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## **“I didn’t realise they knew so much”: What pre-service teachers learn through interacting with students in classrooms.**

### **Abstract**

Research on what pre-service teachers learn through authentic experiences in classrooms is overwhelmingly dominated by reports on what they learn from listening to and interacting with supervising teachers. However, there is a dearth of research specifically describing what they learn through their interactions with students in the classrooms. This paper draws on a three year empirical study conducted at a rural Australian university which investigated how learning teaching practice is not only informed but formed through interrogating the theory-practice nexus in enactment. A key finding was that by focusing critically on listening to and interacting with students within the intersubjective spaces of classrooms rather than on the act of teaching, pre-service teachers shifted their perspectives on what teaching practice entails.

### **Objectives or purposes**

This paper aims to illustrate the nature and extent of pre-service teachers learning about teaching from their accounts describing what they have learnt from listening to and interacting with students in classrooms. We draw on findings from a larger study of teacher education practices conducted by Charles Sturt University’s Faculty of Education which called for teacher educators to reconceptualise their approaches to developing core skills and practices of teaching (Ball & Forzani, 2010; Grossman et. al. 2009; Reid, 2011; Zeichner, 2010). The study was developed based on the fundamental premise that it is through quality interactions with students in classrooms that teaching efficacy is constituted. The idea of learning to observe and listen to students in classrooms is not new. ‘Kidwatching’ (coined by Yetta Goodman, 1978) emerged and evolved over time as a concept which encompasses listening to and observing students with the aim of assisting teachers learn to develop responsive practices and enhance their professional work. However, ‘kidwatching’ has remained a province of teachers rather than as a focused approach for strengthening the learning of pre-service teachers. Moreover, although quality interactions are recognised as a feature of effective teaching, it typically receives little dedicated space for development across many teacher education programs. Research has shown that a limited focus on developing effective classroom interaction leads to a tendency for pre-service teachers to enact, predominantly by default, more traditional communication practices in placement classrooms (such as didactic teacher dominated talk). Their interactive practices are often based on replicating known patterns of interaction experienced in their own school education (Love, 2009).

Interestingly, research reporting on pre-service teachers observing and listening to students in classrooms appears to be mainly locating in analysing videoed lessons (Xio, 2013), or in lessons focused on the subject of Mathematics (Harkness & Wachenhrin, 2007; Ryan, Kassem & Sarland, 2003) or music (Haston & Russell, 2012). This paper is an attempt to re-theorise the development of quality teaching practices in teacher education (Author, forthcoming) and to illustrate how a focus on *practising* interacting with students in classrooms influences what pre-service teachers learn about teaching from listening to and interacting with their students in their school placements. Furthermore, we aim to show how learning to listen and learning to interact in contextually relevant sites is critical for bridging and extending the theory-practice nexus. We argue that to know about the role of classroom interaction for learning is simply not enough, what is required are overt *designed-in*

opportunities for pre-service teachers to focus on learning to listen, observe and interact with students in classrooms.

### **Perspective(s) or theoretical framework**

In recent years, a new line of enquiry in practice theory offers a new way of conceptualising practice. Among others, Green (2009), Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) and Schatzki (2002, 2010) have sought to show how practices – like practices of teaching and learning – are held in place by distinctive preconditions which enable and constrain particular kinds of interconnected activities, language and relationships which together constitute a practice of one kind or another. Theoretically, the paper draws on the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Author, et.al. 2013) which proposes that practices – like teacher education and teaching - are informed and shaped by particular *cultural-discursive* arrangements (the sayings of a practice), *material-economic* arrangements (the doings of a practice) and *social-political* arrangements (the relatings encountered in practice) which prefigure, but not determine, the practice. In this vein, the multidimensionality of the practice arrangements of learning to teach during school-based professional experiences is explored. This theory seeks to understand teaching and learning practices in the sites within which they happen *as they happen*; that is, the existential and ontological dimension of practice (Kemmis, 2012). Through empirical material, the paper seeks to provide dynamic descriptions of the particular conditions that stimulate and support the practice development of pre-service teachers through their interactions with students in classrooms.

Specifically, the paper will present participant accounts and how the particular practice arrangements of interacting with students in classrooms form the intersubjective mechanisms for understanding how learning about teaching take place. This view of practices aims to provide the means to analyse practices like teacher education and to discover the conditions (the practice architectures) which make them possible. Practically, we will examine the nature of the interactions pre-service teachers have with students in classrooms as a platform for learning about teaching, learning about learning and connecting this to theory. The paper will highlight what pre-service teachers learn from listening to and interacting with students in classrooms and the value they place on this as formational for understanding teaching from their first session of study.

### **Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry**

The study design was premised on a need for pre-service teachers to overtly focus on developing quality dialogues with students in classrooms. In this project, volunteer pre-service teachers were guided to pay close attention to the details of the discourse actually spoken by teachers and their students in classroom exchanges. Pre-service teachers, in mentoring pairs, then ‘practised’ interacting with small groups of four to five students in their classrooms. The focus for the pre-service teachers was on listening and interacting rather than on teaching or being assessed as typical in practicum placements. Primarily, the project was designed as an action research project designed to provide first year pre-service teachers with weekly opportunities to:

- participate in overt instruction about classroom interaction;
- focus observations of teachers in classrooms on the dimensions of interaction, which included ‘learning to listen’ to what students said, the language used, how they interacted with each other;
- develop quality dialogic practices through authentic learning experiences with small groups of students in classrooms; and

- talk with peers and classroom teacher mentors through mentoring conversations (critical reflection and mentoring feedback).

These weekly in-class observations, practise sessions and mentoring conversations (after Timperley, 2001) were conducted over 12 weeks in the first session of their Bachelor or Education degree.

### **Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials**

The study was a three year qualitative research and drew on a range of qualitative research methods, including participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) . Data collection periods were mainly conducted in the first semester in each year of the study. In particular, observations of volunteer first year pre-service teachers interacting with small groups of students in classrooms and observations of pre-service teachers participating in mentoring conversations with their supervising teacher were conducted. Data from the audio-recorded small group interactions between pre-service teachers and their small group of students (24 in total) were transcribed as a record of the actual discursive production of the talk-in-interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Freebody & Freiberg, 1995). Each classroom teacher and pairs of volunteer pre-service teachers were issued with a small video/audio recorder ( Flip Camera) for the duration of the study to record the conversations and small-group interactions. Informed consent was provided by pre-service teachers, teachers, principals, students and care-givers.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers and academics, and focus group interviews with pre-service students were conducted after the in-classroom sessions were completed at the end of the university semester. These data were audio recorded and transcribed. Over the three year period of the study, participants included 346 pre-service teachers (who participated in the in-class program) of which 24 pre-service teachers (arranged in pairs) volunteered to audio-record their small group interactions with students in classrooms. Other participants included 16 classroom teachers, six academics and the group of 346 pre-service teachers who participated in the final survey conducted after their in-class experiences.

This paper specifically draws on follow-up semi-structured focus group interviews (Mertens, 1998) with three groups of volunteer pre-service teachers (18 participants in total) and 12 classroom teachers. These interviews were conducted to build participant accounts and associated attributions of participant experiences and explanations of the practices in focus (Freebody, 2007).

### **Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view**

The research revealed the learnings elicited by first year pre-service teachers about the value they placed on firstly, ‘actually’ practising interacting with students in classrooms; and secondly how they attributed much of what they had learnt about teaching to the focus on learning to listen and interact with students. In general it was found that the many underlying beliefs held by pre-service teachers about what teaching actually entailed were re-conceptualised as a result of the in-class focus on listening to and interacting. In particular, the following themes from a thematic analysis of interview and survey data emerged; pre-service teachers:

1. acknowledged that they had to learn to listen, it didn’t come naturally.
2. acknowledged that they had to learn to interact, for many it was taken to granted and didn’t come naturally.
3. highlighted that listening was a foundation for understanding student knowledge; many didn’t realise (and were surprised by) what students actually knew about the range of topics. They

were of the belief that the role of the teacher was to deliver curriculum rather than the ‘find out about the learner and what they knew prior to teaching’.

4. highlighted they had learned about the importance of responsiveness in teaching; that is, by listening closely to what students said in interactions provides valuable information to which teachers should respond.
5. articulated a deepening understanding that classroom interactions form an intersubjective mechanism for teaching and learning.
6. reconceptualised classroom interaction as a pedagogical tool, rather than a taken-for-granted dimension of being a teacher.
7. articulated an understanding of the duality of their roles as both a teacher and as a learner.

For the pre-service teachers in this study, to conceptualise their understandings of the interactivity and sociality of pedagogy, they needed to engage in, practise, reflect on and analyse classroom practice at the “primordial” level of classroom interaction (Freebody & Freiberg, 1995). This study provides timely outcomes in that it documents the pre-service teachers’ reconceptualisations of teaching and learning as interactive practice. The research also has important implications for ways in which pre-service teachers theorise ‘practices of learning’ and ‘practices of teaching’ from the early stages in their formation as teachers. In this vein, to undercut ongoing issues of teacher efficacy in the future, classroom interaction and learning to listen to students needs to move more directly into focus in Teacher Education. To do this Teacher Education policy needs to ensure courses lead pre-service teachers to construct and develop educational encounters which demonstrate a metacognitive awareness of the role of listening and interacting, and moreover provide overt ways for pre-service teachers to practise these in authentic classroom contexts.

### **Scholarly significance**

The results directly inform the global debate which focuses on the efficacy of pre-service teacher education. In particular, in this paper we challenge teacher education in its propensity for taking for granted the importance of creating focused opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn to listen and interact with students in classrooms as an *existential and ontological* foundation for learning to teach. For us, broadening teacher education practices to more explicitly account for listening to and interacting with student in classrooms - without the constraints of assessment - must be addressed to advance educational development globally.

Importantly, this study informs the field how pre-service teachers both learn to listen and interact with students in the moment-by-moment interactions encountered in classrooms. It was found that framing the in-class experience around dialogic practices and situating these in the classroom as a site for learning teaching practice made the focus authentic and timely for first year pre-service teachers. The paper illustrates the importance of connecting theoretical propositions made within teacher education programs with the authentic interactions between pre-service teachers and students in classrooms as a significant nexus between theory and practice. The challenge for teacher educators is ensuring the role of quality teaching is developed across courses as a theoretical proposition which guides teacher educators and pre-service teacher’s understandings and thus their bases for efficacy in enactment. In making these claims the paper invites further exploration of practice development and in particular core practices of teaching and learning such as listening and interacting.

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