

Teaching Practice as Communities of Inquiry

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ABSTRACT Often teaching practice is seen as a single, linear process and not as a multi-connections process with focal points at various sub-components of the process. Within each component, education world-wide is faced with pressures which are controlled and managed at most or partly or never managed. Although these pressures or challenges are numerous and complex, the level of challenge or pressure varies. In this paper the researchers argue that teaching practice as a component of teacher education needs to be framed as communities of inquiry, in order to underscore the interconnectedness and reflexive nature of the teaching practice environment, and how such an approach would enhance organisation and insights into the teaching practice process, and could therefore be applied as an organiser of teaching practice (TP) in an open distance learning (ODL) context.

INTRODUCTION

Just like the Industrial Revolution, which called for the redesign of schools in order to prepare a labour force for new forms of work and citizenship, the present global technological period calls for new forms of education to prepare a locally and globally-oriented workforce and citizenry. Wagner (1993: 24) reiterates this as follows:

“Now, in another era of rapid economic and social transformation, the business world finds that it must adapt to new technologies, changing markets and global competition. This new revolution in the workplace, in turn, suggests fundamental reforms for education.”

Not only should educators consider the competencies required for active social change and citizenship, but also changes in both the capacities of students and incentives for learning. Educators must further face ongoing changes in the workplace, in the requirements for global citizenship, in the nature of knowledge creation, and in the needs and concerns of students (Wagner 1993).

Tabulawa (2008) concurs with Wagner. He avers that “the 21st century education programme needs to develop a self-programmable learner, who has attributes such as creativity, versatility, innovativeness, critical thinking abilities, problem-solving skills and a positive disposition towards teamwork – all attributes deemed essential in today’s changing work environ-

ment.” It is for this reason that the education system envisaged developing and cultivating such attributes, as well as other attributes that are of critical importance in democratic societies, and are aimed at social advancement and the wellbeing of society, which must be robust and focused. Among other important educational aspects, the teacher education component must be based on democratic and open-ended inquiry knowledge-creation processes, which regard teachers not only as key role-players in the learning process, but also as co-learners with their learners – both mainstream and physically impaired learners.

Although this trajectory does not make reference to learners with disabilities (LD), it is our understanding and conviction – via the paper’s evidence of effective teaching practice as communities of inquiry – which educators and teachers in LD learning institutions could benefit from this discussion and become better informed. The researchers are of the opinion that communities of practice – both an inclusive and inquiry practice approach in teaching and learning – are better grounded in ensuring that LD is not marginalised from the circle of multi-connected partners and reflexive processes of teaching practice inquiry. Note that the concept of “communities of inquiry” is deliberated further on in this paper, but now the researchers shall turn to brief nuggets of teacher education and teaching practice, communities of practice and distance education (“Nuggets”, because these issues are

explored in depth in separate subsections further on in this paper).

VARIED INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CONCEPTS UNDERPINNING THIS EXPLORATION

In order to focus and delineate the scope and depth of this exploration, it is necessary to discuss the following concepts:

Teacher Education: Numerous clarifications of what teacher education is and what it entails are advanced by various scholars of education. Perraton (2003: 4) seems to understand teacher education as an education that considers the expectations of both educators and their pupils; helps educators serve as role-models; transforms education and, via education, society; further develops changed attitudes of educators and learners with regard to their work and education respectively; and encourage their self-confidence and creativity. This notion of what those involved in teacher education should cultivate in learners, seems to reiterate Wagner (1993) and Tabulawa's (2008) observations with regard to the goal of education.

Perraton (2003: 4) further alleges that, "in order to educate and train with this goal in mind, teacher education and training programmes ought to entail four elements, namely the improvement of the general education background of student teachers; the growth of the students' knowledge and understanding of the subjects that they will be teaching; the pedagogy and understanding of children and learning; and the development of practical skills and competencies." Of note, is the fact that the balance between these four elements varies in relation to the education background of the student teacher; the level at which she/he will be teaching; and the professional development stage she/he has reached in her/his teaching practice experience. These elements are obviously honed during the teaching practice period, and thereafter in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) process.

In this paper, teacher education is seen as a deliberate programme to professionally transfer skill to a human resource that will develop educators who are capable of cultivating self-confidence and self-programmable learners, with attributes such as creativity, versatility, innovativeness, critical thinking, problem-solving skills

and a positive disposition towards teamwork. These are learners who are taught not only to depend on another to provide them with jobs, but to create jobs for themselves and others. Note that teamwork is of critical importance for multiple connections of partners in a teaching practice process that is reflexive.

Teaching Practice: Teaching practice is either seen as an aspect of work-based learning or as meaning the same "thing" as work-based learning, irrespective of the context of practice. Koosimile, Monyatsi, Ngwako and Chakalisa (2003: 3), state that teaching practice is a teaching "internship" and/or "fieldwork" undertaken by "prospective teachers", and it forms an essential component of all the teacher education programmes offered by an education institution.

The (former) Department of Education's document, *Government Notice No. 30353* (South Africa 2007: 3) views teaching practice as work-integrated-learning (WIL), and describes WIL as incorporating "periods of required work that integrate with classroom study". However, the University of the Sunshine Coast (2014) regards both WIL and internship as components of work-based learning. The University of the Sunshine Coast also refers to WIL as "work experience in industry or industry-based learning", while Flinders University in Australia refers to WIL as "work-based" learning. However, the University of South Africa (Unisa) (2008) seems to have greater clarity as to what WIL experiences constitute. Unisa (2008) states that WIL "is an umbrella term, used at Unisa to include experiential education/teaching strategies, such as clinical training/teaching practice, internship, professional practice, experiential training/learning, supervised learning/practice and work-based learning".

Therefore, in this paper, teaching practice is viewed as an aspect of WIL and not as the whole of WIL. It is seen as an example of one of the kinds of WIL that takes place in an education context. Hence, the term, WIL, is seen as too broad to encapsulate teaching practice experience obtained in schools. Therefore, the collaboration is referred to as "communities of inquiry" (interconnectedness of components as reflexively reflected upon to guide ongoing organisational and execution of tasks towards improved outcomes). Teacher education departments are therefore expected to define and outline the philosophical underpinning of their

teaching practice endeavours, in order to ensure that clear and focused understanding is not merely meaningful, but also based on a sound theoretical education foundation.

Distance Education: Matthews (2002: 2) posits that distance education is a movement that seeks to expand the traditional university in order to overcome its inherent problems of scarcity and exclusivity. Hall (in Matthews 2002) claims that distance education is also a creative political response to the increasing inability of the traditional university structure to grow, and went on to point out that “distance education dealt with the problem of too many students in a single physical space”. He further attests that distance learning is emerging as mainstream education (2000: 2). The researchers note that the term, “distance learning”, seems to be used interchangeably with “distance education” by Matthews (2002). Garrison (1989: 2) claims that, “while virtually every attempt to define distance education refers to the separation of teacher and student, many (scholars) also reflect upon other illuminating perspectives”, such as that (1) distance education implies that the majority of education communication between teacher and student(s) take place non-contiguously; (2) distance education should involve two-way communication between and among and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the education process; and (3) distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication.

Given the diverse nature of the teacher-education-student cohort in higher education, good teaching practice needs to be seen as the interconnectedness of all components, in order to allow for reflexive inquiry. It furthermore ought to encompass a range of delivery methods in a variety of contexts for a wide range of students. These multiple student-centred learning approaches (for example: blended learning; learning connections; peer-to-peer knowledge exchange; and learning teams) are aimed at enabling students to access a range of flexible learning options (UniSA Progress Report 2005).

Boyer (1990) reiterates this view, as well as the need for an education process that provides learners with multiple models for success. He further argues that insights, provided via multiple ways of looking at issues in teacher education (and teaching practice), provide valuable insights for teaching and gives the assurance

that cooperative “work-together scenarios” are encouraged at distance education (and open-learning institutions, rather than the enforcing of narrow and rigid teacher education discourses, whether at a non-open distance learning (non-ODL) institution or in an ODL environment. However, Matthews (2002) cautions that there are factors that could be perceived as challenges in distance learning, namely: the quality of distance learning; distance learning being perceived as labour intense; questions as to how effective distance education is; the competencies of the drivers of distance learning; pedagogical versus commercial forces; the high-level of staff training; the development of learning support materials; inaccessible libraries; equity of access for students; inadequate reflection, conversation and intellectual dialogue; maintaining sufficient student contact; intellectual property rights; inadequate financial aid policies; and globalisation. These factors will not be entertained in this exploration. However, the researchers acknowledge them as some of the challenges that need to be well-coordinated within the multi-connections of the components and reflexive inquiries that form part of the teaching practice. The researchers shall now engage ourselves with the ensuing subtopic, so as to try and indicate the link between communities of inquiry and teaching practice.

THE LINK BETWEEN TEACHING PRACTICE AND COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY

Fulton (2006: 354) argues that “the making of a teacher relates to two major categories: the institutional context in which pre-service training takes place (also the institutional context of the school); and the programme of pre-service education and training (namely the purpose, content and approach to teacher education in general and in ODL in particular).” Teaching practice as being both an aspect of the content and the process of teacher education is given priority in this exposition. However, the aim is not to give a detailed statement of aims for teacher education and training, as this would not be universally appropriate, nor could the universal appropriateness of these aims always be appropriate for a contextually-based setting.

Reiterating this observation, Fulton (2006: 346) posits that “it is unlikely that a detailed

statement of aims for teacher education and training would meet with universal approval because of the value judgements that are inevitably involved". He then pronounces on what it is believed to encapsulate, as well as that which embodies the teacher education and training agenda world-wide as:

- ♦ the ability to fit into the existing school situation with some degree of security; master knowledge to teach, as well as expertise in the methodology of teaching; and having acquired communication and interpersonal skills;
- ♦ the ability to review new curricula, new methods, as well as new learning activities, and to respond in an informed and thoughtful manner to proposals for change; and
- ♦ as the basis for future professional development, such as knowledge and skills (pedagogic and academic needs).

Fulton emphasises the need for student teachers to come out of their education and training programme, fully conscious of the fact that they need to commit themselves to professional development (2006: 346). This is a necessary caution, since the majority of teachers see professional growth in their teaching merely through monetary value, and not so much as acquiring valued capabilities towards their development as humans. It is during the pre-service stage that student teachers should be introduced to quality teacher development initiatives so that, by the time they enter the teaching profession, they are fully aware and ready to develop themselves in a lifelong process, in order for them to remain quality educators in the changing global education landscape.

Needless to say that some educationists argue that the guidance and evaluation of students during their practical teaching – that is the teaching practice experience – are seen as wanting, and that the range of teaching practice activities should perhaps be broadened, so as to give student teachers the opportunity to learn a wider "repertoire of skills than those necessary to teach formal lessons". This could offer the opportunity, not only to provide student teachers with a repertoire of skills to teach, but also with capabilities to develop professionally within a context of lifelong learning. Fulton further argues that student teachers often complain that they are not taught how to teach, when in fact they mean they did not get the chance to

put their knowledge into practice and discuss their efforts reflexively with skilled and sensitive tutors or mentors. The researchers concur with Fulton that the continuing interaction between student and mentor ensures that students can try out their skills, knowing that they will be given assistance to overcome the difficulties they may face. Hence, the importance of well-trained mentors and supervisors – that is those who visit the student teachers in the schools to assess their teaching practice experiences and progress, and who form part of the communities involved with teacher training programmes.

The researchers also agree that, "if teaching practice is to help towards producing effective teachers, then opportunities will have to be provided for students to practice a wide range of skills related to the classroom and to the school, to discuss reflexively the planning of lessons and programmes with mentors from both colleges and schools, to use insights from theoretical study and to analyse classroom tasks and take appropriate action; that is to earnestly stimulate the student teacher's role in learning to teach more convincingly" (Fulton 2006: 353). According to Perraton (2003: 3), teacher education and training have a two fold relationship with schools, namely to influence them and to react to them. Student teachers visiting schools are expected to be mentored by experienced school teachers, both should become directly involved in teacher education and, "whilst this involvement may reduce the likelihood of conflict between teacher colleges or teacher training universities and schools, this relationship has also been criticised as a weak opportunity of changing school culture through external influence". This is probably not a fair criticism, because schools influence society in an immense manner, and they are, in return, influenced by society, because they exist within societal perimeters of societal knowledge.

In this paper the researchers argue that communities of inquiry are the various multiple stakeholders in teaching practice, and provide the interconnectedness of these via reflexive processes of continuous and informed change. The researchers can only caution that any influence should always be aimed at improving the quality of teacher education practice, and should not be abused for selfish reasons and personal gains. Examples are when student organisations go on strike just because they do not want to

write end-of-year/semester examinations, or when teachers down tools because a colleague has been found guilty by a court of law of student sexual harassment. It is therefore necessary that effective communities of inquiry processes entail the following:

- ♦ **Learning Connections:** These are all the stakeholders in a teaching practice activity. They are policymakers, accreditation officers, curriculum developers in education, education managers, academics, quality assurers in education, publishers of teacher education resources, school managers, teachers (mentors of student teachers in schools), and community members with a vested interest in teacher education. A deliberate effort to note and acknowledge the contributions of these learning communities cannot be over-emphasised with a view to meaningful and successful teaching practice. The researchers, however, need to caution that not all these communities might be required for all the activities that teaching practice is charged with.
- ♦ **Work Experience Learning:** This activity is defined differently, because of its context-based meaning. In industry, it is also referred to as an “apprenticeship”, as trainees are expected to acquire work experience during their time spent in the industry. In teacher education, some scholars refer to it as “work-integrated learning”, because the student teacher is expected to acquire teaching skills and competencies. Whatever the researchers prefer to call this activity, the outcome seems to be the same, namely to gain first-hand work-related experience of that which the trainee/student teacher will need upon taking up a teaching post, following training. This experience is one of the many components of teaching practice.
- ♦ **Blended learning:** Although some student teachers might not have access to some of the available technology to improve the quality of their teacher education and training, technology remains a corner-stone of blended learning – that is blending non-technological and technological pedagogical methodologies in learning. Perraton (2003: 18) reiterates that, “in making an educational choice, the key distinction is between the use of technology to distribute teaching materials, and allowing two-way

mentor-student communication and, possibly, student-student, interaction”. This document (2003: 18) further argues that “technology is useful only if both the institution and the learner have appropriate access to it”.

- ♦ **Collaborative Learning:** It involves partners, who are, most of the time, influencing and controlling the learning process or the knowledge acquired as learning communities. Note that the learning experiences are also shaping the actions of student teachers and of all those involved.
- ♦ **Whole-school Learning:** It involves integrated learning, by the school communities, of all the facets of the school. Learning communities need to understand multiple perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge and knowledge creation. In this paper, whole-school learning also integrates learning from teacher training universities.

Boyer (1990: 80) aptly captures the effectiveness of shared communities of inquiry upon observing that a campus-wide, collaborative effort with regard to teaching would be mutually enriching. A similar case can be made for cooperative research, as investigators talk increasingly about “networks of knowledge” – even though individual creativity is recognised and affirmed, and actions or processes of learning are reflexively debated by communities of teaching practice. Integrative work, by its very nature, cuts convincingly across disciplines and components of knowledge production processes. The researches concur with Wenger that communities of practice could be perceived as groups of people who share a common concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly via the activities they are involved in and that they are trying to shape (Wenger 2006). But instead of teaching practice regarded as a community of practice, the researchers hold that communities of inquiry are more than just a “community” – that is components in one community. The researchers argue that different communities are brought to one focal point of interest, namely an inquiry regarding their teaching practice task. The emphasis is on the inquired reality and not so much on the community.

The characteristics that Wenger proposes for a community of practice are seen as characteristics of each of the various communities of

inquiry, and they constitute a vehicle for developing strategic capabilities, aimed at successful teachings practice outcomes. Caution is, however, expressed about the fact these have been adapted for communities of inquiry:

- ♦ Communities of inquiry enable collaborating practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, recognising that they are in the best position to do this.
- ♦ Communities of inquiry create direct links among practitioners and between learning and desired outcomes, because the same people or communities participate in the community of inquiry, as it is broken down into units of tasks.
- ♦ Practitioners can address the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and sharing, as well as the more explicit aspects thereof.
- ♦ Communities of inquiry are not limited by formal education structures. They are able to create connections among people, across organisational and geographical boundaries, with the aim of focusing on the investigation of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), as student teachers acquire their teaching practice experience.

SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING (SOTL) AND TEACHING PRACTICE

Confusion among academics about what exactly constitutes the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is regarded as an obstacle to greater educator involvement in SoTL at any institution (McKinney 2007). Hence, the plethora of views on what constitutes SoTL, the researchers offer a few caveats in this paper regarding this aspect of the discussion. Boyer (1990: 16) argues that scholarship means engaging in original research. Taking scholarship and teaching further, Nelson and Robinson (2006: 78) posit that SoTL is the “purposeful construction of a community in which scholars can converse about the creation, dissemination and application of research into teaching and learning that enhances both student learning and faculty experience with teaching”.

In the context of this paper, this means those communities of scholars, for example the Department of Teacher Education (at a university)

and the Department of Educational Studies (at a university); embark upon joint research efforts in teaching practice.

Because teaching practice is perceived as a component of SoTL, or as integral to teaching and learning, McKinney (2007) seems to agree that SoTL is not scholarship unless it is integral to research into teaching and it is made public. This view is congruent with the notion that regards the purpose of SoTL as the application of what the researchers learn in order to enhance student learning and development (2007: xix). What the researchers learn could be in the classroom – how the researchers teach; what and why; the how, why and what our students learn; and the how and why our classrooms are organised in the way they are – therefore calls for student teachers to learn and develop professional classroom research scholarships.

Of course there are varied interpretations of SoTL that exist among different scholars in the field of teaching and learning. McKinney (2007: 5) cautions that such diversity ought to be a good thing, in that it brings to the fore the fact that the functional nature and meaning of SoTL would, in any way, vary in accordance with its disciplinary, departmental, institutional and national context. Citing Huber and Hutchings (2005), McKinney posits that the field or discipline is likely to be stronger with a definition and understanding of SoTL that are as inclusive as possible (2007: 5). Boyer (1990: 5) proposed a framework for SoTL, based on the scholarships of discovery, application and integration. These scholarships may be perceived as a teaching and learning-based inquiry.

According to Hubber and Hutchings (2005: 1), SoTL is noted as “viewing the work of the classroom as a site for inquiry, asking and answering questions about students’ learning in ways that can improve their own classroom and also advance the larger profession of teaching”. Matin, Benjamin, Prosser and Trigwell (in McKinney 2007: 6) stated that SoTL relates to “engagement with the existing knowledge on teaching and learning, self-reflection on teaching and learning in one’s discipline, and public sharing of ideas about teaching and learning within the discipline”. Weston and McAlpine (in McKinney 2007: 6) observe that SoTL seems to provide a continuum of growth and development to the practising of SoTL, and that this takes place in three stages: “growth in one’s own teaching;

growth in dialogue with others about teaching and learning in the discipline; and growth in the scholarship of teaching – developing scholarly knowledge with substantial impact in both the disciplinary and institutional settings”.

What the researchers mean by teaching practice (TP) as SoTL, is that what is happening in classrooms during TP, should be reflected upon by those involved in TP. It should also be carefully examined and documented, in order to improve TP and further guide teaching and learning (teaching practice) in ODL institutions and other higher education institutions offering teacher education. Therefore, communities of inquiry in teaching practice are regarded as entities that would enable interconnections among scholars with similar interests (such as quality teacher education), so as to collaborate on research into different aspects of teaching practice, and to build meaningful learning spaces for student teachers, while enhancing continuous formative processes to shape their practices and those of their students. The researchers, however, caution that SoTL goes beyond scholarly teaching and involves the systematic study of teaching and/or learning, the public sharing and review of such work via presentations, publications or performances within academia and in public, as well as sharing knowledge about teaching, service and research that was accumulated through teaching practice as communities of inquiry.

SoTL should be explicit in teaching practice within an ODL teacher education context. Shulman (2004: 157) reiterates this view when they argue that the rationale for undertaking SoTL (in this case arguing in favour of teaching practice as SoTL) lies in professionalism, since it is the professional obligation of teachers to be scholars in their disciplines; even more so in that SoTL is pragmatic, since it is practical and it helps teachers in sharing their experiences gained via practice and, in the process, improves their teaching and learning skills. It is needless to say that via SoTL, communities of inquiry can provide the essential evidence of their practice, in order to make informed decisions about education policy imperatives in teaching and learning (teaching practice). Perry and Smart (2007: 4) also attest to the “urgency for evidence-based decision-making on practical issues related to teaching and learning to replace the experiential, anecdotal, ‘common sense’ sense evidence used for decision-making in the past”.

CONCLUSION

Effective and result-oriented teacher education and training is undeniably an important service to humanity. Therefore, SoTL should be defined in ways that recognise the interpretative and integrative work of teaching and learning. According to Boyer, to be a scholar is to be a researcher – and continuous investigation into teaching practice scholarship is the primary yardstick by which scholarly productivity is to be shared and tested in shaping the course of teaching practice. Our intention with this paper is for the dialogue about teacher education and teaching practice in ODL contexts to continue grappling with the notion of teaching practice as communities of inquiry, with a view to enhancing quality teacher education and training outputs.

No single entity can achieve much in the practice of teacher education, but all parties with a vested interest and parties, who can improve their civic duty, are called upon to contribute to this field and maintain the agency and creation of cutting-edge knowledge, which is critical for the present and future of humanity’s welfare. The researchers have deliberately ignored weaknesses of communities of inquiry in this paper, because our thinking is that, “working together to achieve a common goal”, seems to outweigh by far any weaknesses that might be inherent in communities of inquiry. However, we encourage readers who might want to engage themselves in such literature to consult some of the works cited in this paper, as well as other literature that is pertinent to this observation. It is observed that “teachers and students alike are profoundly moved by the desire to serve the democratic community, and that all the colleges (higher education institutions) boast of the serviceable men and women they have trained, and regard the serviceable patriot as their ideal product”. Not only are teachers and student teachers proud of their achievements in providing a highly required service to society, but society itself is very proud to be part of the process and output.

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