



# Transforming traditional models of initial teacher education through a mandatory experiential learning programme

Gary James Harfitt <sup>a,\*</sup>, Jessie Mei Ling Chow <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Room 656, Meng Wah Complex, Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong

<sup>b</sup> Room 647, Meng Wah Complex, Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong

## HIGHLIGHTS

- A compulsory experiential learning component was integrated into an ITE programme.
- Student teachers chose from a raft of community-based projects and undertook a 6-week placement.
- Qualitative data reveals important benefits including transferrable teaching skills.
- Reciprocal benefits were also reported by community partners and NGOs.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the impact of a compulsory credit-bearing experiential learning (EL) block embedded into an initial teacher education (ITE) programme in Hong Kong. Student teachers engage in extended participation with community-based projects, aimed at enhancing their understanding of real-world environments, expanding their capacity to integrate theory and practice, and broadening their global outlook. The projects include community placements in Hong Kong, as well as regional learning opportunities. Qualitative data from a hundred participants reveal important outcomes in terms of pedagogical development, students' understanding of diverse others and enhanced reflective practices. The paper attends to global changes in education.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is positioned at the intersection of the interrelationship between three key areas of initial teacher education (ITE): constructivist learning theories, teaching practicum (TP), and the promotion of reflective practices through experiential learning (EL). We view learning as a social and cultural process and attempt to demonstrate in this paper that teachers' expertise should not only reside in the knowledge domains typically established by universities and schools. Another crucial knowledge domain that should be accessible to all pre-service teachers is the community and we argue that universities, schools and community partners stand as key knowledge bases that when combined can maximize the learning potential of beginning teachers today. The study in this

paper outlines the establishment of a *mandatory* EL block across multiple subject disciplines on a pre-service teacher preparation programme and draws upon qualitative data collected from participants and community stakeholders. We set out to critique an innovative approach to teacher preparation on a one-year post-graduate teacher preparation programme at a University in Hong Kong; we see this curriculum initiative in teacher training as enabling a powerful synergy between the core functions of a teacher-training faculty at university and the wider community. This paper will show how community partners including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play a highly significant role in the development of beginning teachers and how they might even be seen as co-educators in the process of teacher preparation.

Typically, TP has acted as the dominant experiential component in most teacher training programmes. In this model, pre-service teachers are placed in local schools for a fixed period of time to work alongside in-service teacher mentors and are given the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [gharfitt@hku.hk](mailto:gharfitt@hku.hk) (G.J. Harfitt).

chance to undergo an apprenticeship-style learning experience that usually includes university staff visiting them on-site to observe and assess their teaching. This type of traditional model of TP has been challenged with Zeichner (2012) observing that very little success is achieved in coordinating what is carried out on the course and field components of ITE courses. This partly explains why we have turned to the community outside of the university and school classroom as a highly complementary learning space. We believe this space is where beginning teachers can encounter different types of learners and degrees of diversity than they might in traditional TP models, but where they can also transfer teaching skills acquired on their pedagogical courses at university.

To be clear, we are not presenting EL projects as an alternative to TP; the importance of TP in shaping the pedagogies beginning teachers need at the outset of their teaching careers should never be underestimated. However, the premise of this paper is that off-campus learning presents exciting new opportunities for pre-service teachers to view the community beyond the institutional walls of the university and TP classroom as a fundamental, but complementary layer of learning. According to Payne and Zeichner (2017, pp. 1101–1117) teachers need to know more about the communities in which their students reside so that they can draw upon the expertise and knowledge that is culturally embedded in those communities. We concur that this community beyond the university and school classroom is a powerful knowledge space that has been under-utilized in teacher preparation, and that there is a paucity of knowledge on how this beyond-campus learning model when carefully structured can actually complement and enhance the more traditional models of TP (Coffey, 2010). There is also a need to throw light on the impact of community-based projects on teacher training and particularly on the question of whether such an approach actually leads to tangible benefits in terms of subject matter teaching skills (Richmond, 2017).

The concept of EL is not new to ITE with typical examples of experiential education including field trips (Boyle, 1995), service-learning and cooperative education (Hollis, 2002; Jakubowski & Burman, 2004). In most teacher-preparation programmes and certainly in our own context of South East Asia, pre-service teachers' learning in the wider world is often treated as peripheral rather than a central part of the teacher training process when compared with TP. The EL in our study integrates meaningful, structured activities beyond classroom teaching (Moore, 2010) with reflective components that in turn enhance students' learning experience, 'knowledge of the community' (Murrell, 2001) and global outlook. We have undertaken the difficult task of seeking to promote in our pre-service teachers an intrinsically motivated engagement with community-based EL projects through a compulsory EL block. We are currently the only faculty of Education in Hong Kong to do this and believe this is a regional innovation too. We hope it will add to the weight of literature on community-based learning that has shown how this approach can cultivate in learning teachers a deeper understanding of diversity, social justice, and of themselves (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007).

Through the establishment of a raft of EL projects for pre-service teachers (one-year postgraduate diploma of Education, or PGDE students) with local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) we report on beginning teachers' understanding of real-world environments, their capacity to integrate theory and practice, and the broadening of their global outlook. This paper adds to our knowledge base by integrating a third layer of learning, namely learning that occurs in real world contexts, that is the community. From this situated learning perspective we see the community outside the university classroom as a vital 'inter-space' for knowledge building and the source of multiple learning opportunities (Zeichner, 2012). We believe we are facilitating an

important change on our traditional teacher education landscape which brings to the fore the question of *who* can be teacher educators in our community. Payne and Zeichner (2017, pp. 1101–1117) raise the issue of *whose* knowledge counts in teacher education, and we intend to show how the scope of teacher preparation can be broadened to include community partners from outside the usual orbit of university and school educators. With this in mind, a single, but wide-ranging research question underpins our study:

- In what ways do faculty, pre-service teachers and community partners perceive the impact of a mandatory EL programme integrated into a pre-service teacher preparation programme?

## 2. Experiential learning and teacher education

EL is often synonymous with service-learning (SL) and community work. While EL is manifested in numerous formats including volunteerism, service-learning, internships, practica and cooperative education (Moore, 2010), SL is more intended to enhance students' academic and civic engagement (Bingle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2012; Lim & Bloomquist, 2015). The community-based EL projects at the centre of our ITE programme integrate academic knowledge and facilitate student teachers' personal and social competencies, thereby complementing the traditional curriculum that too often focuses on academic knowledge and pedagogy at the cost of key competencies in the social realm. This EL initiative comes at a time when traditional models of teaching and learning are being challenged. In recent decades, a constructivist worldview has gone some way to explaining how to better support teachers through teacher education (see Bridges et al., 2018; Harfitt & Chan, 2017; Richardson, 1997, 2003). Promoting constructivist models of teacher education can be a complex process and one reality of a constructivist approach is that it too often functions in a traditional university setting (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). Research on constructivist teaching has also emphasized the central role of learning from experience and social interactions as a way for teachers and students to co-construct knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2000).

Community-based experiences have been shown to develop knowledge and practices in novice teachers (see, for example, Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 1998; Brayko, 2013; Payne & Zeichner, 2017, pp. 1101–1117; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). Coffey (2010), too, suggests that community-based EL projects can prompt pre-service teachers to think about the social factors that might influence school students and to consider how schools operate in the wider context of a community. Bhabha's (1994, pp. 1–2), concept of 'third space' as a specific site "for elaborating strategies of selfhood ... that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself", was further developed by Kirkland (2008) who proposed "pedagogical third spaces" where students could question and develop the types of knowledge required and valued in school as well as the wider global landscape. Soja (2004, p. xi) reminds us that through this concept of a third space, the classroom becomes "an expanded world of learning and literacy practice, (where) the roles also become reversed, as every space and place in the world becomes readable or interpretable as a classroom." Dewey's (1938) view of direct experience as the key to learning and for forging connections across contexts is of central importance here. As beginning teachers are socialized into the role of "teacher", ITE programmes must offer space for these new teachers to question what is involved in such a role.

Building on this global backdrop, our study presents a pedagogical approach that takes pre-service teachers out of their

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