Self-study in teacher education: Developing a community of practice for teacher education academics

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Abstract
This paper reports how a group of six teacher education academics from one university formed a community of practice for sharing ideas about pedagogy. A collaborative self-study approach was used to investigate the experiences of the group. Data include personal written reflections and interviews with individual group members. Results indicate the complexities of university work and offer positive insights into a collaborative pedagogical culture for academics.

Introduction

Higher education is in a state of flux as governments throughout the world seek to make tertiary study more accessible to a broader range of students while at the same time imposing funding cuts and budget constraints (Lea, 2005). These changes often result in lack of time and resources which may compromise academics' opportunities for collegial interaction and professional development. Stefani (2006) suggests universities need to provide "appropriate opportunities for academic staff to develop their approaches to the scholarship of learning and teaching, through action, reflection and evaluation of their current practice" (p. 121).

The context for this paper is the education faculty at a large metropolitan university in Sydney, Australia. The majority of students in the secondary teacher education program are undergraduates who complete a four-year double degree which includes a major study of the teaching discipline, units in educational theory and teaching methodologies, and professional experience in schools. The postgraduate program is open to students who have already completed a degree in their chosen teaching subject comprising two-years of study in education theory and teaching methods combined with professional experience days. Both programs emphasise the value of a developmental professional experience program featuring single-day visits and more sustained blocks of teaching up to four weeks in length. The integrated approach allows students to apply, in authentic classroom contexts, the pedagogical knowledge and skills they are developing in their concurrent academic and curriculum-based methodology units.

The methodology units in the secondary teacher education program are taught by academics who are all former secondary school teachers with considerable classroom experience in their teaching subjects. Most hold doctorates in education but are relatively new to academia and making the transition from secondary school to the university can be a challenge for teachers. Although expert in their subject domains and highly skilled teachers, early career academics are new to the work of preparing preservice teachers for the classroom. The school curriculum is highly regulated with detailed syllabus documents linked to information on programming and assessment; however, the structure and content of the methodology units is left largely to

individual academics who must develop and sequence the learning and teaching activities and the assessment tasks. In addition, teacher education academics are immediately accountable to a range of stakeholders including students, professional experience mentors, and accrediting organisations.

Moving from a school setting to the academy most often means negotiating some important changes in the workplace. The shift from a shared staffroom environment to a private office can lead to feelings of isolation. Collegial discussions about practice which used to occur regularly and arise on an impromptu basis are now far less frequent as academics work alongside each other but can feel like they are working alone. This is especially the case in secondary teacher education programs where the methods lecturer may be the only person working in that particular subject area. New academics may also feel that they are expected to quickly become independent which may lead to unrealistic expectations of self-reliance and promote a reticence to actively seek support from peers.

This paper reports the formation and early development of a community of practice for six secondary methodology lecturers from one university. Known as the Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP) group, it was envisaged as an opportunity for teacher education academics to meet regularly to share best practice and engage in professional learning activities.

Self-study
The STEP group formed as a collaborative self-study which aimed "to both generate knowledge of teaching and enhance our own pedagogy" (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 858). Self-study is "based on confronting the dilemmas of practice that are typically too easily ignored, or explained away, because of the pressure of teaching" (Loughran, 2004a, p. 162). Self-study is always predicated on the co-involvement of others in order that learning moves beyond a personal construction of meaning. Learning about teacher education practices occurring through the self-study project can be tested by the degree to which it is seen to resonate with colleagues (Samaras, 2002). Importantly, self-study is clearly distinct from reflection about an issue or problem of practice. While reflection is typically of a personal nature and resides within the individual, self-study takes reflection further since it "demands that the knowledge and understanding derived be communicated … so that it might be challenged, extended, transformed and translated by others." (Loughran, 2004b, p. 25)

Teacher educators may engage in self-study to enrich their own personal-professional development and for wider purposes that relate to enriching their understanding of the practice of teacher education (Cole & Knowles, 1998). In either case, these purposes are not mutually exclusive. The former usually incorporates a largely practical focus on pedagogy where the goal is to advance the pedagogical practice of the individual. The latter has a broader aim that is "more generally related to the production and advancement of knowledge about teacher education practices and the programs and contexts within which they are situated." (Cole & Knowles, 1998, p. 225). Self-study can assist early career teacher educators who "face a range of personal and professional challenges as they navigate new social and institutional contexts, grapple with multiple and at times conflicting professional identities, and begin to forge their own personal pedagogies of teacher education" (Williams, Ritter, & Bullock, 2012, p. 245).

Korthagen and Lunenberg (2004) suggest that self-study can become a catalyst for teacher education reform. They argues that self-study can improve practice from within a particular context by focussing on the specific concerns of teacher educators and their preservice teachers. The authors identify four key dimensions to frame a self-study, each of which are indicative of the fundamental shifts in focus that are central to self-study projects. These include the shifts: first, from the knowledge of experts to the authority of practice; second, from academic theory to each individual's personal practice; third, from generalisation to specific situations and unique contexts; and fourth, from individual learning to notions of interdependence and collaborative learning.

The STEP group self-study project reported here was envisaged as a means to share ideas about practice for personal-professional development and promote a collaborative academic community where members could learn with and from each other to enhance their understanding of teacher education (Larsen, 2007). The group is comprised of six secondary methods lecturers in English, Mathematics, Science, History, Economics, and Languages.

Communities of practice

The theoretical framework for this paper is based around the work of Étienne Wenger and his notion of a community of practice. Wenger defined a community of practice as "a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavour and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them" (Wenger, 2001, p. 2). Accordingly, communities of practice differ from other communities in three significant ways: first, they focus on a domain of shared interest; second, members cooperate and learn together through their participation in joint activities and discussions; and third, they acquire a shared collection of experiences which can help to produce exemplary practices and solutions to problems. Gray (2004, p. 22) notes:

> *This theoretical framework proposes that it is in these communities of practice that people learn the intricacies of their job, explore the meaning of their work, construct an image of the organization, and develop a sense of professional self. Such communities address not only the technical acquisition of skills required by a specific practice, but also the informal and social aspects of creating and sharing knowledge.*

Those who work in professional learning communities and share their expertise are more likely to improve the learning outcomes of their students than teachers or academics who work on their own (Wood, 2007). Communities of practice create sustained opportunities for shared practice and co-learning which may also provide an effective means of responding to the constant changes that take place at such a hurried pace in the higher education sector by (Cox, 2006). Collaborative practice can also help to counter the culture of individualism often found in universities where individuals may become isolated and unaware of the practices of colleagues (Laurillard 2006).

Research studies based on communities of practice focus on the collective or group as the unit of analysis rather than the individual (Fuller, 2007). In communities of practice, individuals learn through a shared practice with other members. There is an emphasis on the socio-cultural norms of learning which takes place through co-participation in the shared practices that evolve from the practice of the community. Another key feature of the learning associated with communities of practice is that it is made apparent through identity formation.

As such, communities of practice differ markedly from other social networks because social relations are formed (mutual engagement), negotiated (joint enterprise) and sustained (shared repertoire) around the activity that has brought people together (Fuller, 2007).

A community of practice is formed when people come together to focus on an issue of common interest through mutual engagement because members possess knowledge and understanding that allows them to learn with and from each other. Learning through a joint enterprise allows members to share information and develop their expertise by engaging in reciprocal activities and collegiate discussions. The activity of the community members helps to create a range of resources by "producing or adopting tools, artifacts, representations; recording and recalling events; inventing new terms and redefining or abandoning old ones; telling and retelling stories; creating and breaking routines" (Wenger, 1998, p. 95). This paper reports how the relations within the STEP group were formed (mutual engagement), negotiated (joint enterprise) and sustained (shared repertoire) around the activity of improving learning and teaching.

Method

The STEP group commenced at the start of 2012. During 2012 each academic gave a 60-minute presentation on his or her approach to pedagogical practice within the secondary methodology units for pre-service teachers. These presentations focussed on the conceptualisation of the methods unit, the learning and teaching activities, and the assessment tasks. The presentations were informal in nature and there was a great deal of dialogue and discussion as members asked questions of the presenter and the group, and shared their ideas. At the start of 2013, the academics each wrote a 500 word personal reflection on what they had gained from the STEP meetings. These reflections were used to assess the impact of the STEP program and to consider possible future directions for the group. A research assistant, who was not a STEP member, conducted semi-structured interviews with each academic individually for about 20 minutes. The research assistant then analysed the written reflections and interview responses in terms of Wenger's (1998) three defining features of a community of practice; namely, mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.

Findings and discussion

Coming together as a community of practice

STEP group members reported their sense that they spent too much time working apart from colleagues and opportunities for sustained conversations about teaching did not occur often enough. There were regular staff meetings attended together with other colleagues but the agenda was almost always full of administrative matters so there was usually little or no time to talk about classroom practice. As discussed by Laurillard (2006), academics often remained unsure about their pedagogy and how well they were operating within the faculty. N1 noted in the personal reflection, "Isolation and a feeling of not knowing what you don't know is a challenge! Having a group of colleagues you can discuss common issues with has helped to address this issue".

The domain of shared interest for this community of practice is the preparation of preservice teachers for secondary schools. At the start of the STEP process, everyone wanted to know what everyone else was doing in their methodology units so they had some means of comparing what they did themselves. Members wanted to know if what they were doing was

alright. They discovered that others were experiencing similar challenges than themselves and this gave them a sense of comfort.

> *I've learnt that there are lots of other people in the same boat as me. That makes me feel comfortable about just having a work in progress rather than a perfect finished product. There's room to consider and think about what other people are also considering along with me. In practical terms it's taken the pressure off ... and you can start enjoying your work.* (N2)

STEP meetings have become an occasion for discussion and sharing about the conceptualisation and approaches to learning and teaching of our methodology units. As N3 noted in the interview, "It is refreshing to attend a meeting where the focus is solely on how we can support each other in advancing our pedagogical practice for the benefit of our students."

> *It makes your own practice visible. You can't help but to look at your own practice in relation to other people's. I think it affirmed my practice. It suits my own field, in what I'm doing, so I felt reasonably good about that. But I did think there are some strategies here that I could use.* (N4)

Sharing best practice from methods units as well as concerns about areas of pedagogy where there were doubts or concerns was an important part of establishing a sense of mutual engagement in the group. The presentations affirmed each person's expertise through the encouragement received from peers. Members were able to learn more about each other's work and hearing in detail about colleagues' units showed that there was far more held in common than previously imagined. Presentations also encouraged an honest and open exchange of ideas which has built a more collegial sense of recoirpocity among STEP members.

Negotiating meaning in the commuity of practice
STEP is a somewhat diverse group in terms of background and experience and each person convenes a different methodology unit across a broad range of subject areas. Even so, cooperating and learning together through participation in joint STEP activities and discussions showed how much could be learned from each other. The range of presentations contained some common and recurrent themes such as the range of teaching methods discussed, the importance of developing preservice teachers' familiarity and confidence with technological tools, and the need to find ways of linking the methods classes to the students' concomitant professional experience.

The more pratical concerns of individual classroom teaching occurred alongside a desire to develop a stronger shared responsibility across the secondary teacher education program. The growing sense among the STEP members of working together for colleagues' and students' mutual benefit has highlighted the common goal in preparing preservice teachers for the classroom.

> *For me there have been, and continue to be, two areas of learning need: firstly, immediate practical matters to solve, and secondly, the need for broader learning, to make my practice visible against my colleagues' practice, to gain a more complete picture of our shared endeavour. The STEP group has been extremely valuable on both fronts.* (N4, personal reflection)

Negotiation of difference appears as an underdeveloped theme in the literature on communities of practice and to some extent the STEP experience brings this into focus. There were differences that emerged as each academic presented their methodology unit and this called for a degree of negotiated meaning as members were challenged by the different approaches and discourses. N1 noted that while some presentations were mainly concerned with detailing specific teaching strategies, others "were more about theoretical justification for our structure". There were contrasts in the language we used to describe practice and in differing priorities which often arose due to the varying demands of diverse syllabuses. Sometimes the dissimilarities sharpened the sense of difference, even isolation, and N4 commented about sometimes "struggling to find similarities". Even so, these tensions also helped to clarify what was valued in each person's own specialisation: "It made me realise how highly I regard accurate and meaningful content and pedagogical content knowledge" (N5).

The close connection between each member's area of curriculum content and pedagogy in pre-service teacher education also became apparent. Even though individual backgrounds and perspectives have shaped the perceptions of peers' approaches, members felt that these differences helped to make their own thinking and practice more visible. N4 noted that the tension of the challenge of attending to a variety of presentations from different subject areas "turned out to be a positive growth outcome, in that these extra discourses expanded my teacher education understanding and repertoire".

For example, for N5's methodology unit, the relatively heavy emphasis on content became even more apparent as the presentations progressed when comparing the unit to those of other STEP members. N5 started "thinking about whether there is another way to go about it and still address the requirements". For N4's unit, perhaps there was too strong a focus on "lesson design and building students' repertoire of practice activities (e.g., games) and sequencing". N3 began to re-evaluate assessment rubrics and whether they aligned to the learning outcomes because "I see now that's something I have to work on more". And N1 noted that "students reflecting on their own practice" is a theme that came out in many of the presentations and is something I hadn't been flagging quite so much in my units, so I've got my students doing that more".

The shared endeavour of teacher education was another key focus of the learning which took place in the STEP group meetings. A question which often arose in the discussions was articulated by N5, "In what way can my teacher education students be best prepared to take their place within the profession?" The STEP activities had helped N5 "become more responsive to the needs of her students".

Reflecting on our stories
STEP activities encouraged a shared collection of experiences which helped to produce exemplary practices and solutions to problems of mutual concern. Meetings became a time for members of the group to reflect on how they understand their individual practice and how they see it in terms of the work of their peers. N3 commented in the interview about the ways in which STEP group activities "allowed me to stand back from my daily work and reflect more deeply on my pedagogy; it has provided me with a space to grow and develop professionally". N4's personal reflection noted the importance of taking time away from the more pressing demands of teaching to consider how the understanding of practice had changed:

> *After four years in the role, after grappling with the immediate demands of unit construction, development of content and resources, I feel I am only now just starting to understand the nature of the role.*

Individual reflection began as each person prepared their presentation on their unit. In doing so, members needed to identify what was valued most about the methods units in order to to select what would most be of benefit to colleagues.

> *One of the key benefits of presenting to colleagues in this forum was the opportunity to reflect on my own practice. Presenting to the group gave me the opportunity to think carefully about my own practice and clarify the rationale for my unit design. (Rod, personal reflection)*

Reflection continued during the STEP meetings as each person was encouraged to contemplate their own practice in light of colleagues' presentations. The self-study work promoted reflection in the preparation of written responses and by participating in the interviews for this research. These activities have also afforded the chance to look back on the activities of the STEP group and think about what has been learned from being a part of it. As N5 commented:

> *I began to view my endeavours with students as part of a wider mentoring activity – shared with my colleagues at university and also with the classroom teachers supervising my students.*

Interestingly, as STEP members began to reflect collectively on the shared practice within the community they also started to recognise the importance of developing the reflective practice of their students.

> *One of the main things I've put in is having the students much more involved in evaluating each other's work. Students reflecting on each other's practice and reflecting on their own practice is a theme that came out in many of the presentations and is something I hadn't been flagging quite so much in my units, so I've got my students doing that more – more of a learning community and getting them to reflect on things before they hand them in, even to the point of letting them invent some criteria before they hand things in, and then reflecting on how they went and on how their peers went after they submit work. (N1)*

The written reflections prepared as part of this self-study have also become important stories that have been shared among the group. The reflections not only comprise significant data for this study but have also helped members to reflect on the progress of the group and where to take it next. Reading these reflections has provided further insights into how each person helped to shape the dynamics of the group and how mambers have been shaped by working together. The written artefacts of the group highlight how challenging it was at first for each STEP member to share their individual practice with peers, while at the same time highlighting how much has been gained as a result of doing so. Members have discovered more about the previously hidden work of colleagues and heard about some of the challenges they face in their units. They have been impressed by the dedication of their peers and felt affirmed, supported, and inspired by them. Members of the STEP group now also feel more open to the concept of sharing ideas and seeking advice.

> *The opportunity to bounce ideas off each other, interact, probe further and actually have time to hear fabulous approaches is irreplaceable.*

Future directions for the group have also been discussed by identifying common issues and concerns. Now that a degree of trust has been established among the group and members have had the experience of making their practice more visible to each other, members are seeking other ways of advancing our shared understanding of teacher education. In keeping with the advice of Stefani (2006), it is intended to include opportunities for scholarship of teaching through reading and discussing articles of interest to the group.

Practical implications

The STEP model exemplifies how a group of academics interested in developing a more collaborative approach to teaching can operate together. STEP activities have enabled a better understanding of the challenges faced by others, strengthened a sense of common purpose and feelings of inclusion, and provided a rich opportunity to reflect on pedagogy for improving practice. These outcomes were achieved because each member of the group was willing to share elements of their practice with their peers in an environment of mutual respect which still allowed each person to question and challenge each other. It was also important that leadership was distributed among the group as each academic took the lead in his or her presentation.

The approach described in this paper could readily be taken up by other Education faculties where there is already a strong focus on learning and teaching. In a sense, the STEP approach demonstrates what teacher education academics want to encourage their pre-service teachers to do: collaborate with peers to advance individual and shared understanding of teaching. Lecturers in other faculties could also apply a STEP method to meet around common teaching and or research interests. However, a significant barrier to the model being adopted is the fact that of the casualisation of the workforce in many universities where teaching is often undertaken by casual tutors who are not funded to spend time meeting with each other to discuss their teaching.

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