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Teacher' Working Knowledge: The Value of Lived Experience

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Contents

- Abstract
 - Teacher Competencies and Teacher Knowledge
 - The Context of Teaching
 - Teachers' Knowledge
 - Teachers' Work beyond the Classroom
 - Valuing Experience in Teacher Education
 - References
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Abstract

Generic frameworks of teacher competencies have shaped teacher education, defining the work knowledge of the profession and contributing to the structural context of teaching. Teaching, however, is a social act defined as much by its sociocultural, biographical and historical contexts as by its structural context. These multiple contexts of teachers' work demand more than knowledge of generic competencies. Work knowledge, developed through teacher education, must be "massively supplemented, as well as mediated" (Schwab, 1969) in practice by knowledges of language and power whose sources derive from lived experience. The role of teacher education must be to acknowledge and cultivate the knowledges of work, language and power that will enable teachers' best practice in the multiple contexts of their profession.

*Graduates should see their initial teacher education
as the first part of a continuum of professional learning*
Australian Council of Deans of Education (1998:9)

The journey to teaching does not start at the teacher education institution. It has begun well before, and will continue well beyond, teacher education. It is a journey where every 'lived experience' contributes to the working knowledge of the teacher and to her ability to "respond sensitively, exercise judgement and think creatively" (Ministerial Advisory Committee on the Quality of Teacher Education and Training - macqtet, 1994:ii). [back](#)

Teacher Competencies and Teacher Knowledge

During the 1990s in Australia, attempts were made, at both State and Federal levels, to define teachers' work as a series of competencies and teachers' working knowledge as a series of desirable (and defineable) qualities that are acquired through the process of teacher education to provide a standard of entry to the profession ready to be implemented as the graduate commences her professional journey as a beginning teacher.

Teacher competencies have developed as an outcome of concerns with productivity, quality control and efficiency that have been the hallmarks of economic rationalism. Their phrasing owes much to the corporate language of market reform with its emphasis on standards, measurement of outcomes and public accountability. The perception of teachers' work as industrial work practice has been a particular outcome of an economic rationalist perspective. Teacher award restructuring has introduced the powerful idea of productivity into schools and reconceptualised many aspects of teacher career development in terms of skills and competencies (Milligan, Ashenden and Quinn, 1994). Links between student learning outcomes, the quality of teacher education and the quality of teaching has been clearly articulated (MACTEQT, 1994: fwd).

Although developing from different perspectives, competency frameworks attempt to make explicit a set of minimum and essential desirable characteristics of all teachers at the beginning of their careers (National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning (NPQTL), 1996). Expectations of their qualities, attributes and competencies are stated in ways that are demonstrable, assessable by the school or university supervisor and programmable by the teacher educator. By ensuring quality of new teachers and the learning they facilitate (Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE), 1998), each framework therefore becomes a response to economic rationalism in education by providing a means of quality assurance.

Frameworks have focused on attributes that reflect traditional issues of epistemology and pedagogy, establishing "some assessable, practical skills" (MACTEQT, 1994:1). The *Desirable Attributes of Beginning Teachers* includes: professional ethics; the content of teaching; the practice of teaching; professionalism and professional development (MACTEQT, 1994:3-6). The *National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching* outlines areas of competence as: using and developing professional knowledge; planning and managing the teaching and learning process; monitoring and assessing student progress and learning outcomes; and, reflecting, evaluating and planning for continuous improvement (NPQTL, 1996:12-24). The *National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education* outlines the conditions of preparation of the graduate as well as expectations of attributes included in broad areas: general professional attributes; duty of care, health and safety; indigenous education; content studies; curriculum; literacy; numeracy; teaching and learning; relationships with learners and behaviour management; technology, assessment and evaluation (ACDE, 1998:9-18).

The increasing perception of schooling as a public enterprise and of the teacher as the "frontline operator" of a "customer service-oriented institution" (Scott, 1990:67) has meant that the practice of the teacher is necessarily extended beyond the classroom and this extended work base is also identified in competency frameworks. The *Desirable Attributes of Beginning Teachers* outlines expectations of "interaction with families and the community" (MACTEQT, 1994:3-6), the *National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching* includes "communicating, interacting and working with others" (NPQTL, 1996:23) as an area of competence and the *National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education* includes expectations of graduate attributes in the areas of: students and their communities; working with others; and working in schools and systems (ACDE, 1998). Included within these attributes are expectations that the beginning teacher will have "an understanding of the roles of parents in schooling ... of models of partnership with parents ... of the structures of parent participation and ... developed an ability to work with parents (ACDE, 1998:17).

Competency frameworks, by defining the domains of teachers' work also construct the parameters of teachers' working knowledge. They also shape teacher education programs which attempt to equip graduates with the knowledge needed to undertake work as beginning teachers. The frameworks are, of necessity, inherently generic structures and the expectations of teacher performance they establish are for all classrooms in all educational contexts. The reality of teaching is very different. The journey that each beginning teacher undertakes, while similarly signposted, is unique because the path is constructed differently for each specific teaching situation. The notion of a generic framework of attributes for teaching is thus problematic. A contextual dialectic is established between the specificity of the beginning teacher's situation and the generality of the structured knowledge, skills, attitudes and values defined by competency frameworks. While a framework of competency provides, for the graduate, a theory of teaching, it is isolated from her potential practice because of its inherent and intended universality. Context divides the preparation from the practice, the 'graduate' from the 'beginning teacher'.

As Cornbleth (1991) argues, "given its multifaceted, nested, and fluid nature, the relevant context cannot be predetermined. There is no generic context, no fixed set of parameters or invariant grid that can be imposed" (p.269). [back](#)

The Contexts of Teaching

Every teaching situation is a unique and complex interplay of interacting, interdependent, often incompatible contexts. Teaching occurs within a structural context which Cornbleth (1990) argues is the "education system's established roles and relationships, including operating procedures, shared beliefs and norms ... often distinguished as organisation and culture (p.35). Decisions made at all levels throughout the education system, from the central government authority to the school committee, will impact on classroom practice. Elements of structural context include national and state curriculum decisions about educational funding and curriculum directions; the policies and expectations of the particular school system - government or independent; and even the impact of geographic location may be a structural factor in educational decisions particularly funding.

In addition to the structural context, teaching occurs within a sociocultural context. This represents the environment beyond the education system which includes "demographic, social, political and economic conditions, traditions and ideologies, and events" (Cornbleth, 1990:35). Interactions within the sociocultural context between teachers and learners, parents and professional peers, occur through the 'interactive' classroom social structure, through the

‘organisational’ structure of the school and the system, and through the ‘embracing cultural context’ representing the social structure and hegemony that links the perspectives of individual teachers and groups of teachers to the immediate local community of the school and to its surrounding society’s ideologies, practices and material conditions (Pollard, 1982).

Each social interaction of teaching is a function of the biographical context, not only of the teacher but of those with whom she interacts. Biographical context represents each individual’s “personhood formed in social circumstances that include ... their experiences, their interactions with other individuals, groups, institutions, and environments both physical and human, natural and created (Cornbleth, 1998:1). Of these experiences, her undergraduate teacher education constitutes one important aspect of her biographical context.

Teaching is also enacted within a specific temporal period, and historical context acknowledges “past events and experiences are potential context for subsequent ones” (Cornbleth, 1991:269).

These contexts of teaching - structural, sociocultural, biographical and historical - are not discrete but “overlapping and interacting clusters” (Cornbleth, 1991:269) that vary over time and with the local situation within the national milieu and in their relative strength or intensity of interaction. Every interaction a teacher has with a child, parent or professional colleague thus represents a unique ‘context of situation’ (Malinowski, 1923), an outcome of the balance of the elements of the structural, sociocultural, biographical and historical contexts of the participants.

When the ‘graduate’ becomes a ‘beginning teacher’, her teaching situation will be unique because it represents a particular interweaving of contexts. It is unique also because her interpretation of these contexts is a function of her singular biographical context, an outcome of her social experiences with other individuals, groups, institutions and environments (Cornbleth, 1998:1).
[back](#)

Teachers' Knowledge

Teacher’s work is complex (ACDE, 1998) and rarely predictive. It is a social act where knowledge is “constructed and reconstructed by individuals and groups in particular times, places and cultures” (Cornbleth, 1990:33). When the graduate becomes a beginning teacher, her practice will be situated in a unique physical, social and temporal environment which represents the intersection of multiple, interacting, interdependent contexts and she must call upon multiple ways of knowing to begin to enact the roles of her profession.

Habermas (1974) offers a structure for considering the multiple ways of knowing that are necessary for the beginning teacher. He argues that knowledge, like teaching, is a social act which is grounded in human needs and their cognitive responses. Habermas proposed three different kinds of knowledge constitutive interests: the technical, the practical and the emancipatory which, together, create a unified whole. Each knowledge interest spawns a certain ‘way of knowing’. Knowledge of the technical supports the mastery of skill; communicative knowledge is the knowledge of the practical, developed through the hermeneutic interpretations that make possible the orientation of action; and emancipatory knowledge supports a critical ‘way of knowing’ where analysis and reflection enable empowerment and autonomy.

These knowledge interests inform social organisation through “work, language, and power” (Habermas, 1972:313). For the beginning teacher, each teaching situation involves all ways of

knowing because each moment in the social act of teaching, the teacher's practice, involves work, language and power.

Frameworks of competencies become the accredited, technical knowledge (Habermas, 1972) of the profession - the work knowledge, of pedagogy and epistemology, that defines the "essential minima" (ACDE, 1998:47) of the profession. However, the 'work knowledge' of teaching must be not only a knowledge of theory and of skills but also a knowledge of social constructions because teaching is always contextualised and, like its knowledge, grounded in human need.

The theoretical knowledge of the competency frameworks developed through training are important. They represent the accountable body of professional knowledge - the technical knowledge that informs a teacher's work. But they are not all that is necessary for the teacher to contend with the complexities of context and the relationships within each teaching situation. As Schwab (1969) argues, "theories are not ... adequate by themselves to tell us what to do with human beings or how to do it. Theory must be ... massively supplemented, as well as mediated, by knowledge of some other kind derived from another source" (p.14). The technical knowledge of the competencies must be supplemented, and mediated, in context with the communicative and critical knowledge whose source is "lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990) to together inform the teacher's work, language and power.

Within each social context, language becomes a tool of access serving both to mediate developing relationships, and to negotiate information (Christie, 1985). Habermas (1972) argues that 'communicative knowledge', the hermeneutic understanding involved in all human interactions, must aim to ensure legitimacy, truthfulness, sincerity and comprehensibility in each interaction. This is attained through "learned and shared systems of meaning and understanding, communicated primarily through natural language" (D'Andrade, 1990:65). Identifying and employing the appropriate text in each interactive context demands, for the beginning teacher, a communicative knowledge that is developed beyond the frameworks of competencies through the experience of interacting with different people in different ways in different contexts through her journeys to teaching.

Language and power are intimately interwoven. Cousins and Hussein (1984) suggest that power is created in terms of relationships between individuals and communicated in discourse. Foucault (1982) argues that power begins with the individual and is derived from the relationship between one individual and another. "The relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly or immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions" (p.785). In this sense, power is a technique (Warham, 1993) and the exercise of power consists in "guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome ... (structuring) the possible field of action for others" (Foucault, 1982:789). For the beginning teacher, each relationship defines its own power - at times the teacher will be the 'guide', at other times the 'guided'. Critical knowledge (Habermas, 1972) shapes her actions by informing techniques of power within each relationship. Her experiences of power and the critical knowledge which has developed through these experiences have occurred in every interaction along the journeys she has undertaken

The beginning teacher is involved in multiple relationships in the contexts of her teaching appointment. Each relationship is influenced by the interplay of structural and sociocultural contexts, by the historical context of the situation and by her biographical context. Each relationship defines its own power. Critical knowledge (Habermas, 1972) shapes the beginning teacher's actions by informing techniques of power within each relationship just as communicative knowledge informs the language of relationships.

For the beginning teacher, each teaching context involves all ways of knowing "technical, communicative and critical - because each moment in the social act of teaching, the teacher's practice, involves work, language and power. Competency frameworks shape teacher education and structure the technical knowledge of a teacher's work and, within the restricted contexts of teacher education structure opportunities for the development of communicative and critical knowledges. However, it is "lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990) that essentially supplements technical knowledge with communicative and critical knowledge to inform the contextualised practice of the beginning teacher. [back](#)

Teachers' work beyond the Classroom

As the work of the beginning teacher is defined well beyond the classroom to include partnerships with the community, the supplementation of the technical knowledge of the profession becomes ever more important. The beginning teacher is expected "to develop close partnerships between home and school ... and an ability to work with parents" (ACDE, 1998:17). Soliman (1995) argues that "partnership is a developmental process for both teachers and parents and involves the acquisition of knowledge of what working together entails (and) a commitment to do so"(p.160). Theories of participation may support knowledge of partnership structures but 'knowledge of what working together entails' can only develop as the partnership develops, as the partners come to know, not just each other, but the implications of their social act. It is essentially a knowledge of communication, of hermeneutic understanding (Habermas, 1974) between partners.

'A commitment to work together' is an action of critical knowledge (Habermas, 1974) developed from an understanding of the context and the possibilities of partnership within that context. Partnership that involves commitment and is mutually valued cannot be mandated by a structured agenda, nor can it be imposed from an external source or even by one of the potential partners. It must develop from shared goals and beliefs.

Experience is the essential element that underlies and integrates the knowledges of partnership. For the teacher, each partnership is different because each parent brings to it a different biographical context, a different interpretation of the symbol of the school, and, different expectations of the school, the teacher and the child. Each partnership is then a different experience of work, language and power, involving different technical, communicative and critical knowledges. The "lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990) that support these knowledges and which supplement the theoretical knowledges of partnership structures and processes have developed through the relationships that have been cultivated in a variety of situations along the journey to teaching. [back](#)

Valuing Experience in Teacher Education

Teaching is not a journey taken in isolation. It is social action where children, parents, other teachers are fellow voyagers who bring to each interaction individual biographies, lived experiences and perspectives. The ability to understand these perspectives, to utilise the knowledges of work, language and power to facilitate the teaching act, is a function of the totality of each teacher's lived experience.

Graduates are expected to see their initial teacher education as the first part of a continuum of professional learning (ACDE, 1998:9). However, the journey to teaching does not start at the teacher education institution. The journey has begun well before this. It is the "lived experiences"

(Van Manen, 1990) before teacher training, during training and throughout the professional career that contribute to a teacher's knowledge, skills and attitudes and to her ability to respond sensitively, exercise judgement and think creatively (MACQTET, 1994:ii).

A challenge for teacher education then becomes one of acknowledging the totality of experience within each student's biographical context, and of valuing the knowledges of lived experience as a supplement to the theory of the competency frameworks to inform their contextualised practice.

One way to achieve this is to provide variable entry paths to the profession. *Preparing a Profession* (ACDE, 1998), in outlining program standards and guidelines for the development of competencies for graduates, acknowledges that "recruitment activities and selection criteria should facilitate entry by individuals who ... have had a diverse range of life experiences (p.22). In this way, "life skills ... people skills, gut knowledge (that's) learnt over time and ... comes with maturity" (McLeod, 2000) are valued and then provide a potential resource of experience, of variable perspectives, for other students.

If it is important in teacher education to acknowledge the totality of experience within the biographical context of each student, and to value lived experience as a supplement to theory through reflection, then it must also be a commitment, within the teacher education program, to cultivate opportunities to extend those lived experiences.

The development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will support beginning teachers' practices with parents is an area where extending lived experience is critical. This is not to deny the role of theory in establishing partnerships between teachers and parents. Beginning teachers, as an outcome of their graduate training are expected to "have an understanding of models of partnership with parents in the context of their understandings of teacher professionalism, (and) to know the structures of parent participation in the settings for which they are being prepared" (ACDE, 1998:17). Clearly these are 'understandings' and 'knowledges' that can be accommodated within the framework of teacher education theory because they are essentially understandings and knowledges that are not dependant on context. Models that have been proposed for teacher education programs generally aim to cultivate a sharing of theories and research findings to give preservice teachers a broader base of knowledge on which to build parent involvement strategies (Tichenor, 1997).

However, there is also the need to develop a knowledge of the contexts in which participation occurs. As well as "understanding models" and "knowing structures" beginning teachers are expected to act to "develop close partnerships between home and school ... and to have developed an ability to work with parents" (ACDE, 1998:17). To achieve this, De Acosta (1996) argues that teachers' knowledge should extend beyond the classroom to include an awareness of the social and political context of teaching and the economic, social and political demands placed on schools. This may be achieved through community placement within the teacher education program to support the development of practical competence, the ability to meet and hold dialogue with families, formulate choices, and ask questions in choosing courses of action for family action (De Acosta, 1996). The service-learning components (Donohue, 1999; Wade, Anderson, Yarbrough, Pickeral, Erickson, and Kromer, 1999) of some United States teacher education programs, designed to integrate community service activities with academic learning, also provide a potential vehicle through which to "gain a window on community perspectives" (Donohue, 1999:688).

Field experience, during teacher education becomes a vehicle for the cultivation of the 'practical' and for the supplementation of theory from practice. It provides an experience of the specific, an opportunity to develop "the forms of knowledge ... which temper theory so to identify the disparities between real and theoretical, to modify theory in its application and to devise ways of taking account of the many aspects of the real thing which the theory does not take into account" (Schwab, 1969:12). However, as Grossman (1997) argues, without a forum for reflection and the opportunity for the development of proactive strategies, there is a danger that the experience of 'the real thing' will produce negative ideas and opinions that will persist through their teaching careers.

Expansion of the 'field' of 'field experience' is a way to structure experiences that support the development of communicative and critical knowledges. *The National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education* (1998) suggests that while the "major focus of students' field experience should normally be undertaken with classes of the developmental levels and curriculum areas, and ... school type for which they are being prepared ... this should be balanced with diverse experiences: for example, with both male and female learners, and learners of varied ages, abilities, disabilities, social circumstances and cultures" (ACDE, 1998:23).

While this extended framework of expectations focuses on diversity of the learner and is intended to promote the development of pedagogical skills, it also inevitably provides the developing teacher with experience of the diversity of structural contexts which impact on learners and of the diversity of sociocultural contexts in which learners, their teachers and their parents interact. The educational 'field' in all its diversity provides a potential framework of experience of teachers' work and also of the language and power that enables that work. Not to be denied, are other experiences in other 'fields' in which developing teachers are involved. The diverse experiences of work, financially necessary for survival during the often-impooverished years of teacher education, are also vehicles for the development of knowledge of language and power that support the work of teaching.

A further opportunity to extend life experiences of preservice teachers beyond the traditional contexts of teacher education is to situate theory in diverse contexts - within and beyond a faculty of education. Beyond the faculty, the developing teacher experiences the diverse pedagogies, and epistemologies as well as perspectives of others journeying towards professionalism. *The National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education* (1998) suggests that within a teacher education framework "there may be provision for joint units or activities with students undertaking initial education for related professions (such as youth work) so that there can be a cross- fertilisation of knowledge and perspectives, and an appreciation of different areas of expertise can be developed and utilised in later professional work" (ACDE, 1998:24). Within the faculty, the theories, research and practices of the profession are supplemented by critical reflection of these diversities. Gaining insight from the lived experience of others is a valuable way to support autonomous action through reflection.

The teacher's journey continues well beyond teacher education, just as it has begun well before. Teacher educators have a responsibility to acknowledge and to cultivate the knowledges derived from the many "lived experiences' of the journey that supplement the programs of teacher education to inform a teacher's work, language and power. [back](#)

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