Valuing practice over theory: How beginning teachers re-orient their practice in the transition from the university to the workplace

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper is about the experiences of beginning teachers in turning theory learned in universities into practice in the workplace. The research is situated in the context of a pre-service teacher education programme that explicitly and deliberately seeks to bridge the theory-practice gap in teacher education. The paper argues that, despite long-standing awareness of the theory-practice gap as a central issue faced by beginning teachers, attempts by teacher educators to address this issue remain thwarted. The argument draws on interview and focus group data collected via a study of 1st year graduate teachers of an Australian pre-service teacher education programme. The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism is used to focus on the meanings that graduates have of their experiences of turning theory into practice. The data suggest that prospective teachers during pre-service training value both the theory that they learn on campus and the practice that they observe in schools. However, once they become practitioners, they privilege the latter. Upon entry to the workplace, graduates come to associate good practice with that of the veteran teacher, whose practice and cache of resources they seek to emulate.

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1. Introduction

Since the professionalisation of teaching over thirty years ago, one of the major and sustained challenges of pre-service teacher education programmes has been to strike a balance between theory and practice (Bates, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Shulman, 1987; Smith, 2000). According to Levine (cited in Hartocollis, 2005, p. 2), a widely held concern is that "one of the biggest dangers we face is preparing teachers who know theory and know nothing about practice." Others suggest that separating theory from practice creates a false dichotomy and that teaching is a profession in which theory is embedded in and inseparable from practice (Schön, 2003).

Teacher education studies however attest to a disparity between the theory of the pre-service programme and the practice in the workplace (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Neville, Sherman, & Cohen, 2005). Consequently, one of the main criticisms directed at pre-service teacher education programmes is their purported inadequacy in enabling students to bridge the theory-practice gap (Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2003; Louden et al., 2005; Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996), with several stakeholders conceding that "traditional teacher preparation and in-service training have failed to produce the level of quality demanded by the new educational environment" (Neville et al., 2005, p. 3). That is, concepts of teacher training are "antediluvian and do not adequately reflect the science of education" which must comprise a more sophisticated understanding of the knowledge required to teach in the twenty-first century (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2004, p. 3).

In Australia, responses to the theory-practice gap in teacher education have included a call for reform of the nation's pre-service teacher education programmes (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2005; Donnelly, 2004; New South Wales Government, 2001; Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2005). This paper examines a pre-service programme that was designed to respond to these disaffections with and inefficiencies of teacher education (Smith & Moore, 2006). A fundamental and foundational principle of the programme is that its graduates will have the capability to integrate theory and practice and will be workplace ready when entering the classroom or learning site. This paper identifies weaknesses in the operationalisation of this programme and suggests that, despite the programme's deliberate attempt to close the gap between theory and practice, it remains open and intransigent. Reasons for this are proffered, most notably the tendency of pre-service and beginning teachers to privilege practice observed and experienced in the classroom over theory taught on campus.

This study adds to international debate in a number of ways. First, it examines the gap between theory and practice in the

context of a programme that consciously and deliberately attempts to bridge it (Smith & Moore, 2006). Second, it contributes to debate about teacher education, understandings of school contexts as places of socialisation and broader theoretical views of how neophytes become experts. Third, the study gives voice to beginning teachers and responds to the criticism that "ironically, all over the world, candidates' voices are rarely used to ascertain whether their teacher education programme achieves its goals" (Korthagen et al., 2006, p. 20).

2. Context

The Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) was established by a working party consisting of members from the teaching profession and academics in response to the perceived need for programme reform in pre-service teacher education (Smith & Moore, 2006). Introduced in 2001 to replace the conventional Bachelor of Education (BEd) at a regional Australian university, it responds to the "general consensus that teacher education needs to be re-engineered if historical changes and the preparation of teachers for a new kind of student and society are to be aligned" (Central Queensland University, 2000). The BLM was created to provide a distinctively new approach to pre-service teacher education and it represents a paradigm shift away from traditional programmes that are based on the assumption that theoretical underpinnings, provided through on-campus course work, will be automatically translated by pre-service and beginning teachers into actionable sequences in the learning site (Lynch, 2003). Thus, it aims to represent "a point of departure for rejuvenating and transforming teacher education and training" (Smith & Moore, 2006, p. 9).

The BLM "consciously and directly attempts to bridge the 'theory-practice' gap so often attributed to teacher education programs" (Smith & Moore, 2006, p. 20). It has as its primary concepts *workplace ready graduates* and *futures-oriented* educators who are empowered with a sense of social and educational change (Smith, Lynch, & Mienczakowski, 2003). It focuses on pedagogy rather than learning theory, with pedagogical strategies rather than curriculum development forming the core intent of the programme. That is, the BLM attempts to provide a pedagogic scaffold that prepares future teachers with the foundational knowledge, as well as the requisite skills, techniques and pedagogical strategies, necessary to be able to teach effectively, upon graduation. It provides "an emphasis on the design of pedagogical strategies that achieve learning outcomes" (Smith & Moore, 2006, p. 11).

Comprising the BLM are four key knowledge domains: Essential Professional Knowledge, Futures, Networks and Partnerships, and Pedagogy. Courses within these domains include a theoretical background in instructional theory and design, and an understanding of the meta-analysis of teaching/learning, with a particular focus on the role of the teacher (known as the "learning manager") in achieving learning outcomes in students (Allen & Smith, 2007). The on-campus work done by BLM students focuses on the practice of classroom teaching rather than the discipline languages of educational psychology, child development patterns, sociology of education and other mainstays of traditional BEd programmes (Smith & Moore, 2006).

Central to the learning management concept is the notion of "design with intended outcomes" (Lynch & Smith, 2006a, p. 53). That is, the BLM presents students with a basic architecture common to effective teaching, or learning management, no matter what is being taught. Known as the BLM Learning Design process this architecture, or deep structure, of effective teaching supplies students with a common framework that prepares them to design pedagogical strategies that achieve learning outcomes (Ingvarson, 2006). It consists of the 8 Learning Management Questions (Lynch & Smith, 2006b), a set of sequential design based questions that

enable the learning manager to design effective learning experiences, and Dimensions of Learning (Marzano et al., 1997) which provides an integrating pedagogical framework. The expectation is that through applying the Learning Design, the BLM graduate will develop professional capabilities focused on pedagogical strategies and learning outcomes in students (Ingvarson, 2006). In the balance between curriculum development and pedagogy, the emphasis is definitely on pedagogical strategies. This is a feature that characterises the BLM compared with its predecessor, the BEd (Smith, 2005).

Another core initiative in the BLM is that practicum-type periods in schools common to the BEd model of teacher preparation have been reconceptualised as *Portal Tasks*, periods when students put into practice the concepts and theories explored on campus (Smith & Moore, 2006). Portal Tasks are situated throughout the programme to target a range of standards against which students must demonstrate competence in order to proceed in the programme. They entail a structured and mentored period of theory application in real-life settings and aim to capture the theory/practice nexus vital in the preparation of educators for the creative knowledge society (Smith & Moore, 2006). Similar arrangements apply to the ten-week internship that students undertake in their final year. A central tenet of the portal task arrangement is that all participants, students, academic staff and supervising teachers, follow the same script. This is achieved through partnership arrangements, which include industry input into BLM course work and assessment and shared professional development (Allen & Butler-Mader, 2007).

Hence, the BLM strives to create a disruptive innovation in teacher education (Smith & Moore, 2006) and to break away from the conventional models of teacher preparation which "domesticate student teachers into a rather effective hegemonic culture of teaching [where] the new teacher, once in schools, is incorporated rapidly into the dominant patterns of pedagogical and curriculum practices of the past, within periods as short as three years" (Smith & Moore, 2006, p. 17). The claim made about BLM graduates, on the contrary, is that they are able upon graduation to do the job for which they are paid in ways that have the potential to transform the profession (Allen & Smith, 2007).

3. Theoretical orientation

This paper extends upon the work of classical sociologists such as Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) to examine the professional development of pre-service teachers. The theoretical orientation of this study is derived from the interpretive school of thought of symbolic interactionism. This approach allows me to focus on the active input of graduate teachers as they articulate their experiences and perceptions of their teacher education programme. The underlying assumption of this study is that the nature of reality is such that individuals construct their reality in social contexts through communication and role taking (Benzies & Allen, 2001). Symbolic interactionism suits this particular study because it attends to how individuals give situations meaning through their interactions with others and presents a view of social reality as being dynamic, emergent and pluralistic (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2006). It aims to uncover the subjective meaning of human behaviour and emphasises in particular the role that language and thought play in the interaction among humans.

The focus of this research is framed by Mead's (1934, p. 141) concept of role taking, one of the "specifically social expressions of intelligence" that shape the interpersonal nature of teachers' work. Role taking involves the self engaging in a reflective dialogue with itself in order to act in role. Mead (1934, p. 173) views the self as divided into the "*I*" and the "*Me*," with the *I* representing the inner, reflective self and the *Me* referring to the outward, socialised aspect