Theorising the Practicum in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper questions whether the practicum can deliver valuable professional learning experiences for preservice teachers. My recent research indicates that practicum learning is often left to chance and many learning opportunities are wasted. It appears that frequently the practicum is a time of tension, frustration, confrontation, acquiescence and mis-communication. An immense investment of time and energy by preservice teachers is necessary for a successful practicum and a complete rearrangement of lifestyle and responsibilities is often demanded. Rather than being left to chance, the practicum should be a time when clearly articulated outcomes are aspired to and achieved through timely quality guidance and support. Yet there has been limited interrogation of the process of the practicum beyond ‘taken for granted’ expectations developed from uncontested traditional understandings. This has led to a range of untheorised and inequitable experiences for preservice teachers with mentors (who also invest much time) reporting that the guidelines and anticipated learning outcomes are unclear.

It is important that preservice teachers and their mentors are helped to ‘make sense of’ the practicum so that a clearer understanding of its purpose and what it can deliver emerges. To progress this view I have devised nine ‘principles of practicum learning’ and a learning cycle based on the sharing of stories of practicum learning that have been created from classroom observation and considerable critique and analysis from preservice teachers, their mentors and their teacher educators (Rorrison, 2007). Through acting upon the themes that emerged from the stories with the critical questions of ‘how did it get to be this way?’ and ‘who is benefiting?’ robust theories that create spaces and opportunities for practicum learning are presented. Understandings around the receptivity of school cultures, contemporary views of young people as learners, productive mentoring and the importance of collaborative relationships between the schools and the universities help re-vision teacher education to make sense of the practicum.

There is no certainty in a democratic learning environment but what is exposed is the need for teacher education to reflect on, harness and learn from the complexities of the practicum. With little evidence to support secondary practicum learning and much anecdote doubting its effectiveness, I was tempted, before this study, to suggest that we replace the directionless and time consuming experience akin to ‘jumping through hoops’ with more worthwhile culminating experiences. I realise now that I missed the point. The practicum sits within a very full and demanding teacher education course structure and on the periphery of a complex and only partially understood education system. What are needed are changes in attitude and ways of conducting practicum relationships through agreed and explicit practicum learning principles. With a refined sense of teacher identity and an awareness of the role of context, culture and the socio-political dimensions of learning to teach during the practicum, the preservice teachers, supported by their teacher
educators and enabled by their school based mentors, will begin to understand why the hoops spin as they do and take pleasure in spinning them anew.

Introduction

This research project grew out of concerns that the practicum in preservice secondary teacher education was failing to offer what it promised. As a teacher educator I struggled to make sense of the disparate views of practicum learning voiced by those involved in universities and schools as well as the opinions and attitudes of those not involved, but seemingly attempting to direct the process of practicum learning. My research has uncovered that it can be a time of tension, frustration, confrontation, acquiescence and mis-communication while other’s write of a time of conflict, violence, irreconcilable differences, undermining, normalising and mimicry (Phelan and associates, 2006). Preservice teachers talk about ‘jumping through hoops’. Rather than being left to chance, the practicum should be a time when clearly articulated outcomes are aspired to and achieved through timely quality guidance and support. I have detailed elsewhere (Rorrison, 2008) that ‘there has been limited interrogation about the purpose of the practicum beyond ‘taken for granted’ expectations developed from uncontested traditional understandings’ (p. vii) resulting in a range of under-theorised and inequitable experiences for preservice teachers and their mentors. What I want to do in this paper is present in more detail the project I designed to observe the players in the field, write about the practicum experience of preservice teachers in accessible ways, check my understandings with those who have an interest by encouraging them to voice their own perspectives, and then ask questions about what this means and how it came to be like this. In this project I also hoped to provide some ideas from my research about how things might be done differently based on better understandings rather than expedient ‘solutions’. My findings are presented as nine principles of practicum learning and are an antidote to the proliferation of top down governmental policies that have hi-jacking the professional decision making of teacher educators. In the process I would also like to debunk the ‘tool-box’ remedies that feed these policies.

Research into the practicum is fraught with difficulty. We have a culture of assessment that results in both teachers and preservice teachers being suspicious of observation. Initially I had planned to also involve school students in my research through focus groups but my pilot study identified that the complexity of the story that school students wanted to tell suggested I was mining too deeply for the practicum ‘problem’ that was the topic of my research. Some of the issues identified through the pilot focus groups with school children are available in the publication ‘Turning a critical lens on the practicum in secondary pre-service teacher education programs’ (Rorrison, 2005). From over 200 hours of secondary and middle school classroom observation I wrote six ‘stories of practicum learning’. These were critiqued by preservice teachers, their mentors and their teacher educators. Robust theories that support practicum learning and create spaces and opportunities for preservice teacher learning and transformation, emerged. These re-vision a pedagogy of practicum learning and make sense of the extremely complex process of the practicum. Issues
and inconsistencies that have previously worked to disempower preservice teachers and undermine practicum learning were uncovered.

The research process

The data collected in this research project were presented and analysed in four ‘layers’ (see table 1). The first ‘layer’ was the field notes from practicum observations. While I acknowledge that the very act of ‘noticing’ and ‘not-noticing’ renders this data as partial from ‘unconscious lenses’ that sort and interpret the observations, I justify the approach by presenting and analysing the data through a multi-layered design. The second ‘layer’ of data are presented as six fictional composite stories of the practicum. Again one could question vested interests as the data are organised and massaged into stories by the researcher/author from her view of the world. Consequently the third ‘layer’ of data consists of the annotations (written messages, comments, additions and other responses that varied from sweeps of the pen, arrows, erasures, circles, ticks, crosses, highlighting, sticky notes and question marks) as well as emails and phone calls that presented the perspectives of 35 readers who responded to the stories. These reader/respondents made 2,878 responses from their view of the practicum while reading the stories. It is these responses that are the focus of the research. Firstly the responses were sorted into meaning units. On interrogation of the language and connections between meaning units, themes or meaning concepts emerged as a more sound foundation for data analysis. The final step was the engagement of the critical questions of the reflective cycle, where the emergent themes from the perspectives of the reader/respondents were rubbed against the research questions through applying the critical questions. A number of themes were distilled from this process resulting in nine practicum learning principles or recommendations.

Table 1 Layered Analysis

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tentative practicum learning statements are designed to help articulate practicum learning outcomes more clearly and highlighting a new view of practicum learning</td>
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<th>Layer 4</th>
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<tr>
<td>Patterns, themes and meaning concepts that emerge from comments and annotations of preservice teachers, teachers, mentors and teacher educators and others, are acted upon by the critical cycle to uncover a new view.</td>
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<th>Layer 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>The stories are read by preservice teachers, teachers, mentors, teacher educators and ‘others’ who offer to comment on them. These comments are sorted and analysed through their connections with the orienting questions.</td>
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The project was designed to be sensitive to the complex and busy lives of the readers, avoiding as much as possible adding to the stresses of these lives so their voice would be authentic, not rushed or resentful. This issue of educators being ‘time poor’ is difficult to manage. Teachers and teacher educators are notoriously reluctant to divert time from their students, yet to include the necessary complexity and development of the lifeworlds of preservice teachers, mentor teachers and school students necessary for this study, as well as a wide range of classroom and school cultures, the themes and characters in the stories needed to be more dense and complex than the critical incidents, problem based scenarios and case-studies that teachers and preservice teachers have previously been asked to respond to. The stories needed to be engaging and meaningful enough to convince the readers to invest the necessary time to read the more dense and complex narrative. I am aware from my own research and reflection (Rorrison, 1996; Rorrison 2002) that real change is a product of much effort and experiences beyond what is comfortable or easy, and attempted to make this clear when introducing my project to prospective reader/respondents.

Making sense of data is an effortful process and relies on asking questions of the data so that new ideas, or new views on old ideas, emerge. Tacit understandings and the purpose of the study are important aspects in managing data yet the overwhelming consideration is to let the data speak and allow ideas to be illuminated beyond what we already know and accept as reality. The value of the findings of this study to the research community and to the education of preservice teachers was continually being reflected on, as the data was theorised in rigorous, ethical and trustworthy ways. Ely and her associates warn that we should not expect meaning to emerge from our data ‘like Venus on the half shell’ (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997 p. 205-6) but suggests that understanding ‘reside[s] in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them’. I saw my data as articulating their meaning through the actions of the critical cycle, actions that describe, inform, confront and reconstruct (Smyth, 1989, p. 486; Smyth, 1992) the unseen forces and practices that had positioned the practicum as ‘natural’ and immutable. By uncovering and challenging the ‘taken for granted’ beliefs and actions that currently positioned the practicum, new theories of practicum learning emerged.

Smyth (1987) warns in his earlier ‘critical’ work where he draws on a number of his contemporaries (Day, 1985; Apple, 1975; Giroux, 1981) that
None of this is to suggest that reflecting on the common place nature of what is normally taken for granted is not an unnerving experience, particularly when entrenched and even cherished beliefs about teaching are being subjected to scrutiny and challenged. (Smyth 1987, p. 20)

He goes on to suggest that it is the very act of critique as critical questioning that enables us ‘to acquire a capacity for self-understanding, and of the political struggles involved in bringing about changes’ (Smyth 1987, p. 21). More recently other researchers support this need for the researcher to first make sense of their own unconscious lenses and come to terms with their own unique positioning within the research landscape (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Cochran-Smith 2002b, 2004; Gore 1995, 2001; Martinez & Mackay, 2002).

When a critical approach is taken we recognise that the practicum is part of a political, social, cultural and gendered struggle that positions learning and learners in unclear ways. Framing and connecting the critical questions provides the link between the confusing, contradictory and complex descriptions of the problem and the reflective and reconstructive possibilities of counter hegemonic practices. As Smyth suggests ‘then they will have a basis upon which to engage in dialogue with one another so as to see how their consciousness was formed and how it might be changed’ (Smyth, 1992: 296).

Understanding how the ‘critical cycle’ and is used in this analysis of the reader/respondent comments on the practicum stories assumes some understanding of the development of critical theory in education. The writings of Smyth from 1987 offer a window into how ‘theory’ or ‘analysis and critique’ can turn a fresh lens on old problems. Smyth’s work throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s honed the reflective questions as they related to schools, teachers, classrooms, teaching and the learning of young people in schools. With origins in the work of Foucault (1980, 1984, 1992) who claimed that normalising is more insidious than authoritarianism in supporting the dominance of those who lack an emancipatory vision, and Freire (1970) who suggested that action that was not based on a carefully designed reflective process was mere activism and would not benefit the powerless in society, Smyth develops and applies a critical cycle based on four questions for action describe, inform, confront and reconstruct.

It is not my intention here to reproduce the work of Smyth who develops and strongly positions his arguments for the critical cycle in a number of arenas (Smyth, 1987, 1989, 1992) and later applies them as a ‘socially, culturally, and politically reflective approach’ (Smyth, McInerney, Hattam & Lawson, 1999a; Smyth, McInerney, Hattam & Lawson, 1999b). I also use this socially, culturally and politically reflective approach to focus a clarifying lens on the practicum by constructing a better understanding of the way things are, how they came to be that way, what this means, and how they can be re-visioned when we step back and look afresh. Issues of power and control in teaching and teacher education, coupled with beliefs in transformation and different possible futures, lead me to challenge the stagnation and hegemony of current practicum processes and the policies that guide them. By thinking about the data and acting upon it on the four levels prescribed by the critical cycle the partial understandings of the author/researcher are connected...
with the understanding of the reader/respondents to develop more general abstractions and new understandings emerge.

1) Describe – what do I do?

2) Inform – what does this mean?

3) Confront – how did I come to be like this?

4) Reconstruct – how might I do things differently?

(Smyth, 1992:295),

One by one the research questions are re-visited through the critical questions and the meaning concepts that emerged describing the relationships, connections, inconsistencies and silences in current practice allow us on further critique to uncover the understandings, beliefs, attitudes or habits that make things the way they are in the practicum. In this way we can begin to make sense of the non-sense of many of the practicum beliefs, actions and inactions. Smyth’s (1989) third ‘moment’, an act of confrontation – ‘How did it come to be this way?’ then leads us to confront whether what we do is legitimate, reasonable, informed, innocent or just. Here we draw on Freire’s (1972) term ‘problematising’ or situating the problem within its social, cultural, gendered and political context, asking who benefits or who is disadvantaged by these actions and what are the assumptions on which we base our decisions about practice. It is only with this understanding that the final ‘moment’ in this critical cycle, a moment of reconstruction and change, can begin.

This process resulted in nine recommendations or ‘principles of practicum learning’. The naming of these findings or proposals or ‘principles’ has resulted in much reflection. At first I named them practicum learning ‘statements’ but in end decided the word ‘statement’ was too definitive and authoritative. They are, after all, propositions or theories that result from the research. I finally decided on the term practicum learning ‘principles’ though I am still searching for a term that will clearly articulate the tentative and partial nature of the recommendations in view of the critical nature of the research.
**Practicum Learning Principle 1:** Productive and transformative pedagogies linked to transparent and robust theories of learning should be clearly constructed and the related teaching experiences carefully scaffolded for preservice teacher learning during the practicum.

**Practicum Learning Principle 2:** Collaborative relationships between schools and university schools of education should be underpinned by a shared understanding of how theory and practice intersect to inform teachers about engaging students in quality learning that will prepare them for a future of change, challenge and authentic learning.

**Practicum Learning Principle 3:** The different learning needs of preservice teachers must be recognised and they should be given the space at university and in the schools to learn about teachers’ work in ways that are empowering and transformative for their practice.

**Practicum Learning Principle 4:** Worthwhile outcomes must be established and clearly articulated for any observation and teaching experience during the practicum. The diverse cultural, socio-political and learning contexts of practicum settings should be transparent, valued and shared as part of learning about teaching.

**Practicum Learning Principle 5:** Universities, schools, teachers and teacher educators collaboratively share the responsibility for informing preservice teachers about the changing nature of school culture, classroom dynamics and student needs and how these render the practicum as problematic.

**Practicum Learning Principle 6:** It is the responsibility of teacher educators, as committed and informed teachers, to support classroom teachers to maintain a focus on preservice teacher learning while remaining involved in the practicum classroom. As joint mentors they will foster successful teaching and learning relationships while their mentees develop appropriate and effective pedagogy and sense of ‘self’ as a teacher.

**Practicum Learning Principle 7:** Conversations about the practicum learning experience can prepare preservice teachers to look with a fresh lens on contentious and previously ‘silenced’ issues. Narrative grounded in ‘truly conceivable experience’ and explicit principles about the practicum process are valuable teacher education resources.

**Practicum Learning Principle 8:** Carefully constructed ‘fertile’ questions and learning circles workshopping productive and transformative pedagogies can enable critical, reflective, professional and ethical learning conversations around practicum teaching experiences that will prepare preservice teachers with a more holistic and collegial view of teaching.

**Practicum Learning Principle 9:** Preservice teacher mentor workshops focussing on the
practicum learning principles will develop collaborative relationships between teacher educators and mentors and provide a better understanding of the practicum learning process.

Each of these Practicum Learning Principles emerged from the critical analysis of the meaning concepts and how they informed the four orienting questions of the research (see table 2). The first of the research questions ‘Are the theories and understandings of socially critical constructivist and transformative learning and productive pedagogies that underpin and drive teacher education at university, robust enough to support the preservice teachers as they move into the practicum?’ connected with six meaning concepts, sixty meaning units and 436 reader/respondent comments (15 per cent of the total responses). The second of the questions ‘How can preservice teachers be given the ‘space’ and opportunities to apply their understandings during the practicum?’ connected to four meaning concepts, a total of 74 meaning units and 409 responses (14 per cent of the total responses) while the third research question ‘What support and guidance from the school and mentors best leads towards the sense of ‘becoming’ a teacher?’ connected with 5 meaning concepts, 58 meaning units and a huge 644 comments or annotations (22 per cent of total responses). The final question that completed the cycle and reflected back on the genesis of the project (stories as a pedagogy for teacher education), ‘Can stories of a ‘sense of’ the practicum build a shared view of the process of practicum learning that resonates with a wide range of those who participate in preservice teacher education? Can the sharing of stories of the practicum ‘re-visions’ the practicum in the eyes of preservice teachers, mentors, teachers and teacher educators and thus benefit preservice teacher learning about professional practice?’ resulted in only two meaning concepts or themes, yet 45 meaning units and forty-six per cent of the total 2,878 responses. The reader/respondents themselves introduce thirty-five of these meaning units which suggests that they resonated with many ideas or meanings I had not anticipated.

The results of critiquing each of these questions through the four steps of the critical cycle is reported elsewhere (Rorrison, 2007), and space is not available here, however I will discuss the final step which led to the development of the ‘principles of practicum learning’.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Orienting Questions</th>
<th>No. of Meaning units</th>
<th>List of meaning units</th>
<th>Characteristics of meaning concepts as they relate to the questions</th>
<th>Total responses</th>
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Table 2 Analysis of Reader Response
| Question 1. Are the theories and understandings of social critical constructivist and transformative learning and productive pedagogies that underpin and drive teacher education at university, robust enough to support the preservice teachers as they move into the practicum? | 15 | [a] 1, 2, 3, 6, 11, 13, 38, 60, 95, 96, 106, 141, 180, 196, 231 | Theories that support learning, [a] Who is the preservice teacher? Sense of 'being' a teacher, who the teacher is, self doubt, vulnerability | 191 |
| | 9 | [c] 5, 37, 51, 55, 70, 170, 175, 218 | [c] What teach? Content/complexity | 60 |
| | 4 | [d] 158, 198, 179, 197 | [d] Where? School culture, | 4 |
| | 25 | [e] 23, 45, 152, 171 | [e] Power issues (critical) | 24 |
| Question 2 How can preservice teachers be given the 'space' and opportunities to apply their understandings during the practicum? | 44 | [a] 19, 42, 82, 93, 97, 98, 16, 27, 29, 31, 46, 69, 52, 54, 56, 58, 62, 64, 74, 75, 78, 79, 84, 94, 100, 119, 121, 128, 145, 160, 188, 189, 190, 194, 202, 209, 210, 211, 224, 225, 226, 230, 235, 237 | Spaces, opportunities in the practicum. What are they learning? [a] Practicing pedagogy | 269 |
| | 3 | [b] 8, 223, 204 | [b] Observing | 31 |
| | 17 | [c] 10, 12, 18, 47, 49, 63, 81, 84, 86, 122, 164, 186, 192, 193, 199, 200, 215, | [c] Understanding teachers work | 47 |
| | 11 | [d] 15, 36, 80, 110, 140, 151, 156, 203, 205, 214, 232 | [d] School context | 62 |
| =74 | | [e] School culture of receptivity is imp | Total 409 | 14% |
| Question 3 What support and guidance from the school and mentors best leads towards the sense of 'becoming' a teacher? | 40 | [a] 17, 20, 32, 34, 39, 53, 66, 68, 71, 72, 73, 92, 114, 115, 118, 127, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 139, 146, 147, 149, 154, 165, 166, 173, 174, 181, 182, 183, 185, 216, 221, 227, 233, 234, 235, 236, | Support, guidance, mentors, school culture, useful, not useful | 351 |
| | 14 | [b] 9, 26, 50, 65, 77, 83, 88, 116, 137, 143, 162, 172, 201, 219, | [b] Quality of mentoring | 244 |
| | 2 | [c] 99, 191 | [c] Class management issues | 7 |
| | 1 | [d] 120 | [d] Mentor preparation | 14 |
| | 1 | [e] 7 | [e] Other preservice teachers for support | 28 |
| =58 | | | Total 644 | 22% |
| Question 4 Can stories of a 'sense of' the practicum build a shared view of the process of practicum learning that resonates with a wide range of those who participate in preservice teacher education? Can the sharing of stories of the practicum 're-vision' the practicum in the eyes of preservice teachers, mentors, teachers and teacher educators and thus benefit preservice teacher learning about professional practice? | 36 | [a] 102, 103, 104, 105, 108, 109, 111, 112, 113, 117, 123, 124, 125, 126, 134, 135, 136, 138, 142, 144, 148, 150, 153, 155, 157, 159, 161, 163, 176, 177, 184, 169, 207, 212, 213, 229 | Narrative, inform, revision [a] Narrative as inquiry and information | 1260 |
| | 9 | [b] 22, 24, 33, 90, 101, 178, 206, 208, 228, | [b] Silenced issues highlighted | 65 |
| =45 | | | Total 1325 | 46% |
'Are the theories and understandings of socially critical constructivist and transformative learning and productive pedagogies that underpin and drive teacher education at university, robust enough to support the preservice teachers as they move into the practicum?'

Critical Question 4: Reconstruct - what could be done differently?

When we reflect on the themes that emerge from this research question related to the theories offered by the university to support preservice teacher learning in the practicum, it emerges that it is not the ‘robustness’ of the theories that is in question but the failure of the players in the field to harness the potential of the new ideas that are directing thinking about education and schooling. Preservice teachers and their mentors know about the theories and can relate to what logically and ethically could occur in schools but there are indications that there is still doubt about why these critical understandings should be played out in teaching practice. It appears from the analysis of the responses of the readers of the ‘stories of the practicum’ that teacher professional development may be providing teachers with the tools for applying new curricula and processes, but there appears to be little evidence of the deeper more reflective moments that change beliefs and ideology and that result in making sense of the theories in light of personal practice. Likewise, teacher educators need to make transparent the theories of learning and productive and transformative pedagogies in their own teaching if they are to establish credibility for their theories. Loughran (2006) discusses this issue in his most recent publication and stresses that teacher educators need to better understand what they do if they are going to teach teachers. It is necessary that those who purport to ‘teach teachers’ have a clear understanding of the complexity of how teaching and learning are played out in a learning relationship. If clearly articulated ‘theories of secondary practicum learning’ that are cognisant of the needs and current understandings of preservice teachers and their mentors could guide this experience, then we could begin to offer a practicum that can deliver what it promises.

**Practicum Learning Principle 1:** Productive and transformative pedagogies linked to transparent and robust theories of learning should be clearly constructed, and the related teaching experiences carefully scaffolded, for preservice teacher learning during the practicum.

**Practicum Learning Principle 2:** Collaborative relationships between schools and university schools of education should be underpinned by a shared understanding of how theory and practice intersect to inform secondary teachers about engaging students in quality learning that will prepare them for a future of change, challenge and authentic learning.
Orienting Question 2
How can preservice teachers be given the ‘space’ and opportunities to apply their understandings during the practicum?

Critical Question 4: Reconstruct- what could be done differently?

In terms of giving the preservice teacher the ‘space’ and opportunities to apply their understandings during the practicum it appears we need to do things differently. The very experiences that render the practicum as problematic should to be seen as part of the learning tapestry. The multiple roles of the teacher and the mentor, the variety of reactions from the school students, the unequal power relations, the lack of consensus around what makes a good teacher, the range of school cultures, the receptivity of the setting and the deconstruction of observation as a learning opportunity, can all be turned to advantage learning. Indeed, the diversity and complexity highlights the possibilities inherent in the practicum. Preservice teachers will benefit most from school experience if they are able to problematise its situated nature and learn from it. Questions of why schools are the way they are, what leads us to construct school students the way we do, how teacher identity is developed and played out and how the presence of a preservice teacher impinges on the school and classroom culture, need to be addressed. A distillation of these inquiries will help demystify some of the issues around the purpose and outcomes of the practicum and may reduce the tensions in the setting. Preservice teachers, like all learners, should be engaged in experiences that are purposeful, meaningful and self directed so that they can construct new ideas and make connections with their current practice. I believe this was part of Diero’s (1996) call for a significant level of autonomy for preservice teachers and Loughran’s (2006, p.33) suggestion that ‘affirming personal autonomy [is] crucial to understanding teaching as professional practice’. Loughran goes on to support the use of case studies to ‘help to frame the problematic as liberating; the possibility for learning more about teaching emerges through the diversity of others’ experiences’ (34). As indicated earlier, this is precisely my intention. The purpose of the ‘stories of the practicum’ is to offer lived experience to be deconstructed and reconstructed by teacher educators, mentors and preservice teachers to help them inform their practice. By critiquing lived experience I hope to unveil the inconsistencies, connections and silences and use this new understanding to inform teacher education knowledge and practice. I believe I have uncovered that this can occur, despite and because of the challenges and diversities of setting.

To progress this idea I recommend a workshop process based on the ‘stories of the practicum’ prior to the practicum for preservice teachers and during mentor preparation for secondary school teachers. In the stories we have trustworthy evidence of the sorts of things that are happening during the practicum. One of the reader/respondents (teacher educator, over 50 years, female, booklet 22) recommends use of the stories to ‘challenge students to write their own stories…’ and ‘use over and over again, after each practicum, to highlight the new and different understandings they gain’. Ennie, who is a teacher educator in Holland, also recommends a key words index so that preservice teachers can refer back to scenarios when they experience similar incidents to help them during their reflections. A preservice teacher in Adelaide, Australia shares this
sentiment. Her mentor shared one of the stories from the booklet with her, as he believed it highlighted many of the issues that she would need to address during the practicum. She has since requested a copy to refer to, to refresh her about incidents and issues that will support her learning. These are the ways I suggest the stories and the developing principles of practicum learning can open up conversations to progress practicum learning and help preservice teachers understand the complexity and uncertainty of teaching.

If we revisit this second orienting question in light of these new understandings, previously uncontested practicum practices around the opportunities provided for preservice teachers to apply their learning about teaching in diverse classroom settings, are questioned. To support my assertion that we can learn to do things differently, I propose two further practicum learning principles.

**Practicum Learning Principle 3:** The different learning needs of preservice teachers must be recognised and they should be given the space at university and in the schools to learn about teachers’ work in ways that are empowering and transformative for their practice.

**Practicum Learning Principle 4:** Worthwhile outcomes must be established and clearly articulated for any observation and teaching experience during the practicum. The diverse cultural, socio-political and learning contexts of practicum settings should be transparent, valued and shared as part of learning about teaching.

Orienting Question 3

What support and guidance from the school and mentors best leads towards the sense of ‘becoming’ a teacher?

Critical Question 4: Reconstruct- what could be done differently?

A completely new attitude to the preparation and selection of mentors and placement of preservice teachers in schools is indicated here. If preservice teachers are going to be able to ‘practise’, succeed, struggle, discuss, reflect and try again, they must be supported and guided by mentors from both the university and the schools who can empathise with the challenges they face. By remaining involved in the classroom learning process, both teacher educators and mentors can better support and progress preservice teacher development as a teacher coming to understand teachers’ work. By thinking about the practicum classroom as a learning experience rather than a testing ‘tool’, preservice teacher learning becomes the central focus of the practicum. Both the universities and the schools need to ensure that those involved with the practicum are quality educators, reflective practitioners and committed mentors who can relate to the preservice teacher, collaborate with other teachers and teacher educators and engage with a range of theories of learning while representing the profession in a moral and informed way. It appears that we need to find ways of sustaining interest in teaching and mentoring preservice teachers both in the universities and in the schools. Consistency and agreed processes within the practicum should be developed from frank discussions and research designed to uncover ‘the way things are’ and ‘what might be done about it’. When it is recognised that quality mentoring is a shared responsibility of the university and the schools and the purpose of the role is
not ‘enculturation’ or ‘testing’ but instead a ‘futures focused’ application of contemporary theories, then the practicum is more likely to deliver what it promises.

Two more principles of practicum learning are added that begin to focus on the roles of the teacher educator and the mentor teacher.

**Practicum Learning Principle 5:** Universities, schools, teachers and teacher educators collaboratively share the responsibility for informing preservice teachers about the changing nature of school culture, classroom dynamics and student needs and how these render the practicum as problematic.

**Practicum Learning Principle 6:** It is the responsibility of teacher educators, as committed and informed teachers, to support classroom teachers to maintain a focus on preservice teacher learning while remaining involved in the practicum classroom. As joint mentors they will foster successful teaching and learning relationships while their mentees develop appropriate and effective pedagogy and sense of ‘self’ as a teacher.

**Orienting Question 4**

Can stories of a ‘sense of’ the practicum build a shared view of the process of practicum learning that resonates with a wide range of those who participate in preservice teacher education? Can the sharing of stories of the practicum ‘re-vision’ the practicum in the eyes of preservice teachers, mentors, teachers and teacher educators and thus benefit preservice teacher learning about professional practice?

**Critical Question 4: Reconstruct- what could be done differently?**

The results of this research project point not only to the value of narrative but the potential of this narrative inquiry to uncover new understandings and deepen our knowledge around the practicum. Not only is a range of previously silenced issues given voice but also a number of previously ‘naturalised’ issues have been viewed with fresh eyes. Kincheloe (2004: 62) calls for more sophisticated ways of thinking about practice, warning as I have, that the purpose of the practicum ‘is not to indoctrinate practitioners to operate in a particular manner’ but to encourage preservice teachers to reflect and examine a wide range of theories and understandings about how theory and practice inform each other. Loughran (2006) also calls for a better understanding of the practical aspects of teacher education though, in my reading, apart from presenting student crafted anecdotes from the practicum, fails to position the practicum adequately in his otherwise inspiring view of the potential of ‘teaching teachers’. Only through really understanding the relationship of the practicum experience and how it is located within the university teachings, can teacher preparation claim the relevance and transformative learning it promises. Teacher educators also need to understand their role in relationships of power within the practicum settlement, and how lack of clarity frequently results in the outcomes being left purely to ‘chance’, a disempowering experience for prospective teachers.

The stories of the practicum experiences of the fictional yet authentic preservice teachers provide honest and trustworthy examples of the confusing and unpredictable nature of everyday teaching practice. It becomes clear that there is no certainty in a democratic learning environment and what is exposed is the need for
teacher education to reflect on, harness and learn from the complexities of the practicum. With little evidence in the literature to support the secondary practicum and much anecdote that doubted its effectiveness, I was tempted before this study to suggest, as others have done, that we replace the directionless and time consuming ‘institution’ with more worthwhile culminating experiences for preservice teachers. This was why I asked the question:

*What are the learning experiences that the practicum should deliver? How can this best be achieved? Can a ‘theory of practicum learning’ be developed that reaches beyond the individual schools or universities schools of education, to give a voice in education reform, policy and community education to those currently silenced?*

I realise now that I too missed the point. The practicum sits within a very full and demanding teacher education course structure and on the periphery of a complex and only partially understood education system. What are needed are better understandings of the attitudes, beliefs and practices of those involved so that changes in attitudes and ways of conducting the practicum relationships become possible. By situating understandings within tentative new theories of the practicum learning process, teacher educators and preservice teachers can together uncover the issues, interruptions and inconsistencies that have previously worked to disempower these novice teachers. With a refined sense of teacher identity and an awareness of the role of context, culture and the socio-political dimensions of learning to teach during the practicum, preservice teachers, supported by their teacher educators and enabled by their school based mentors, will begin to understand why the hoops spin as they do and take pleasure in *spinning them anew.*

Principles 7 and 8 focus on the use of the stories of the practicum while principle 9 reintroduces the concept of mentor professional development.

**Practicum Learning Principle 7:** Conversations about the practicum learning experience can prepare preservice teachers to look with a fresh lens on contentious and previously silenced issues. Narrative grounded in ‘truly conceivable experience’ and explicit principles about the practicum process are valuable teacher education resources.

**Practicum Learning Principle 8:** Carefully constructed ‘fertile’ questions and learning circles workshopping productive and transformative pedagogies can enable critical, reflective, professional and ethical learning conversations around practicum teaching experiences that will prepare preservice teachers with a more holistic and collegial view of teaching.

**Practicum Learning Principle 9:** Preservice teacher mentor workshops focussing on the practicum learning principles will develop collaborative relationships between teacher educators and mentors and provide both with a better understanding of the practicum learning process.
Is it a journey, spinning hoop or chance?

This paper reports on a research project that has progressed through a number of layers, from developing truly conceivable stories from trustworthy data, through exploring the uncertainty, inconsistencies, struggles, misinformation, tensions and messiness of lived experience in the light of patterns that emerged, to the creation of practicum learning principles that offer a tentative theory and direction for the practicum. The most important elements of a theory that might drive practicum learning is an acceptance of the view that each situation is quite different, yet there are similarities that can be highlighted to provide powerful new ways of understanding the practicum experience and abstracting the particular to the wider practicum view.

By helping preservice teachers to gain complex understandings of teachers’ work in a way that does not focus on teaching as a set of strategies or bag of tricks, but as an holistic knowledge about the physical, cognitive, affective and socio-political domains of learning, they are empowered to see beyond their previous limited conception of what teachers do and their view of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a teacher (Practicum Learning Principle 6).

Also central to this new view is the development of a truly collaborative partnership between the schools and university schools of education that is underpinned by shared understandings of well-informed theories of education and transformative practice. Such a model allows preservice teachers to develop views that understand theories of learning and practice as integrated and connected, not separate and competing. In this way previous concepts of secondary school practicum ownership and the power struggles that ensue might be dispelled. Policy guidelines and directions that purport to settle for all time our understandings about teaching and learning by pre-packaging teacher education as one size fits all, will be seen as fraudulent. Expedient ‘apprenticeship’ models that rely on the good faith of time poor, unwilling and partially informed classroom teachers who are struggling themselves with the demands of continuous change and increasingly disengaged young people, have little to offer the robust preparation of our teachers. Even the highly acclaimed observation process during the practicum has been challenged by the results of this study. It would appear that teachers frequently do not wish to be observed and preservice teachers need to have more choice around what they observe (Practicum Learning Principle 4) and how (and by whom) they are observed.

There are a number of other aspects of teacher education that can be treated differently if we are cognisant of the new understandings that have emerged from this project. In Australia, each university’s school of education works individually with schools and there is very little sharing of ideas at the university level. Indeed, in many ways there is a culture of ‘competition’ rather than cooperation especially as the practicum placements available in schools are becoming more difficult to organise. While policy documents are recommending more days in schools, universities are offering teacher education in ‘fast-tracked mode and students are struggling with financial and time issues, mentors are also becoming increasingly difficult to find. Different universities are trying different initiatives to reduce the problem and the burgeoning ‘distance education’ courses are increasing the pressure on individual schools. Universities have trialled paired
practica and have organised programs further a field (sometimes to the chagrin of the local university) and some have sponsored remote placements. Such placements can be quite a complex cultural experience and while not wasted in terms of the personal development of preservice teachers, they can struggle to offer the necessary learning experiences due to lack of support or cultural knowledge. With no clearly articulated and agreed ‘theory of practicum learning’ the diversity of practicum experiences appear to be frustrating for preservice teachers who frequently feel they have been unable to achieve the outcomes they expected to meet during their teacher education and practicum. If the practicum learning principles recommended here are used as a basis for conversations around the practicum, then practicum outcomes (‘the purpose of the practicum’) could be more clearly understood and practices more transparent. A tenth practicum learning principle could be added that relates to the important role of conversations between university teacher educators around the practicum process, based on developing a better understanding, or a tentative theory of the practicum.

There are currently a number of other alternative programs throughout Australia where preservice teachers are placed in ‘after school care’ or support programs for students who have ‘dropped out’ or been excluded from school (Gannon, 2005). A recent media report also mentioned the possibility of placements in ‘government departments and Technical and Further Education sites in addition to schools under a radical proposal to help stem a ‘crisis’ in teaching placements’ (Leung, 2006). It is ironic that the policy makers wish to increase school involvement in the preparation of preservice teachers yet the universities are finding it necessary to design alternative programs through lack of school commitment. Unfortunately there is no mention in the ‘alternative sites’ discussion of the important underpinning theories and knowledges of those who will mentor the preservice teachers, no mention of practicum learning outcomes, and certainly no acknowledgement of the problematic nature of the practicum and its role in developing preservice teacher understanding and identity.

**Spinning the hoops anew**

Some university practicum programs have developed contracts for schools to sign indicating that they will offer particular support and experiences to preservice teachers. Others are developing ‘teaching schools’ and are transferring all responsibility for the practicum to school based mentors. In such cases they are missing the point that it is the complexity of the contexts that inform and support practice, and the limited understandings of the processes and procedures that are possible in schools, that have led to the questions of whether the practicum can deliver what it promises. Without an better understanding of the beliefs and practices of those involved, what this means in terms of how practicum learning and preservice teachers are positioned, and how this came to be the way it is, then the possibilities invested in the practicum and the importance of spinning the hoops anew, will be missed. As the ‘experts’ on teaching and learning, teacher educators have been slow to recognise and listen to their own advice when planning for the learning of preservice teachers. They must now find themselves in the position where they advocate strongly for their
own role in the practicum, cognisant of how it sits on the periphery of a complex and only partially understood classroom teaching and learning relationship, as they are in danger of losing their influence in the preparation of preservice teachers. It is only through collaboration between schools and universities of education at a deeper level that we will begin to meet the needs of our preservice teachers and the teaching profession. A situation free from vested interest and disempowering posturing, where the theories that underpin the practice of teaching are played out, will allow us to begin to do things differently (Practicum Learning Principle 5 and 6).

It is essential that mentors and teacher educators are given the space to work together to inform preservice teacher learning during the practicum (Practicum Learning Principles 6). The relationship between the teacher educators and mentors is extremely important. It is clear from this study that the teachers in the classrooms do not want the responsibility of mentoring preservice teachers in the current climate of the intensification of their work and the threats to their autonomy in the classroom. Yet their role is crucial. Teacher educators need to make it particularly clear to mentor teachers that they should work together in all aspects of practicum learning and the already extensive teacher knowledge about schools, education, teaching, pedagogy, students, classroom dynamics and curriculum is valued. Attitudes change dramatically during mentor workshops when it is stressed that the practicum is a shared endeavour and the purpose of mentoring workshops is for both the mentors and teacher educators to share their understandings and build a valuable learning experience for preservice teachers (Practicum Learning Principles 5, 6 and 9), not replace teacher knowledge with teacher educator knowledge (Rorrison & Sutton, 2005). By workshopping the sorts of experiences that the individual mentors and their schools can offer preservice teachers, partnerships at a deeper level of understanding can be developed, expelling the views that one or the other must hold the key or the ‘right’ way to proceed for preservice teacher practicum learning. It is not the lack of possibilities for learning that is the problem but the failure of those involved to harness the potential of the critical understandings of the teaching and learning process as it is played out in the practicum. Mentoring workshops can begin to address this.

**Conclusion**

I realised as I sorted and analysed the data that some of my own beliefs and theories were challenged as unexpected patterns and themes emerged. The theories that make meaning in my life are no more innocent than those that make meaning in the lives of those I research. It astounds me how often my unbridled support for the hegemonic structures that contain teacher education influence my own beliefs and practices. There are still some questions that remain unanswered. What aspects of the practicum are actually silenced by my research method? What issues of power, tradition and interpretation have continued to silence some of the voices that the research design was created to uncover? As I became fully immersed in the data a number of unexpected connections and ideas emerged that changed the way I now read the ‘spin’ of the hoops. By allowing the spin within this study the freedom to find its own balance and by making this transparent to the
players in the field, a transformative project of possibility is created. In the beginning I thought ‘jumping through hoops’ was a concept that undermined the practicum and rendered it unworthy of the role to which it was entrusted. I realise now it is a statement of transformation. The complexity, contextual variations, diversity in positioning and the quest for clarity and a more clear vision are what keep teaching vital and relevant in changing times. We no longer need to pretend that it is organised, consistent, linear or standardised but celebrate and make transparent the moments of understanding and the eclectic spin that challenges and underpins good teaching practice for teacher educators, teachers in schools and preservice teachers.

Suddenly the spinning stopped

The hoops were still and calm

The peace of understanding struck

The past was left behind

The future stretched before our eyes but then our hearts did jump

For in the distance we could see more spinning hoops in sight!

References


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