

TESOL in context: Authentic workplace learning for pre-service teachers

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The action research project entitled Engaging pre-service TESOL teachers in authentic workplace learning aimed to enhance the TESOL practicum experience of pre-service teachers in the Graduate Diploma of Education at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. Integrated into the relevant TESOL curriculum unit was the requirement that pre-service teachers work with a small group of Year 8-10 ESL students for one hour a week for six weeks in a partner school. During this time they conducted a needs analysis with the students, determined proficiency levels against the relevant progress map and then prepared and taught lessons designed to assist the students in their English language development across the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The results of the action research project indicated strong support for this form of authentic workplace learning and the continuation of its integration into the curriculum unit.

Keywords: *workplace learning; teacher education; school-university partnerships; TESOL preparation*

Introduction

The practical component of teacher education courses is vital for enabling university teacher education students, or 'pre-service teachers' (PSTs) as they will be described in this article, to understand how theory and practice are enmeshed, and to develop their own practical approaches to teaching. However, according to

Crookes (2003, p. 2), the TESOL practicum is “undertheorised and underresearched”. A review of the published literature supports this statement. Much of what could be located was American and at least ten years old (see for example Richards, 1987; Richards & Crookes, 1988; Stoyhoff, 1999; Stoyhoff & Sayavedra, 1995). Exceptions to this generalisation include Flowerdew (1999), who provides a Hong Kong perspective, and a more recent publication by Hobbs (2007). In general, there is a dearth of Australian published work in the area.

There are different types of TESOL teacher education courses in Australian universities. These include courses where TESOL is a major teaching area, providing a ‘full’ TESOL teaching qualification that prepares graduates for teaching TESOL to year 12 and is recognised by state authorities as such; those where TESOL is a minor teaching area, preparing graduates to teach TESOL up to the end of Year 10; and those which include a single TESOL unit (as core or elective) where the focus is on providing graduates with an understanding of ESL learners. Some universities only offer TESOL as further study for teachers who are already qualified to teach in Australian schools. The Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) at Edith Cowan University (ECU) discussed in this paper fits the second of the categories listed.

This article describes the key elements of an action research project designed to provide TESOL PSTs with a type of practicum experience, and discusses research undertaken to determine the successes and limitations of the project. In particular, it provides an analysis of data collected from key stakeholders in the project: the PSTs, the leadership team at the partner senior high school, and the university staff involved.

Prior to 2010, graduates from the ECU Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary), who studied TESOL as a minor teaching area, consistently reported that they did not get the opportunity to teach TESOL during their course. In 2010, a project entitled *Engaging pre-service TESOL teachers in authentic workplace learning* was undertaken to redress this situation by embedding TESOL teaching in the second semester TESOL curriculum unit (Thomsett & Ainsworth, 2011; Vanderford & Thomsett, 2010). The project aimed to provide the opportunity for each PST to interact with a small group of ESL students, to develop their own TESOL teaching skills, and to make a positive contribution to the English language learning of participating students in a local secondary school in partnership with the university. Over a period of six weeks the

PSTs, in teams of two or three, spent an hour a week with students at the school who had recently completed between one and two years in the school's Intensive English Centre (IEC).

The TESOL curriculum unit was restructured to address the weekly reality of PSTs working with the ESL students in the partner school: to consider PST interaction with ESL students, design language tasks based on those students' needs, and plan for future teaching. Unit assignments were reshaped accordingly. PSTs had greater hands-on experience than previously with State level curriculum documents, including ESL/ESD progress maps, and were able to contribute to students' future language development through communicative task design.

AWL in partner school:

- Visit to ESL/ESD Resource Centre (one week)
- Preparation for teaching (three weeks) mapping authentic work samples from lecturer's school against ESL/ESD progress maps, and designing needs analysis for AWL first visit to partner school
- One hour per week for 6 weeks in AWL partner school, working with small groups of students.

Focus group meeting in partner school:

- One hour per week (six weeks of AWL)
- Focus group meeting with Professional Practice Coordinator post-teaching ESL students
- Opportunity for PSTs to reflect on their teaching, talk about their students and their reactions to working with them, and raise any organisational issues that needed to be addressed with the school or the university.

Assessment:

- Two assignments based on activities undertaken with students.
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Table 1: AWL Activities

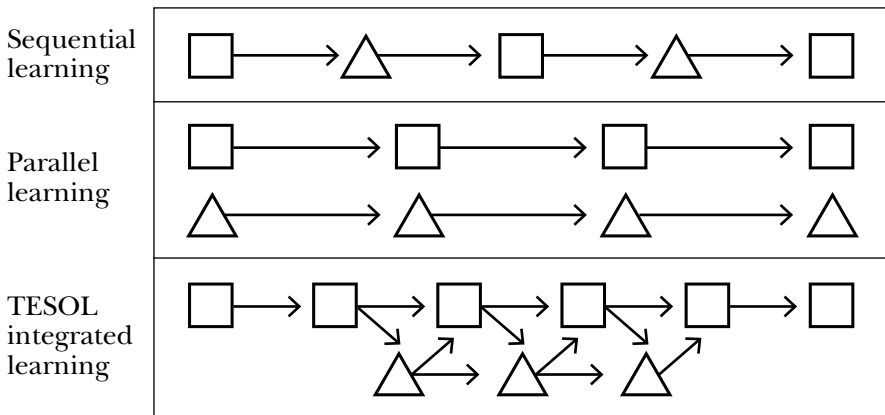
Table 1 summarises the authentic workplace learning (AWL) activities which were integrated into the curriculum in the 2010 project. The key research questions addressed in this article relate to the very specific form of the practicum embodied in this project:

1. What benefits do stakeholders identify as resulting from the integration of AWL into the TESOL teacher education program?
2. How sustainable is this model of integrated AWL within a TESOL context?

Literature review

Authentic Workplace Learning

Throughout Australia, the necessity for PSTs to gain experience teaching students is reinforced through state teacher registration and course accreditation requirements (Australian Government, n.d.; Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz, & Elliott, 2004). Models vary, as does the level of integration. As *Figure 1* illustrates, school experience and university work may operate sequentially, in parallel, or may (as with this project) be fully integrated.



Key: □ University based learning △ School based learning

Figure 1: Models of university and school based learning

The need for a strong connection between school based and university based learning in teacher education has been a recurring theme in state and national reports on teacher education over the decades (see, for example, Adey, 1998; Dyson, 2005; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Kleinhenz, Wilkinson, Gearon, Fernandez, & Ingvarson, 2007; Ramsey, 2000). Indeed many courses, including Edith Cowan University's own Kindergarten through Primary Bachelor of Education, have this as a fundamental premise in the course design (Sharp, Turner, Haig, & Cullity, 2009). Similarly, there is increasing recognition of the need for mutual advantage; for schools and universities to benefit from some form of partnership. However, the project described in this paper is unusual because of the strength of integration between the two components of the program, the direct benefits to the students and the level of support provided for the PSTs; with school leaders, the TESOL lecturer and Professional Practice Coordinator all involved on a weekly basis.

Needs analysis and progress maps

PSTs were required to conduct a needs analysis to assess students' linguistic and communicative needs and assist them with their English language development in the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Needs analysis is well-documented as a teaching tool (Gibbons, 1991; Harmer, 2007) or device (Fatihi, 2003). For this project, the needs analysis comprised two related parts: (a) an analysis of the present situation of the student; and (b) an analysis of the target situation, i.e. where the student hopes to be with their language skills in the future.

The ESL/ESD Progress Map (Department of Education and Training, 2010) draws on research, resources and teachers' experience with assessment tools to provide detailed descriptive statements about student progression in ESL within the context of the WA education system. PSTs needed to develop a working knowledge of these statements to situate the ESL students' current linguistic needs and to plan for future learning. Hence, for the first assignment PSTs were required to collect examples of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Consistent with the aims of the unit (Ainsworth, 2010) authentic work samples were collected by PSTs and the language needs of the students analysed, taking into account the different factors that affect language learning. The PSTs then selected appropriate techniques and strategies to suit a specified group of students, incorporating the relevant student outcomes identified by ESL/ESD Progress Map level statements (Department of Education and Training, 2010) into their lesson planning.

Establishing rapport

Providing a positive "affective climate" for ESL students is just as important as ensuring progress in ESL students' knowledge and skills building (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003, p. 10). An ESL student at the partner school could relate to other peers and teachers differently in classrooms and as a result, the "cultural norms and needs" of the student might "impede that student's learning" (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003, p. 234). In the TESOL curriculum unit, emphasis was placed on the importance of starting from the existing language competencies of the student (Gibbons, 1991), and on establishing a good rapport with the students to ensure that they felt comfortable with answering PST questions about their background, thereby providing the opening for a needs analysis to be conducted. PSTs were encouraged to identify student needs,

taking into consideration any physical, social, emotional, cultural, educational and familial characteristics that may impact on the learning potential of the student. Discussion in lectures about the needs analysis design for these students took into account students' interests. Part of the aim here was to aid their motivation to continue learning beyond everyday English and/or "playground" (Gibbons, 1991, p. 284) English.

Task-based teaching

Another major focus of the TESOL curriculum unit was task-based teaching (Nunan, 1991). As has been extensively documented, effective second language learning occurs best when students are engaged in meaningful, purposeful, and authentic communicative tasks, rather than having to work through sequentially organised, discrete language items or skills studied in decontextualised situations (Carr, 2005; Curriculum Council, 1998; Fatihi, 2003; Nunan, 1991). The concept of 'task' sits at the centre of current second language pedagogy (Carr, 2005; Nunan, 1991). Similarly, the WA Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998) for all schools describes tasks as either practice or use. Practice is understood to be exercise and rehearsal of language items that may lead towards deployment, whilst use is deployment or activity and can be used for assessment.

Approach to the unit and the research

An action research orientation underpins the project and the article. An application of action research in the TESOL context can be found in Auerbach (1994), Crookes (2003) and McDonough (2006); more general literature discussing the defining features of action research include Carr and Kemmis (1983), Grundy (1995), Holly, Arhar and Kasten, (2008), Noffke and Somekh (2009) and Willis (2010).

Aspects of action research are evident at three levels in this AWL project: in the design and review of the project, in the unit teaching, and in the work done by PSTs with the school students (although PSTs were not introduced to the term 'action research'). The three levels of action research are interconnected as *Figure 2* demonstrates. PSTs were required to collect relevant student data to inform their teaching, and reflect on student learning. Similarly, university staff were committed to making decisions based on appropriate data and good information. For example, in the teaching of the unit, after the first initial contact with ESL students

in the AWL school, unit tutorials required adjustment to include a session on research methods, and semi-structured interview techniques and data analysis, to ensure PST justification statements about their ESL student were valid and reliable. The focus of this paper is on the first of these three levels, the AWL project.

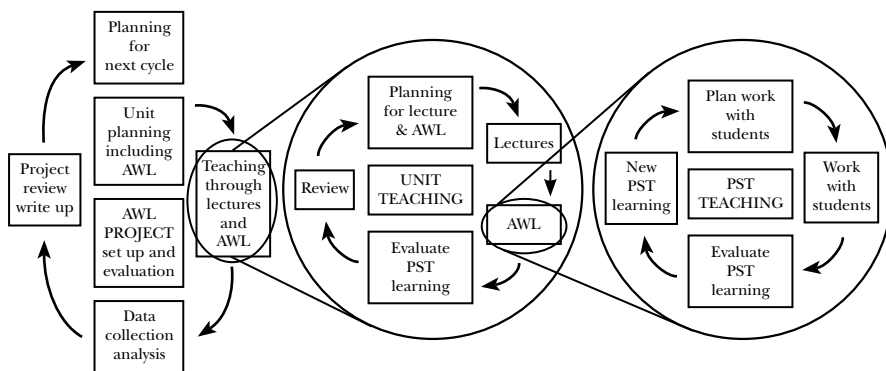


Figure 2: The three levels of action research within the AWL project

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from key stakeholders: PSTs, school leaders and relevant university staff. Methods used included questionnaires, interviews and the analysis of curriculum documentation as indicated below. A questionnaire designed by university staff was given to all PSTs by the Professional Practice Coordinator. The instrument appears in Appendix A of this article. Responses were received from 77% of PSTs and these were analysed to identify the themes and the frequency with which key issues were raised.

Telephone and/or email contact was attempted with all PSTs in March 2011, to ascertain their current employment status and their retrospective view of the importance of the AWL. Six of them were continuing with their studies. Of the twelve graduates, four were teaching their major, none was teaching TESOL, but one had needed her TESOL qualification for her position in the public service; and two did not respond. Perspectives from the principal and deputy principal of the partner school were ascertained in an unstructured interview via telephone. A SWOT analysis was then used to analyse the comments. In this article, quotes from interviews with four academics and school staff are designated Int1-Int4.

The PSTs participating in this project had varied backgrounds. The majority (67%) had LOTE as their curriculum major, but the cohort included PSTs with visual arts, English, society and

environment and science as their major. The first language was English for only 61% of PSTs; the remainder were, themselves, ESL speakers. First languages included Arabic (17%) and Japanese (17%). Golombek and Jordan (2005) provide a useful discussion of some of the additional challenges faced by non-native speakers in establishing credibility as legitimate teachers of English.

The findings: Stakeholders' perspectives

Five themes emerged from the data: the importance of establishing rapport with students; confidence in teaching ESL students; the overall impact of the experience on PSTs' learning; changes to PSTs' perceptions about ESL students; and the value of the assignments for the unit.

Establishing rapport with students

There were no specific questions about establishing rapport with students in the questionnaire. Nevertheless, when asked which aspects of the AWL supported their learning, half of the PSTs volunteered comments about the value they placed on having the opportunity to build relationships with students. Typical responses included "Engaging with the students themselves" (PST4), "Making connections with each student" (PST5), and "To be engaged with the students directly" (PST10). The TESOL lecturer and the school leaders considered this element to be pivotal. The lecturer reported that she emphasised to PSTs in the initial tutorials that their first priority was to build rapport with the students.

At the opening of the lecture on Needs Analysis the very first thing I spoke of was establishing rapport with individual students. I told the PSTs 'Without understanding a student's motivation for learning English you won't be able to respond effectively to that student's needs'. (Int1)

The principal commented that the PSTs had a good approach and that the IEC teacher was quite surprised how quickly they had made connections with the students. The Professional Practice Coordinator noted: "By the end of the authentic workplace learning, all of the PSTs had found points of contact with the students and 17 of the 18 PSTs had established appropriate rapport with the students" (Int2).

Confidence in teaching ESL students

In the concluding section of the questionnaire, PSTs were specifically asked about their confidence "going into an ESL class

(or working with an ESL student) when you begin teaching next year”. Altogether, 64% of respondents indicated that they had gained confidence in teaching ESL. They made comments such as “Before this unit my answer would have been ‘have no idea’☺” (PST8); and “Probably not VERY confident, but more so than if we hadn’t done the program” (PST1).

Impact on PSTs and their learning

PSTs spoke and wrote about the impact the AWL had on their teaching and on them personally. Asked “What aspects of this authentic workplace learning (AWL) experience supported your learning?” A total of 93% of PSTs commented on the value of TESOL practice teaching. For example: “Learnt a lot about what aspects of English is difficult for them” (PST1); “Real life contact with ESL students in mainstream school. Getting to learn how they feel, their range of language level and backgrounds. Real life work, problems and solutions” (PST13); and “Being able to use specific techniques we were taught in class was great. Just being around young students was a good experience” (PST14).

Perspectives about ESL students

A majority, 64%, of PSTs responding to the questionnaire commented on the new perspectives they had formed of ESL students. Clearly their assumptions and perceptions were challenged. For example, comments included: “My perception of their ability was completely wrong... Very nice, sweet students that need to be understood” (PST4); “Did not realise that many of those students had difficult upbringings” (PST8); and “Turned them from textbook examples to real life people, understand their displacement better (parents/family still overseas, war, villages etc.)” (PST13).

This element was of particular importance to the deputy principal at the school. Without prompting, he commented how pleased he was to hear that the PSTs recognised the ability of some of the students, and had learned not to judge their ability from their English language level. He added that, a couple of years hence, he expects that the dux of the school will be an IEC graduate (Int3). The capability of the ESL students was also an issue that repeatedly arose during focus group discussions. As the Professional Practice Coordinator noted:

From the first week, PSTs started talking of the students as individuals... and as teenagers with aspirations. They started

rejecting the stereotypical images in favour of comments such as ‘He’s actually a really nice kid’. (Int2)

The value and quality of the assessed work

Assessment communicates to students at any level the values placed on particular outcomes and activities. In 2010, assessment of the PSTs in the TESOL curriculum unit was based on activities undertaken in the partner school. Two assignments were set, each one designed to reinforce the importance of a key element in the unit. The first was a needs analysis assignment requiring PSTs to develop their capacity to collect data, synthesise and critically evaluate it, and then apply the resulting information when developing teaching strategies for ESL students. The second assignment required PSTs to provide an overview of a Teaching and Learning, and Assessment Program outlining suggestions for future teaching based on that needs analysis.

PSTs recognised the importance of the assigned work, even if they did not like the connection between the tasks. Many (57%) volunteered comments about assessment irrespective of the absence of any question on this topic. The following quotes provide a sample of the responses: “Preparation was quite time consuming... However, removing the exam from the unit made up for it” (PST2); and “The needs analysis was a nightmare. Helpful in the end but...” (PST14). Asked about the quality of the PSTs work, the lecturer commented:

Overall, the effort put into the assessment tasks was very, very good. They included samples of student work plus their interpretation of these. The mapping of the work against the progress map was also very good. And they demonstrated responsive teaching. They came up with tasks based on topics with intrinsic interest for their students. (Int1)

On the other hand, at least one student teacher did not value the link between the AWL and the assignments, commenting: “Assignment needs to be separate [not linked to the AWL program]” (PST1). This last comment indicates that further explanation of the logic behind the assignments may be needed in subsequent years.

The findings: Sustainability and improvement

In the context of its curriculum development, Charles Sturt University uses the World Commission on Environment and Development’s 1987 definition of sustainable development:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 43). The definition of sustainable educational leadership used by Hargreaves and Fink (2006) is consistent with this, but more specific in relevant ways:

Sustainable educational leadership preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to, and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future. (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 17)

Taking both these definitions into account, for the AWL to be sustainable it needs to develop deep learning for PSTs, create positive benefits for the school students, and have either a neutral or positive benefit on the relationship between the school and the university. Resourcing issues also need to be addressed; the AWL needs to ‘do no harm’ in the sense of not appropriating the resources normally allocated to other units.

Deep learning for PSTs and benefits for students

The discussion of the findings for the first research question provides clear evidence of the depth of PSTs’ learning in a range of dimensions that were dependent on experiential learning, such as gaining a first-hand knowledge of ESL students and establishing rapport with them. However the new version of the TESOL curriculum unit may have reduced the likelihood of meeting some specific needs of two groups of PSTs within the cohort: those whose major was not language related, and those for whom English was not a first language. The AWL program absorbed a considerable amount of time, reducing the lecture time from three to two hours per week and requiring much of this to be directed towards preparation and planning. This meant that less time could be spent on other aspects of the unit, including strategies to meet the particular needs of these two groups of PSTs.

The benefits for students are more difficult to assess, as collecting data from students was beyond the scope of the project. However the principal and deputy took an active interest in the project, checking up on each of the groups each week, and students’ learning was discussed with the school leadership team. Both the principal and deputy were enthusiastic about the project and the benefits for the students. Their comments, for example, included:

Great value, worked well, of mutual benefit. Students couldn’t help but get some benefit from being in the program... [The

students] seemed relatively engaged from the start, and this increased as the weeks went on. (Int3)

The benefit for the students was not described in terms of specific English language skills. Rather, it was described in terms of the opportunity for the students to use their English in a comfortable and safe environment.

There are great benefits for these students in being able to practise their English in a comfortable and safe environment. They need to develop their social English. In the yard and at home they tend to speak in their first language. It is good for us that they have this opportunity. (Int3)

The relationship between the school and the university

Partnerships between universities and schools are complex. Historically, the balance between give and take has favoured the university in ways that have been unsustainable. Typically, universities have used schools for providing field experience placements for PSTs offering little in return for their time and effort mentoring the PSTs. The AWL is one of a number of elements in the relationship between this particular university and school. Undoubtedly, it is one that was valued on both sides. Students and staff of the two institutions worked well together. The school leaders had brief weekly contact with the PSTs; the Professional Practice Coordinator had informal but regular contact with the school students and with school staff not involved in the program. The intense formal and informal interaction that occurred on a weekly basis contributed to a common intent and a sustainable relationship. For example, the principal commented that she would like her students to have their last session at the university, and volunteered to organise the transport for this. This can be interpreted as the school valuing the program.

Resourcing issues

There is no doubt that the AWL was time 'hungry', putting pressure on the PSTs, the lecturer and the programming of the unit and at the same time reducing the direct lecture time from three to two hours per week. The school visits ended up being a two hour commitment for the PSTs, with a focus group session immediately after their teaching session. Although notionally optional, there was 100% attendance at this, meaning that the unit effectively had four contact hours for the PSTs instead of three. Both lecturer and Professional Practice Coordinator considered that the focus group

session was an essential part of the program. So, in its 2010 format, the AWL did require additional time from staff and PSTs. Only one PST commented that work in this unit took time from other units, but PSTs were not specifically asked about the time commitment.

The lecturer was concerned that, because of time constraints, it was impossible to introduce PSTs to the upper school curriculum. This can only be justified because this is a TESOL minor, and as such, graduates are not supposed to be teaching upper school. But the reality is an increasing number are likely to gain employment as TESOL teachers. The integration of AWL into the TESOL curriculum unit relies on having a lecturer who is familiar with schools, classrooms and the practicalities of planning and teaching. All aspects of the Graduate Diploma of Education program are designed to contribute to PST readiness to teach the relevant group of students. The project arose from a practical difficulty in the program: PSTs with a TESOL minor were graduating without having any practicum experience in their minor teaching area. Does this matter? Is it unrealistic to expect them to transfer their knowledge of teaching their major to their minor? Does the fact that TESOL is not only a curriculum area but is also taught to a group of students with specific needs and characteristics make it any different to other minor teaching areas? If the answer to one or more of these questions is yes, then the absence of teaching practice in TESOL needs to be remedied in a sustainable way: through the TESOL curriculum unit or the course structure.

Concluding comments

Early in this article we posed two questions relating to the AWL. The first investigated the benefits of the AWL, as identified by stakeholders in the project; the second looked at the sustainability of the initiative. In this concluding section the findings presented above are considered in relation to these two questions and the broader issue of course context; in particular the ramifications for postgraduate teacher education programs.

Evidence provided in the preceding sections suggests that the AWL was very much appreciated by PSTs (“the best part of the course”) and pivotal in preparing PSTs to teach ESL students in the lower secondary context, contributing directly to their TESOL knowledge and understanding. Stakeholders were positive about the approach. They considered the main benefits of integrating AWL into the TESOL curriculum area to be in the authentic opportunity for PSTs to establish rapport with ESL students,

analyse their needs and teach them in small groups. The approach is sustainable, in the broader sense, with one proviso: resourcing issues do need to be reviewed.

Why did the AWL have such an impact? One explanation for this can be framed in terms of the ways in which the AWL met the perceived needs of the PSTs. It is common knowledge among course providers that PSTs value their in-school experience above any other element of the course. Graduate Diploma of Education PSTs currently have just one year of full time study in which to accumulate the practical experience required to learn to teach, and although the course provides them with twelve weeks in schools, for most PSTs none of this will involve teaching ESL. Previous cohorts of PSTs studying a TESOL minor have expressed frustration at their lack of such an opportunity, and as the school and university contexts had not changed radically, it was reasonable to assume the 2010 cohort would be no different. The AWL addressed this issue. It provided a context, a time and a structured program in which PSTs were given an opportunity to teach their minor subject and implement the theory they were being taught as well as experiencing success and receiving positive reinforcement directly from the students. The value of this was reinforced by the school and university staff associated with the program and the students.

There is a strong resonance between the AWL program, what the PSTs needed from their teacher education program, and what they valued in terms of their own learning. Whilst specific to the one unit and context, the findings are worthy of consideration in the broader context. Integrated AWL is one way of addressing the need for stronger connection between school and university based learning raised in many reports on teacher education.

Universities in Western Australia are preparing to shift the postgraduate teacher education programs from a one-year diploma to a two-year master degree. This provides new opportunities to reconsider ideas such as the one reported in this article and to rethink fundamental questions in relation to the ways in which the practicum is delivered: should some form of TESOL unit (with an AWL component) be offered to all PSTs? How and where in the course structure should PSTs be provided with the appropriate opportunities for practical teaching? The research reported in this paper may prompt some consideration of the value of integrating authentic workplace learning into curriculum units.

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Appendix A: TESOL Curriculum Unit Evaluation

General Questions

1. What aspects of this authentic workplace learning experience supported your learning?
2. What aspects of this authentic workplace learning experience hindered your learning?
3. What did you learn in this authentic workplace learning experience that you couldn't have learnt from a lecture/ tutorial on campus at uni?
4. What could be improved (and how)?
5. What could be done differently (and how)?
6. How did this improve your understanding about ESL learners?
7. Were there any times in this experience where you made connections which deepened your learning? (Were there any "A-HA" moments?)

Specific Questions

1. How did you find working in pairs/groups, with another Pre-service Teacher? What were the benefits? What were the drawbacks?
2. How many students were in your group? How did you find working with this number of students? What were the benefits? What were the drawbacks?
3. On the whole, do you feel like you had enough preparation from your uni sessions (not about your own time) to support you in doing a needs analysis? Specifically, what additional support would have helped? Specifically, what additional preparation would have helped?
4. On the whole, do you feel like you had enough preparation from your uni sessions (not about your own time) to support your preparation for your teaching program? Specifically, what additional support would have helped? Specifically, what additional preparation would have helped?
5. After completing this unit, do you think you will be confident going into an ESL class (or working with an ESL learner) when you begin teaching next year? Specifically, what aspects of this unit will you find most helpful in the future? Specifically, what could be done differently to enhance your future teaching of CALD (ESL) students?
6. Please add any other comments about the program that you feel helpful to improving this learning experience for future ECU students.

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