enable this to happen for a cohort of more than 250 students, the university timetable had to be changed, the right number of schools with large enough clusters had to found and the most appropriate teaching staff needed to be employed.

Another level of challenge is to be found at the teaching level. The challenge for teacher educators is to support pre-service teachers to move beyond what Grossman et al. (2001) have described as pseudo-community. In pseudo-communities individuals 'play community' and 'act as if they are already a community that shares values and common beliefs' (p. 955). Grossman et al. (2001) explained that individuals have a natural tendency to do this and that it draws on cultural notions of interaction often found in middle-class, typically anglo-saxon settings. When this occurs the imperative becomes to 'behave as if we all agree and no attempts are made to bring to the surface underlying tensions or disagreements. Hence, as Westheimer (1998) also pointed out, 'community can be used as a way to ignore issues of power, race and gender, in an insidious effort to just have everyone to try to get along' (p. 101).

We believe that it is a core responsibility of teacher educators to develop in pre-service teachers the social and intellectual capacities to enable them to participate in ethical and socially responsible ways in learning communities, both now and in the future. However, it remains an ongoing challenge as to how this capacity building can be best achieved. Based on our learning to this point, we try to develop pre-service teachers' conversation skills (Clark, 2001) or 'dialogue' (Senge, 1990). Such skill development has generally occurred in class time on campus prior to pre-service teachers going into schools. In some of our partnership schools, however, co-ordinators committed to professional dialogue and its role in teachers' learning are also taking on this role with their pre-service teachers.

The third level of challenge is at the philosophical level. There are complex relations of power within any teaching/learning process and we need to be mindful of how our own positional power affects the development of learning communities in our work. As Sumsion and Patterson (2004) pointed out, we '…need to be alert to the ways in which we

discursively position ourselves and our students, and to the possibility that our enactments of our roles and practices as teacher educators may be interpreted differently by our students than we intend' (p. 634). As our role in professional experience involves us working closely with school-based staff, these cautions also apply to how we position ourselves with teachers and school co-ordinators and how they also may interpret our actions differently than we intend.

One strategy that has assisted us in our learning has been for ourselves to be members of learning communities. This is in keeping with what Seymour Sarason (1990) recognised years ago: that in order for teachers to create vigorous communities of learners among students, they needed to have a parallel community in which they too were nourished.

8. Conclusion

There are many challenges associated with developing learning communities in pre-service teacher education, which are beginning to be reported in the literature (see Le Cornu, 2007; Sim, 2006). However, it is our contention that framing professional experiences around the notion of active teacher and student teacher agency in learning communities has the potential to enable pre-service teachers to work with their peers and mentor teachers in more collegial ways. We believe that such changes are necessary if teachers of the future are to develop long-term reflective capacities that will enable them to participate effectively in learning communities throughout their careers and encourage their students to take such responsibility in their own learning.

This kind of reconceptualisation embodies teacher learning as a continuum that begins with pre-service teacher education but continues for the teacher's whole career.

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