

Chapter 4.2

Reflective Practice, Professional Learning and Educational Partnerships: Effecting Change in Classroom Settings

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ABSTRACT

In light of current interest in teacher education, this chapter presents an outcome of a study that sought to explore ways that the classroom practices and status of teachers might be improved. The enquiry used a model of professional learning that incorporated blended learning, reflective practice, performance management processes, authentic experiences, and tertiary learning to encourage change in classroom settings. Teacher insights were explored and their classroom practices analysed to identify any change in teacher behaviours that might be attributed to participation in the learning program. Findings suggest that teachers are largely dissatisfied with conventional

approaches to professional development believing them to be separate from the classroom experience and ineffective in bring about change. However, teachers in this study found that a blended learning setting that fostered an intentional connection between theory and practice and collaborative learning provided a strong learning experience that translated to change in classroom practice.

INTRODUCTION

Many contemporary scholars assert that the role of the teacher is pivotal in the quality of student learning experience (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hill & Rowe, 1998; Hattie, Clinton, Thompson & Schmidt-Davies, 1995; Hattie, 2003). Given the extensive body of literature exploring effective

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teaching and learning practices (Dewey, 1929; Piaget, 1955; Vygotsky, 1978), it could reasonably be assumed that contemporary classroom practice would be informed by research findings. However, there is strong evidence that this is not the case (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1993; Newman & Cole, 2004) with some scholars arguing that school based learning has continued in a teacher centred manner despite evidence highlighting the limitations of this approach (Laurillard, 1997). Some scholars argue that school based learning is essentially separate from learning in the lived in world in several ways: school learning largely promotes individual endeavour and cognition, school learning concentrates on promoting 'pure thought' and abstract representations and symbol manipulation is favoured in school learning. Finally, school learning promotes generalised, theoretical principles and skills. In contrast, learning in the lived in world values situation-specific capabilities, shared learning experiences, the effective use of tools and actions that are closely connected to the actual context of objects and events (Resnick, 1987). Newman (2004) suggests that this separateness might be described as a problem of *ecological validity* whereby schooling is systematically different from everyday practices.

Some researchers posit the outcome of professional training activities is often a mere ten to fifteen percent of knowledge transfer from the learning setting to the work place as a consequence of this separateness (Broad & Newstron, 1992; Burke & Baldwin, 1999; Facticeau, Dobbins, Russell, Ladd, & Kudisch, 1995). It has been further suggested by Herrington (1997) that 'school based and university learning are at risk of being isolated, irrelevant and marginalised from mainstream real world activity and performance. It has been argued that the apparent separation of theory and practice is a consequence of a focus on a discrete body of knowledge separated into subject areas that characterises traditional classroom settings (Herrington 1997). In addition, traditional

classroom settings are often characterised by a prescribed timeframe and are removed from the realities of the lived in world. It has also been suggested that educational research has often been conducted without thought to connections between theory and practice (Reeves, 2000; Tanner, 1998). These assertions suggest that the constraints of the classroom setting and ill conceived goals of researchers compound separateness between theory and practice.

These views suggest that, in many instances, current educational practices do not reflect contemporary learning theory, are frequently divorced from the lived in world and are regularly not meeting the educational needs of stakeholders.

This situation suggests a need for enquiry into the ways that contemporary teaching and learning theory might be embedded in the practices of teachers to facilitate pedagogic change in classrooms in ways that overcome the limitations of these settings. In addition, there appears to be a strong need to explore ways to connect the goals of the researcher with those of the practitioner and to explore the influence these factors might have on knowledge transfer from the learning setting to the workplace.

Technologies

Many questions are currently being asked regarding the capacity of learning technologies to meet these educational needs in some way. Some scholars see this technology as potentially an economic vehicle to offer more access to education at a reduced cost (see Hiltz, 1998 p. 55; Holt & Thompson, 1998). Others see it as yet another fad in education that will go the way of radio and television, both of which promised to revolutionise education, but did not (Cuban, 1986 p. 74). Yet another faction sees technology as providing an opportunity to revolutionize the way we teach, providing the rich learning experiences that educators have advocated for many years (e.g. Hiltz, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Saettler, 1990).

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