

# **7 | ADDRESSING THE MISCONCEPTIONS CONCERNING THE TEACHING SCHOOL IN THE BACHELOR OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT**



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# 7 | ADDRESSING THE MISCONCEPTIONS CONCERNING THE TEACHING SCHOOL IN THE BACHELOR OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT

## Abstract

In 2001 Central Queensland University commenced a new pre-service teacher education degree, the Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM). A 2005 Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) study of the BLM indicated that the positive results being achieved by the degree may be, at least in part, accounted for by strong linkages between theory and practice and an authentic partnership between the university and the teaching profession. The most misunderstood, perhaps even controversial, aspect of the partnership between the university and the teaching profession is the concept of the Teaching School. This paper discusses three misconceptions related to the Teaching School with a view of clarifying its purpose, operation and the benefits for all its partners.

## Introduction

The lack of connection between the content being taught at university and the knowledge and skills the profession demands is a criticism of pre-service teacher education. The effectiveness of the 'practicum' university students undertake during their undergraduate degree is often at the core of this critique (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training 2007, pp.70-73). Despite the fact that students often highlight the time spent in schools as the most relevant to their degree, just 'doing time' in schools is no more than an apprenticeship model that replicates the prevailing model of teaching and schooling. Proponents of the BLM argue that these models are no longer sufficient in current times (Smith, Lynch & Mienzakowski, 2003; Lynch & Smith, 2005); the reality is changing them in difficult. The plethora of school renewal literature, including government policy, accompanied by little evidence of real change, is proof of this difficulty (Hanushek, 2000; Rosenholtz, 1985). This is not to criticise the efforts of those in the profession who deliver learning outcomes in complex and difficult circumstances. In the emerging knowledge and creativity-based economy (Drucker, 1994; OECD, 1996; Hargreaves, 2003), 'keeping up' with new knowledge, let alone applying it, is difficult due to the sheer volume of information being generated. Rather it is to confirm that teachers are working in a system that is struggling to change despite evidence that the current paradigm needs reform.

The Teaching School is a deliberate attempt to achieve two outcomes. Firstly it is designed to bridge the theory-practice divide in pre-service teacher education. It does this by ensuring BLM students are not just 'doing time' in schools by engaging them in meaningful and assessable

activities known as Portal Tasks, that contribute to their developing a capacity to close the gap between knowing and doing. Secondly the Teaching School engages those working in schools in a professional learning community discussing new knowledge they otherwise may not have the capacity (the time or resources) to discuss with peers and BLM students. In this way it has the potential to assist educational systems and schools to implement new curriculum practices, policy or educational strategies (Turner & Lynch, 2006).

The Teaching School model emerged from the partnership between one of CQU's campuses and schools in that campus's Education Queensland district. The executive of the teacher education faculty at CQU made the decision in 2006 that the model should be further refined and implemented consistently across all six of the sites at which the university delivers the BLM. In attempting to achieve this strategic outcome a number of misconceptions about the Teaching School concept became barriers to its implementation. The misconceptions became evident through conversations with CQU staff and staff in schools associated with the BLM. This author, given the task of leading the project to implement the Teaching School across all BLM delivery sites, considers the reasons for the generation of these misconceptions were the consequence of either a failure to communicate the model effectively and gain support for its introduction, or a deliberate attempt to resist a change, or a combination of both. Some misconceptions were also articulated by staff in other universities, as well as in professional association publications (Harvey, 2007).

Before addressing the misconceptions about the Teaching School it is appropriate to consider five inter-related elements of this model for reference. Points of difference to the traditional 'practicum model' are highlighted.

### **Description of the Bachelor of Learning Management Teaching School Model**

The first of the five elements that differentiates the Teaching School from the traditional practicum model is that a cohort of BLM students is placed in the school. This cohort, typically six to eight students, has regular contact with an assigned Teaching School, usually for an academic year. This attachment may consist of weekly contact and periods of 'blocks' of time. A block may be three weeks of continuous contact with a class within the school similar to the more traditional practicum. Placing students as a cohort is an important element of the model as it establishes a professional learning community focused on key knowledge to be acted upon in the Teaching School. The extended period of time the BLM student is in contact with the school is also important as it counters the detached "experience" a short practicum offers the student.

The second element is a Portal Task. This is an assessment task related directly to a university course that has to be enacted in the real setting of the Teaching School. The Portal Task focuses the learning activities of the BLM student, and their mentor teacher, and is the principal element in the Teaching School model. It is the Portal Task that identifies the learning BLM students are to demonstrate in the real setting of the professional workplace.

The third element is a practicing professional who coordinates the activities of the Teaching School. This person, a Lead Learning Manager (LLM), is typically a teacher employed at the Teaching School. The LLM is the link between the school (in particular the mentor teachers) and the university's programme. The LLM coordinates the placement of BLM students, orientates mentor teachers and BLM students to the requirements of the Portal Task and organises learning opportunities for the BLM students. The university financially compensates the LLM for coordination of the Teaching School, an important element of which is the weekly Learning Management Session. It also offers them an expanded professional role and learning opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup>Education Queensland is the state of Queensland's publicly funded system of schooling.

The fourth element is the Learning Management Session (LMS). These sessions typically are meetings of an hour duration facilitated by the LLM for the BLM students and are often conducted at the end of the school day. The LMS provides an opportunity for students to be inducted into the school, debrief their Teaching School experiences and observations of the day, and orientate the cohort to the successful completion of the Portal Task.

The final element, and in reality the one that precedes the other four, is the underpinning enabler for the model. This is the partnership between the university and the school. This partnership functions at three levels. At a governance level it involves schooling system executives, curriculum authorities and professional associations. Such relationships ensure currency of the university programme, and have the potential to align the professional learning community established in the Teaching School to strategic priorities of government policy.

At the school district level the partnership links local educational priorities and events to some of the activities of the Teaching School.

The partnership at the school level is where operational issues are played out. The university would be in discussion with the LLM towards the end of the school year about placements in the following year. In this way the university has an indication of the placements available for BLM students in the following year and the capacity for the university to discuss with the LLM the profile of incoming students, individual learning needs if there are any, and negotiate appropriate student placements. This allows schools to indicate to the university their needs, and how it can contribute to the programme in the following year, taking into account staffing changes and school level priorities. Certain Portal Tasks in the BLM programme may better align with school level priorities meaning the school may wish to mentor students in a particular year of the BLM programme.

Having outlined the nature and characteristics of the Teaching School three misconceptions about the model are now discussed.

### **The Quality Assurance Misconception**

The quality assurance misconception is concerned with a perceived “handing over” of pre-service teacher education responsibilities to school personnel. Fundamentally it is a concern that the rigor and quality assurance of BLM programmes are jeopardised with the involvement of an increased number of personnel outside the teacher education faculty. This is also an argument for protecting the professional domain of university staff and the underpinning theory of the programme.

An underlying element of this quality assurance misconception is related to the Teaching School’s role in attempting to close the theory-practice divide at programme level. A closing of what Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) label “the knowing - doing gap” has an impact on the work university staff undertake. The ‘knowing’ is encompassed in the knowledge, research and scholarly activity understood as the domain of university staff. The ‘doing’, is about ensuring the knowledge is acted upon. Constructing ways in which BLM students demonstrate they can apply the knowledge in real school settings requires professional partnerships with schools and schooling systems beyond those which have been traditionally developed by the university.

A second element of this misconception is the suggestion that the utilisation of school personnel means a loss of rigor in the teacher education programme as the majority of teachers do not have postgraduate qualifications. This element contends that accessing school personnel potentially compromises the university’s position as the holders of the important knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> Teaching Schools in the Sunshine Coast North education district have hosted cohorts of in excess of twenty students.

<sup>3</sup> Generally this is school term two and three in Queensland with some overlap into term 4, but the final year programme also gives students access to the start up period at the beginning of the school year in January/February.

A third element is based on the fact that the Teaching School Model utilises potentially many schools and therefore the university faces an issue with consistency in the delivery of learning in the Teaching School. While this may be a reasonable argument it is countered by the fact many organisations achieve consistency in products and services across national and international boundaries through their internal systems and technologies <sup>4</sup>. Central Queensland University and the Teaching School model also have in place systems and technologies to achieve quality assurance and consistency follows.

- The Portal Task (Assessment Task) is defined by the university, supported by university teaching, marked by university staff and moderated through university quality assurance processes. There can be no variation to the Portal Task.
- There is a university induction process for all LLM. University staff have regular contact with Teaching School, and they are the first port of call for questions relating to the university programme <sup>5</sup>.
- The university provides guidelines about topics to be covered in the Learning Management sessions conducted in the Teaching School, and online content supplements these topics <sup>6</sup>.
- Teaching School Coordinators are as bound by course requirements and moderation processes, as much any other member of the academic staff teaching a course would be.

Some variation between schools is indeed possible due to the contextualisation of learning in the school setting. This is preferable to the 'one size fits all' approach that on-campus teaching of the same material results in. The professional discussion that may follow the BLM student's induction to the Teaching School's behaviour management policy has valuable application when compared to the generic discussion a member of the university faculty would be able to offer in an on-campus session.

### The Responsibility Misconception

The second misconception is that partnership with the university simply results in more work for teachers and schools, without any contribution to the school or profession being made. It is this perceived abdication of university responsibility to the profession that this author has labelled 'the responsibility misconception'. The perception of 'more work' for schools does not consider a number of important factors related to the partnership between the school and the university.

The Teaching School does require a different kind of contribution from school staff in relation to preparing teachers, than that required by the practicum model. There are two main differences in the demand upon the school in the Teaching School model. One is that instead of the pre-service teacher completing a short practicum with a teacher, they are attached to the school for a substantially longer period of time, usually two to three school terms. The second is that the partnership requires the LLM to coordinate the activities of the Teaching School and facilitate the achievement of the outcomes specified in the Portal Task on behalf of the university.

The university, at least in part, financially compensates for the responsibility the LLM has in the Teaching School model. The remuneration provided for coordinating at the Teaching School during the period of time the BLM students are attached to the school, is an acknowledgement that the LLM takes on additional duties in their school when they undertake this role.

<sup>4</sup> See Charles Darwin University at <http://eschool.cdu.edu.au/> for an example of how a web based resource for schools and university students can be used to ensure consistency in a Teaching School model implemented at the university.

<sup>5</sup> The university academic responsible for the induction of the Lead Learning Manager, and maintenance of the relationship between the teaching school and the university, is the "Teaching School Coordinator".

<sup>6</sup> Content is also provided through "Blackboard" the university's online learning system.

More importantly there is a potential professional benefit for teachers and a strategic benefit for the school and schooling system beyond any monetary compensation that the university makes. Three examples are offered to illustrate this potential.

One of the assessment tasks in the first year BLM programme require students to implement a 'Learning Management Plan' for an individual student over a period of a school term. Schools have used this Portal Task to achieve school level outcomes by training BLM students in a programme that skills them in supporting reading development, after which they are able to work with identified students to support their learning. The completion of the university's Portal Task thereby contributes to the school's literacy programme.

A second example is that regular contact with a class over a period of more than two school terms provides an additional human resource for the classroom teacher. Due to this extended time that allows for induction into the school, the development of an understanding of classroom practices, and the building of a rapport with students in the class, it has been observed that teachers adjust their classroom routines to take advantage of this human resource.

A third example of how the Teaching School Model may benefit schools is embedded in the difficulties that effecting change in schools brings to school leaders and is related to the translation of knowing what has to be done into action. Articulated policy and financial investment in school change agenda's often do not result in change in professional practice. Aligning the Portal Task to education policy offers an additional strategy to support change. On one level this alignment ensures that graduating students develop the capabilities schools want. In addition, the professional learning community established in the Teaching School adds another level of professional activity and conversation that supports the initiative's implementation (Turner & Lynch, 2006).

The Teaching School Model is not an abdication of university responsibility, but rather an opportunity for the BLM student to close the theory-practice divide, and the school, or schooling system to use the Portal Task to also deliver on its strategic outcomes.

### **The Apprenticeship Misconception**

The amount of time BLM students spend in the Teaching School, especially when compared to the short blocks of time the traditional practicum offers, has resulted in the misconception that the BLM is school-based teacher education or an apprenticeship model (Harvey, 2007). The equating of extended periods of contact with Teaching Schools to the traditional master-apprentice relationship is a simplification, and illustrates significant misunderstanding about the BLM's content, delivery and rationale. Such an assertion overlooks the critical BLM element of the Portal Task.

The apprenticeship is a transfer of knowledge and skills and, in essence, is about ensuring an individual's competency in a particular skill set. Stephenson (1999) compares 'competency' to 'capability' and states that competency is the ability to deliver known outcomes in a known context. The BLM's developers are clearly not looking to this outcome. The intent to "no longer prepare teachers" (Smith, Lynch & Mienczakowski, 2003) is an indicator that the BLM developer's intent is to achieve Stephenson's (1999) capability, the ability to solve unforeseen and complex problems in unknown contexts, in BLM graduates. The intent is not recreating a skill set as an apprenticeship model would.

In one recently published critique of the BLM the author was selective in his use of an ACER report (Ingvarson, et al 2005) to link the BLM to school-based teacher education (Harvey, 2007). Harvey's critique contains an error as well as omitting many of the substantive points the report's authors make about the quality and nature of the BLM programme and why it is successful. For example, Harvey states that the "study finds that BLM graduates are much better prepared than traditionally prepared graduates from CQU" (2007, p 40). The error is that the study finds BLM graduates are better prepared than graduates from all traditional teacher

preparation programmes examined in the study, not just traditionally prepared graduates from CQU programmes, in that Ingvarson et al (2005) said:

*'Non-BLM' includes aggregated data from all teacher education courses in Queensland universities. There was significant variation across the teacher education programmes on each of the measures used in this study (p.76).*

The omissions are very important aspects of the programme that Ingvarson et al (2005, pp.79-83) identify as those which account for the positive outcomes the BLM is achieving; an emphasis on training in a core model of effective pedagogy, active engagement in learning how to use the model, and an authentic partnership between schools, employing agencies and the university.

## Conclusion

Analysis in the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocation Training report into teacher education, *Top of the Class* (2007) revolved around a number of key issues including partnerships between the profession, those preparing the profession, and the community.

The challenge for academics involved in teacher education programmes, and those already in the profession, is to firstly accept that the status quo is no longer defensible. The traditional practicum, with little if any connection between the university programme and the professional experience it offers, is an apprenticeship model in fits and starts.

The BLM Teaching School Model has been one notable attempt to address the theory-practice divide prevalent in the teacher education literature, through its design and the partnership with the profession. Available evidence (Lynch, 2004; Ingvarson *et al* 2005; Turner & Lynch, 2006) would suggest it is successfully closing the divide. It should not be dismissed because of the misconceptions outlined in this paper.

The authors of the ACER study (Ingvarson *et al*, 2005) commented on Central Queensland University's willingness for the BLM to be scrutinised by the study.

*We approached this evaluation with a fair degree of skepticism. The teacher education field tends to be higher on rhetoric than substantiated evidence about what works and – from our initial reading of literature from Central Queensland University – it seemed the BLM developers had set a new benchmark for enthusiastic rhetoric.*

*However, this confidence was matched by a willingness their approach to an independent evaluation. Given the findings of this evaluation this confidence has proved to be well founded. (Ingvarson et al: 2005 p.78)*

The *Top of the Class* (2007) report suggests a need for a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of different models of teacher education. This was a recommendation in the first study into the BLM by Lynch, (2004). Central Queensland University would support such research into the BLM and the Teaching School model.



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