PORTAL TASKS IN PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION: RECONCEPTUALISING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate a pedagogical strategy utilized by Central Queensland University’s Faculty of Education and Creative Arts within its Bachelor of Learning Management program. In response to a call for more authentic university learning experiences, preservice teachers are challenged with a series of educationally relevant Portal Tasks. As an integral component of the Faculty’s education degree, these tasks provide opportunities for preservice teachers to engage, physically and intellectually in real world classroom and school activities. Specifically, the paper reports the use of Portal Tasks as an integrating device, linking theoretical knowledge to practical classroom experience.

Introduction

Faced with rapid change and its consequent uncertainty, contemporary society is struggling to adapt (Ramsay, 2000). According to Giddens (1999), traditional institutions such as work, education and family are particularly vulnerable to pressure from multiple forces, especially those arising from globalization. Family structure has experienced a shift in configuration from the nuclear family due to varying employment patterns, increased mobility and new concentrations of poverty. Contemporary children have fewer
siblings and they move more often. Their parents are older and spend more time at work. Such family disruption has resulted in higher levels of student anxiety, depression, lack of discipline and aggression (Education Queensland, 2000).

Current employment opportunities are becoming clustered in new knowledge-based and person-based service industries. There is an identified job shift from agriculture, manufacturing and resource development, to communications, service and knowledge-based industries. Full time employment is giving way to a predominance of part time and casual work. The prospect of several job shifts throughout life demands that tomorrow's work force must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to embrace lifelong learning.

In response to demands from many sections of the community to create a teaching profession capable of providing appropriate learning environments in times of uncertainty and rapid change, the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at Central Queensland University has introduced a new teaching degree. The Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) is a teaching qualification planned and implemented through collaboration with several stakeholders in the education process including teachers, principals, district education directors, union representatives and academic staff. Having identified the need for a more pedagogy-based and intellectually relevant program of teacher preparation, the education degree discussed here, has a focus on student teacher engagement in a number of educational performance tasks, termed Portal Tasks. In internet terms, a Portal is a gateway, through which one must pass before moving to another site. Within the BLM, Portal Tasks provide opportunities for preservice teachers to develop and utilize a series of pedagogical skills which increase in complexity as the degree progresses.

The following sections of this paper will trace the origin and implementation of Portal Tasks as an alternative
pedagogical strategy which may serve as both process and product in the professional development of preservice teachers.

**Background**

There is little doubt that today's school students need to be prepared for flexible and adaptive life pathways and participation in cohesive social communities. There is question however, as to the ability of our current education system to deliver the goods. There is ample evidence that Australian schools are failing to produce acceptable standards of basic reading and literacy skills (Literacy and Numeracy in Australian Schools, 2000). Ramsay (2000, p. 18) argues that education is not keeping pace with social change and that 'the old structures are unlikely to work for very much longer'. In essence, schools will remain inadequate to student needs until they reconceptualise the very notion of learning. Abott (1999) contends that traditional forms of education do not fit comfortably into any school system where learning is considered dependent on instruction. From his perspective, students should not be subjected to traditional teaching techniques because learning is best facilitated from the authentic experience of interacting with real situations. Education must not stand in isolation from the rest of life. In fact 'the new economy demands vigorous forms of learning that produce higher order thinking skills, analytical strategies and problem-solving ability' (Wise & Leibbrand, 2001, p. 244).

If learning requires reconceptualisation, then so too does the role of the teacher. Education must be different in today's knowledge society which demands that teachers have the capacity to not only understand innovation, but to develop and manage it (Cumming & Owen, 2001). Luke and Matters (2000) concur that contemporary teachers must be equipped with knowledge, skills and discourses required for new times. It is vital that they provide better and simpler linkages between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and that they
develop more effective ways to talk about and attend to equity and student diversity. Cumming and Owen (2001) ask how it is possible to generate a critical mass of these teachers so that innovation becomes a defining feature of the educational landscape. In a recent report in the Australian newspaper Jan Thomas suggests that teacher education holds the answer.

Contemporary education must undergo a paradigm shift in how teaching is constructed and implemented in a knowledge society (Bottey, 1996). This notion has significant implications for those institutions responsible for teacher training. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) agree that the most direct route to educational reform is through the transformation of teacher education and suggest that current programs do not adequately reflect societal needs, nor expectations. Furthermore, Sanders and Epstein (1998) believe that most educators in all nations are unprepared by their education and training, largely because teacher education is not well positioned to meet contemporary and emerging challenges. Similarly, Apple (2001) argues that although there have been numerous proposals to reform teacher education in the past decade, none has proved adequate to the task. What is needed then, is radical change. Teachers must be prepared to operate 'in a world where the rules have changed' (Apple, 2001, p. 182).

The first step in the redevelopment of teacher training must be an identification of contemporary student needs. An education system for today and tomorrow must provide the type of learning that engages children and young adults. It necessitates vigorous academic work that encourages learners to use their minds to make connections between ideas and their application in the world beyond school (Miller, 1998). Contemporary students need to develop skills that extend considerably beyond traditional versions of the three R’s. The school’s job is not so much to be the sole didactic teacher of children as it was in the 19th century, but to prepare them to
learn critically and creatively from a range of institutions and media’ (Education Queensland, 2000).

The assumption underlying these observations is that schooling practices require an urgent paradigm shift to focus on the learning, thinking and working styles required for the 21st Century. Effective teaching will therefore empower students to make connections between the formal curriculum and aspects of their home and working lives. Effective learning will encourage students to:

- learn by doing;
- link prior knowledge to new information;
- learn by reflection and problem solving;
- operate in a supportive environment where they are able to share both problems and successes. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

Contemporary teachers will be required to create a new culture of learning for their students, where the learner is the central focus, not the teacher. Accountability for student learning will be more important than accountability for control. Teachers will require more than just a pedagogical ‘toolbox’. Conversely, they will need the skills to pose problems and seek solution, ask questions and seek explanations and to create knowledge and then use it.

Teachers, in reforming schools do not view themselves as delivering instruction or transmitting knowledge, rather they teach for understanding and assume roles beyond that of the didact. They are child developers, coaches, guides, advocates and critics; they create environments where students can achieve their best work. (Miller, 1998, p. 530).

These are critical times in teaching and teacher education, as teacher preparation is not keeping pace with economic, social and educational reform. The subsequent challenge to the university sector is in the provision of relevant and appropriate pre-service teacher education. In short, universities are under increasing pressure to prepare teachers to teach (Ramsay, 2000).
Wise and Leibbrand (2001) argue that teacher educators will have to reinvent themselves in order to improve student learning outcomes. Similarly, Sealy, Robson and Hutchins (1997) propose a program which promotes student teacher development in authentic contexts and which initiates and fosters partnerships with the learning communities in which the graduating teacher will operate.

Bachelor of Learning Management

A program of teacher education that is based on these principles of authentic learning and community partnerships has recently been introduced by Central Queensland University’s Faculty of Education and Creative Arts. The Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) is a teaching qualification which has been designed in response to the findings and recommendations of two decades of educational research. Specifically, the BLM directly addresses the research recommendation that pre-service teachers should engage more comprehensively in authentic learning experiences that are linked directly to the classroom environment.

The following section of this paper will discuss how the BLM utilizes Portal Tasks as the vehicle through which education students are provided with opportunities to engage in authentic learning experiences as an integral part of their University studies.

Authentic learning experiences - Portal Tasks

For several years, educational researchers have suggested that the key to the transformation of teacher preparation is in the development and maintenance of authentic partnerships with the school community (Bottey, 1996; Sinclair, 1997; Cochran-Smith, 1998; Battersby & Ebbutt, 1999; Maxon & Schwartz, 2001). This concept has been taken up in the United Kingdom where, since the early 1990's school-based teacher education programs have flourished in
a climate where teachers are considered equal partners with universities, in the provision of pre-service programs (Board of Teacher Registration, 1994). Similarly in the USA, the establishment of Professional Development Schools has enabled the teaching profession to advance, through a focus on quality university and school partnerships.

Australian universities have had to keep pace with social and economic demands. In response to such demands the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (1990) has suggested that the pre-service education of teachers should integrate theory and practice in a holistic way through the utilization of contextual learning sites. This aim can only be achieved with the cooperative effort of both the university and the school. In Queensland the story is much the same. Since the 1970's a steady stream of research and reports has recommended a closer working relationship between the providers of education and the providers of teacher education (Bassett, 1978; Project 21, 1987; Eltis, 1991; Sealey, Robson & Hutchins, 1997).

The pedagogical challenge posed by educational researchers is to strengthen the relevant aspects of the pre-service program to provide student teachers with a more realistic view of schools, whilst equipping them with real world knowledge and skills. Aitken and Mildon (1992) argue for a fundamental rethink of teacher education where practical experiences are developmentally linked to courses and university experiences. This is a notion reinforced by Bezzina (1999, p. 2) who demands that providers of teacher education 'seriously address the dichotomy between what is learnt at university and the realities in schools'.

The substance of these arguments is that in educating pre-service teachers, universities must not merely change what is taught but more fundamentally, how it is taught (Maxon & Schwartz, 2001). If we subscribe to the popular notion that teachers will teach the way they were taught, then student
teachers should be provided with more relevant and intellectually engaging work (Newman, Marks & Gamovank, 1995). The university experience should focus on problem-based and inquiry learning where the curriculum establishes the conditions for focused, purposive and connected teaching and learning. University educators must scaffold and enhance the active learning that occurs with engagement in authentic tasks (Education Queensland, 2000). If, in fact, ‘learning has to do with a hunger to make sense of something’ (Abott, 1999), then teacher education programs must provide pedagogical models which actively and innovatively engage the brain of the learner.

The BLM offers a fresh approach to teacher preparation and varies considerably from all current education degrees. The following section of this paper however, will detail one aspect of the degree which responds specifically to the educational research recommending preservice teacher engagement in a series of authentic learning experiences.

**Portal tasks in context**

In reinventing a teaching degree for the 21st Century, the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at Central Queensland University agreed that serious change was required. As such, the BLM was seen as an opportunity for the Faculty to engage students in a more relevant series of learning experiences that were related directly to the classroom and school. These experiences have been devised in terms of problem-based activities called Portal Tasks. Participation in a series of Portal Tasks will provide the student teacher with multiple opportunities to achieve BLM outcomes. Our concept of Portal Tasks has been modelled on the Education Queensland notion of Rich Tasks which are described as specific practices of educational value, intellectual depth and relevance (Education Queensland, 2000). As such, each BLM Portal Task is required to be:
Portal Tasks in Preservice Teacher Education

• representative of an educational outcome of demonstratable and substantial intellectual and educational value;
• transdisciplinary, engaging knowledge and skills from more than one of the BLM principles/courses;
• problem based, with relevance and power in contemporary education settings;
• of recognisable significance and importance to educators and community stakeholders;
• sufficient in developmental, cognitive and intellectual depth and breadth.

Essentially, the Portal Task will act as the device that integrates the knowledge and skills gained through university courses and through practice teaching in local schools. Participation in each task will require active engagement of the learner, both individually and as a productive team member. Tasks are designed to provide outward and visible signs of student teacher engagement in activities ranging from multimedia presented individual research to real life public exhibitions conducted by cooperative groups. Whatever their theme, Portal Tasks must hold educational relevance and rise from a curriculum that genuinely prepares teachers for the challenges of classroom life. In this manner student teachers are challenged to ‘display their understanding, knowledge and skills through performance of transdisciplinary activities that have an obvious connection to the wide world’ (Education Queensland, 2000).

The design of BLM Portal Tasks has been based on Education Queensland’s Rich Task framework. In designing a task, the first step is the establishment of desirable outcomes, which are limited in number and generally stated. These outcomes relate specifically to the knowledge and skills necessary to attain the goal. Indicators of achievement must then be identified in terms of products, performances or
results. It is important that indicators are potentially observable and must relate to a specific outcome. In creating the task, the performance statement must be clear and specific, yet broad enough in scope, to allow a variety of interpretations for different needs and contexts.

In designing appropriate tasks for the BLM, further descriptors have been added to the Education Queensland model. In the context of this new degree it is vital that Portal Tasks:

- are problem-based;
- offer intellectual engagement of participating students;
- encourage creativity, active learning, effective communication, critical thinking and deep understanding;
- provide opportunities to learn individually, in pairs and in small and large teams;
- require integration of the knowledge and skills provided at university and in the classroom;
- have relevance and value in the real world of education.

If Portal Tasks are to achieve their intended learning goals, they must not be seen simply as add-on activities, but as important, challenging and authentic opportunities to engage in meaningful educational experiences.

Throughout the degree, Portal Tasks will enable participating students to develop and enhance knowledge and skills that are valued in the real world of the classroom and school. In fact, several tasks will need to be conducted within the school or its local community. For this reason it is vital that Portal Tasks are not seen as an added burden to busy teachers, but as an opportunity for student teachers and the university to contribute positively to the achievement of educational outcomes in their learning community. Portal Tasks have subsequently been devised to achieve a dual purpose. In addition to facilitating authentic experiences for
student teachers, each task should provide valued events and activities for schools who are invited or elect to be involved. It must be understood that Portal Tasks will not replace existing university learning experiences, but rather they will complement and draw together knowledge and skills in relevant, educational contexts.

Presented here, are two Portal Tasks that have been designed for the Bachelor of Learning Management. Several Health and Physical Education discipline studies courses utilise the Portal Task as a means by which students are able to develop and practise pedagogical concepts and skills involved in the area of Health and Physical Education. For example, as a concluding activity to a weekly Physical Education practice teaching program, first year students are provided with the following task:

'Active and Healthy Expo': a celebration of health and physical activity'

'In teams, students will plan, implement and review an Active and Healthy Expo for a large group of learners. They will observe and analyse the physical and motor development levels of the learners, before designing and implementing a series of healthy and physically active movement tasks. Students will record the details of this experience through the compilation of an individual, progressive reflective journal. In teams, they will share their reflections of the event with the learners involved, through the presentation of an event review, using innovative and appropriate media.' (HPE Course, BLM)

This Portal Task is conducted at the conclusion of the first year Health and Physical Education course. Within the course students gain knowledge and skills in relation to the theoretical underpinnings, pedagogical styles and practical application of the teaching of Health and Physical Education. This discipline knowledge is complemented by a series of weekly practice teaching sessions. For this particular course, the Portal Task event serves as the device that integrates
theory and practice in the implementation of an educationally worthwhile experience for both students and student teachers.

In another course, the Portal Task involves pairs of university students conducting perceptual motor programs in local primary schools. After a theoretical investigation of common motor problems and how these may be addressed through structured motor programs, student teachers volunteer their time in local primary schools, where they assist children who display perceptual and movement developmental delays. Here, the Portal Task involves the planning, implementation and review of a series of practical sessions that aim to improve the perceptual and motor skills of the children involved. Student teachers are expected to record their experiences through the compilation of a progressive journal that documents details of their planning, implementation and assessment protocols. At the conclusion of the task, student teachers participate in a conference, sharing their educational experiences and reporting the results of their programs.

It must be noted that the Portal Task is not a mere replacement for practice teaching. To the contrary, it should draw together and integrate the knowledge and skills derived from all of the theoretical and practical experiences offered by the university. What sets the Portal Task apart from traditional preservice learning experiences, is its capacity to integrate multiple sources of information in the development of an educationally worthwhile activity or project. Conducted thoughtfully, the Portal Task successfully integrates theory and practice at the grass roots level of education.

Meier (1998, p. 596) argues that ‘schools were invented as a replacement for the most authentic forms of education - those that stemmed naturally out of family, neighbourhoods and work places. They were from the start, by their very
nature, artificial.' The utilization of the Portal Task as both educational process and product is a direct response to those critics who believe that schools continue to operate as irrelevant and artificial social institutions where the focus on *learning* often takes a back seat to a preoccupation with *teaching*. Portal Tasks aim to develop and promote student teacher connectedness and commitment to a form of active learning which will one day, hopefully take centre stage in their own classrooms. Undertaken with thoughtfulness and enthusiasm, the Portal Task is a vehicle through which teacher education programs make the connection between the content of the discipline and the pedagogy that enables the most effective learning to occur (Ramsay, 2000).

**Conclusion**

As in most parts of the world, consultations with Queensland parents, teachers, learners, business leaders, politicians and community members have revealed a general dissatisfaction with current education institutions (Schofield, 2000). As society changes, so too does the nature and purpose of schooling. This paper argues that such change may best be facilitated through the comprehensive and relevant training of the teachers who are entrusted with the vital role of nurturing and enhancing student learning.

In response to calls for teacher education reform, the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at Central Queensland University has collaboratively developed a teaching degree with a unique focus on the management of student learning through engagement with performance tasks. These Portal Tasks are designed to intellectually and physically involve student teachers in learning experiences which are closely linked to the realities of classroom life. Throughout the degree, Portal Tasks will require the development of significant networks and partnerships within the university, schools and the local community.
It will be interesting to trace the implementation and potential educational impact of the Bachelor of Learning Management over the next decade and beyond. If the educational research produced throughout the previous 20 years is accurate, and BLM interpretation of its recommendations is productive, then future teachers will be well equipped to provide the positive experience of schooling, which will motivate young learners throughout their lives. The BLM and its unique Portal Tasks is one attempt to improve student outcomes, school effectiveness and the quality of education through a more intellectually engaging program of authentic learning experiences. Built on a foundation of collaboration, the BLM seeks to redress a university ownership of teacher education by offering a teaching degree genuinely based on an equal partnership between university and school. The Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at Central Queensland University is optimistic that this degree will begin the extensive, but vital process of education reform in Australia. Ongoing research and reflection will ultimately gauge the success of this undertaking.

References
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