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What's Up DOCC? Creating Third Space Courses in Teacher Education

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Abstract

There are increasing calls to improve the quality of Teacher Education by reconceptualising the connection between university-based coursework and the teaching practicum. In response, the School of Education at RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria redesigned courses in its first year program to interconnect the two spaces of universities (first space) and schools (second space) in an effort to facilitate Third Spaces. This paper focuses on how one university designed a practicum or Work Integrated Learning (WIL)-based course, underpinned by a Distributed Open Collaborative Course (DOCC) pedagogical approach, aiming to navigate and bridge the two spaces with the intent of realising third spaces. Using data from focus groups, we examine pre-service teachers' (PST) perceptions of this redesign. In doing so, we illuminate some of the possibilities and challenges in attempting to create a third space course using a DOCC approach.

Introduction

Numerous reports into pre-service teacher education in Australia typically refer to the need to improve the quality of Initial Teacher Education programs, with consistent concerns about the lack of connection between theory and practice (Ure, Gough & Newton, 2009). This rhetoric drives political commentary and has been the premise for a number of reports and initiatives. For instance, the *Top of the Class* report (Australian Parliament House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007), argued that at the centre of the issue around interconnection was the "current distribution of responsibilities in Teacher Education" (p.2); whereby theoretical components are typically taught on campus by faculty and the teaching practicum undertaken on-site in schools by practising teachers. The more recent Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) report shared similar sentiments; schools and universities need to form closer partnerships and practising teachers should be more involved in preparing pre-service teachers (Department of Education and Training Australia, 2015).

The teaching practicum is generally acknowledged as one site where universities and schools can connect, as well as being vital for the development of practical skills for future teachers (Ure, Gough & Newton, 2009). Yet, how the practicum should be designed and implemented, and its relationship to university coursework is heavily contested by policy makers, practising teachers, university educators and students. Zeichner (2010) is critical of the way universities approach the practicum, arguing that they typically have very little involvement in its details, leaving these to be worked out between pre-service teachers and their teacher mentors. Drawing on his own extensive experience, he suggests that the teacher practicum is often perceived by universities as an administrative task. Another problem with the practicum he suggests, is that schools and teacher mentors know very little about what happens in the university coursework, and that university educators have little knowledge of what happens in schools. Darling-Hammond (2010) similarly suggests that:

> ... [the practicum] side of teacher education has been fairly haphazard, depending on the idiosyncrasies of loosely selected placements with little guidance about what happens in them and little connection to university work (p. 40).

While there is general acknowledgment by policy makers, academics, researchers and practitioners alike, that university-based coursework and the teaching practicum should be more connected, achieving this connection is complex. A number of approaches have been tried such as: establishing professional development schools; teaching courses in schools/site-based; and having practising teachers teach in universities. Yet, as noted by Grossman et al. (2009, p. 276):

> … though scholars of teacher education periodically revise the relationship between theory and practice, teacher education programs struggle to redesign programmatic structures and pedagogy to acknowledge and build on the integrated nature of theory and practice as well as the potentially deep interplay between coursework and field placements.

In recent times a number of researchers (Taylor, Klein, & Abrams, 2014; Zeichner, 2010) have suggested that creating a hybrid, or Third Space, could prove effective in redesigning the structure and pedagogy to bridge the boundaries between the two spaces and move towards better integration of theory and practice with a greater understanding of the two spaces.

Third Space Theory

Third Space theory is essentially used to explore the spaces 'in between' two or more discourses, conceptualisations or binaries (Bhabha, 1994). This theory has been used in a variety of disciplines and for different purposes, for instance, Bhabha (1994) explored the ways in which people negotiate being in-between their own traditional culture and a newly imposed culture; in other words being in-between first and second spaces. Bhabha (1994) argues that through a continual negotiation, reinterpretation and creation of identities a hybrid or Third Space is created which challenges both cultures. Moje et al. (2004) used Third Space theory to examine the in-between everyday literacies (home, community, peer group) with those used within a schooling context. In their influential paper, they summarised the three main ways that theorists have conceptualised Third Space: as a bridge; as a navigational space; and a transformative space of cultural, social, and epistemological change. Perceived as a bridge, Third Space is a space to build bridges between knowledge which, according to Moje et al. (2004), helps learners see connections, contradictions and bridge competing understandings. As a navigational space, Third Space enables participants to cross over or draw upon different binaries, discourses or discursive boundaries. In other words, Third Space can be seen as hybrid learning space in which students' linguistic and cultural forms, goals, or ways of relating transform the official space of the school, teacher or classroom, so enabling participants to become more central to their learning and gain access to alterative knowledge (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1997). Finally, Third space can be perceived as a space for change or transformation where competing knowledge is brought into 'conversation' leading to new understandings, new forms of learning and to knowledge projection (Moje et al., 2004). For our purposes in this study, Third Space theory encourages us to make visible the connections between and beyond; seeing issues from multiple viewpoints, and provides a means to research the slippages and hybrids between universities and schools (Bhabha, 1994).

Zeichner (2010) explores ways that Third Space has been used in teacher education contexts including: bringing teachers into university courses; encouraging the use of examples of

teacher practice into coursework; mediating instruction (where part of a course is taught on-site in schools); having hybrid educators who teach a course both at the university and on-site; and/or incorporating knowledge from multiple communities (Taylor, Klein, Abrams, 2014). In such Third Spaces, responsibility for teacher education can be shared as boundaries between practicing teachers and university educators are blurred and there are more open lines of communication and shared understanding (McDonough, 2014).

This paper reports on our efforts to realise a Third Space course design; a space that bridges the two disconnected components (spaces) of university and school in our programs and courses. To begin, we mapped our current practice and imagined what a Third Space WIL/practicum course could look like. We then identified a number of features or characteristics that would define it. However, to realise these aims we also had to redesign our current pedagogical approach and course design. We looked towards various teaching and learning models and decided upon a Distributed Open Collaborative Course (DOCC) pedagogical approach to frame our redesign that would encourage Third Spaces.

DOCC Design/Pedagogical Approach

A DOCC is a relatively new approach to course design currently being used in the United States as an alternative to a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). In 2013 a group of scholars, artists and students initiated a DOCC in order to design a course around feminist principles of sharing power, respecting and enabling diversity of opinion, interaction (including via technology) and collaboration to interrogate questions around feminist histories and digital archives (Juhasz & Balsamo, 2012). The resulting DOCC *Dialogues on Feminism and Technology*, involved some 15 universities and colleges.

Within a DOCC, expertise is distributed among its diverse participants. Learning is organised around collaboration with a focus on pedagogical engagement and the distribution of power among all participants. A DOCC uses online tools and pedagogical materials such as images, videos and activities, which target specific learning objectives. This content is appropriated and adapted by users and localised by universities/lecturers to suit their specific learning context and learning needs.

A key DOCC principle is to value situated experience and to share authority and responsibility rather than the MOOC's top-down, one size fits all approach. Attention to discrete learners, teachers and institutions is valued over simple numbers of participants (Juhasz cited in Jaschick 2013). We felt the core principles of the DOCC model would be an effective way to frame a Third Space/WIL course, as outlined below:

- *Shared responsibility:* Practising teachers and teacher educators would collaboratively create the core content for the WIL course and differing opinions would be respected. The WIL course will be taught on-site in schools by a practising teacher (school-based tutor) with a close association with the school and employed by the university.
- *Shared power:* Power within the course would be shared and what counts as expert knowledge would be challenged. The hierarches of power, binaries that traditionally shape university courses and practicum, were also challenged through the creation of Third Space relationships. This principle recognises however, that hierarchies can be useful.
- *Localised and adapted core content:* The course content would be appropriated and reshaped by the school-based tutor to suit the local school site in which it is delivered. Thus content would accommodate the diverse school contexts and pre-service teacher needs.

- *Interactive online learning:* The course would be developed and shared via an online Google Site to enable all members to have access and to interact with it across both first (universities) and second spaces (schools). Course content would be multimodal and geared towards specific learning objectives.

Methodology

This small-scale study (part of a larger study around WIL) was conducted by the School of Education at RMIT University, Victoria, Australia (Ethics was approved by Department of Education and Training, Victoria and RMIT University). The study focuses on the design of a WIL course, framed by the principles of a DOCC, with the aim to bridge the theory practice divide (often a criticism of Teacher Education programs) and facilitate Third Spaces. The course, *Orientation to Teaching* was delivered in Semester 1, 2014 to pre-service teachers who were predominantly preparing to be generalist primary school teachers. The majority of the pre-service teachers were female (86%), aged between 18 to 39 years (mean age of 21), and Australian-born (89.3%) with English as their language spoken at home (81.3%).

The course content and assessment was designed collaboratively by practising teachers and teacher educators. It was produced online via a Google Site to enable ease of access and interaction by all participants (pre-service teachers, school-based-tutors, teacher educators and teacher mentors). The course employed a range of online tools and multimodal content geared towards specific learning objectives and pedagogical engagement. This content was then taught on-site in 16 primary schools in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne by a school-based tutor who was a practising teacher, employed by the university. This school-based tutor localised the content to suit the specific school context. Some 270 first year pre-service teachers, organised into groups of 12 to 16, undertook this course on-site. This course involved an embedded 10 day placement (two week block). As they undertook the course they practically applied their knowledge and skills in a teacher mentor's classroom through activities such as audits and observations (teacher mentors were paid for their supervision of students). The pre-service teachers were required to complete a number of assessment tasks and these were assessed by the school-based tutor.

This study examined pre-service teachers' views of the DOCC design. In particular, we wanted to know how the DOCC design facilitated Third Spaces from a pre-service teacher (PST) perspective. Following the completion of the course, *Orientation to Teaching*, we invited the pre-service teachers to participate in a focus group discussion led by an independent facilitator. Some 42 PSTs participated in one of four focus groups that were held on separate days over a two-week period. Each focus group was held during an unofficial lunchtime, that is, a period when there were no scheduled classes, and PSTs were informed that we would provide lunch (pizza) in return for this participation. These focus group discussions used a number of open questions to prompt discussion around their experiences in the course and its design features. Discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. Later each author independently read the transcripts and coded them to each of the key principles of a DOCC: shared responsibility, distributed power, localised content and interactive online learning. Both authors then met and compared coding. Discrepancies were reviewed and discussed and a joint decision made.

The following discussion provides a snapshot of pre-service teachers' views on each of the DOCC principles that underpinned this WIL course. Given the amount of discussion that was generated in the focus groups, and the word length of this paper, selecting examples can be problematic. We have made an arbitrary decision to select two to three PST examples of each principle; we will make the reasons for our selections transparent to the reader.

Shared responsibility

As seen in the literature review, universities/lecturers have in the past been seen as the qualified experts to teach the theory with schools being responsible for the development and teaching of the practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006). One of the key objectives of this course was to better interconnect theory and practice. This objective was enacted through a series of think tank days where practicing teachers and teacher educators collaboratively designed the course, the assessment and the learning experiences such as the audits plans and reflection questions. The course was deliberately designed so that PSTs had to apply knowledge from the course in their teacher mentor's classroom, or conversely, use materials, texts and experiences from this classroom as the basis for site-based tutorials.

Most PSTs were able to articulate that this course design was different to the other courses they had experienced in the program. One of the themes that emerged from their comments was the explicit bridge of the theory practice divide. For example, one PST commented, *"I enjoyed seeing how the theory we were taught was instantly reflected in teaching practices. It allowed me to be critically aware of how other teachers incorporated or rejected the theories and set my own opinions accordingly"*. This sentiment was also reflected by another PST: *"I found [being on-site] really cemented a lot of things that we've been learning about and it was really eye-opening experience and to see it working in the workshops and to see it in the classroom. This is really, really valuable"*.

Disturbed power

One of the affordances of Third Space is that it provides a framework for moving beyond dominant narratives and blends binaries that have traditionally characterised the two spaces. This course was purposefully designed to disrupt and redistribute binaries of power that have been typically replicated in Teacher Education programs such as teacher mentor/pre-service teacher, universities/schools, teacher/student and lecturer/student. For instance, the learning activities were designed to challenge what and whose knowledge counts and question experience/expertise. Although the focus group raised issues around peer relationships and relationships with university learning, in this discussion we just focussed on the complexity of the relationships between the teacher mentor and pre-service teacher.

Pre-service teachers in practicum spaces are often bound by binaries that place them in limiting positions such as teacher/students, active/passive, expert/notice, student/learner; they neither 'belong' to the school, nor are they 'at' university, thus, they are in-between these two spaces. This has shaped the expectations of PSTs (and teacher mentors) of what they might experience on a first year placement. For instance, PSTs' comments illustrated these binaries of active/passive and expert/novice: *"I have got friends who are already studying education at other universities and they said placement in the first year you pretty much sit at the back of the room and you observe the class"* and the other PST commented that *"I thought I was going to sit at the back of the room but from the first day I was like helping run classes and teaching"*.

In this course, PSTs were positioned differently. They were required to observe and audit teacher mentors' practice. This required them to be more active, to question, critique and reflect in site-based tutorials with their peers and buddy. Being empowered to be an active partner in their learning was reflected in a number of PSTs' comments: *"we were treated like teachers... it was a teacher to teacher relationship whereas here [university] I always feel like a student"*. For the PSTs being in this Third Space, encouraged the questioning of both spaces, it meant that they did not necessarily just replicate the practices of the expert, or teacher mentors. For example, one PST noted: *"I also liked that you started noticing things*

that were happening in your teacher mentor's classroom that maybe they weren't done correctly or there were maybe other ways".

Localised content

In this course online content was delivered on-site in each school by a school-based tutor who localised the content specifically to their context. School-based tutors had been, or were, teachers at that school and where able to support PSTs to 'read' that school, as well as translate school priorities, practices and approaches so that PSTs could 'fit' into that school more readily.

This is typified in the following comment: "*after a while your SBT knew who you were and what class you were in, so that the comments that they made and the suggestion were tailored to you, not just a general group*". This seems to have lead some PSTs acquiring greater confidence and deeper understanding of the school: "*I felt maybe just for my confidence as well – having someone who knew the school who knew how things worked would give us little tips on things that otherwise I wouldn't have known*".

But as one PST noted, this level of knowledge of the school could also influence the ways in which PSTs interacted and reflected upon what they were seeing/feeling in the classroom:

> *I was in a class and my SBT was best friends with my mentor teacher. So of course when I'm submitting an assignment on what kinds of feedback my mentor teacher used, I felt very uncomfortable, because she could go back to my mentor and be like, "oh your student doesn't like the way you do feedback*".

Interactive online learning

In analysing the data from the focus group, there were only a few comments about the online design feature of the course. This issue was not as dominant as the other themes that emerged. For example one student stated that the online material enabled "*quick and easy access to material that I needed*". For others it aided their study: "*the Google Site had everything on it, it's convenient and every time they say go and find this, we knew exactly where to get it and there was no confusion, it was just straight forward and helpful*".

It was interesting that PSTs did not focus to any great extent on the multi-model content of this course, rather other things, such as relationships with their teacher mentor, preoccupied their thinking. Arguably, using online tools and content was not new, or confronting, whereas, being on-site in schools for the first time may have been.

Third Space Practicum Course

From the focus group data it was evident that the DOCC pedagogical approach, with its focus on shared localised knowledge, distributed power and online features, facilitated Third Spaces within a WIL course. From the PSTs' comments, it is apparent the model provided greater insider/outsider knowledge across the first space of university and the second space of school, and encouraged interaction and better understanding. The comments also demonstrated that the localisation of second space (schools) blended with the first space of university and made learning more relevant to PSTs.

Positively, there was evidence that there was a closer alignment of theory and practice, and a redistribution of responsibility and power which is often cited as the 'problem' within teacher education. However, in encouraging new structures and systems it challenges the "histories that constitute it" (Bhabha cited in Usher, 2002, p. 49) and in doing so, it raises complex new relationships that may be unfamiliar in Teacher Education. For instance, there was some evidence of PSTs questioning teacher mentors and not necessarily replicating the dominant

narrative of the 'apprentice', watching and repeating the practices of the expert. Therefore, in destabilising what counts as knowledge and 'official' roles and conventions, it does raise some interesting dilemmas and questions. Are teacher mentors and first year PSTs ready for a Third Space? Do we want Third Spaces? How might teacher mentors, teacher educators and PSTs perceive and react to a change in roles and expectations? Who is valued/devalued in Third Space constructs? More research will be needed to fully realise the complexities of creating Third Spaces within and beyond teacher education.

We were drawn to Third Space theory as we thought it could enable us to make visible the connections between schools and universities via a DOCC model. The notion of a Third Space, as a hybrid space, offers possibilities for Teacher Education where traditionally there have been clear boundaries between the space occupied by theory, often taught on campus, and the space of practicum, taught on-site in schools. For a long time this disconnect has been seen as one of the main areas of concern for the quality of Teacher Education programs. In this paper we discussed how the DOCC design facilitated Third Spaces from a PST perspective. As demonstrated through the comments of pre-service teachers, the WIL course, underpinned by a DOCC design, has the potential to bring together the theory and practice in meaningful ways. It is also important to acknowledge that tensions and challenges do arise when creating Third Spaces. However, it is also important to acknowledge in moving forward, these tensions may be an important part of the learning process for PSTs, teacher mentors and teacher educators.

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