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Teaching practice: new times for the Pacific

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As Pacific Islands teacher educators we agreed that in any teacher training programme, the teaching practice is important as it directly links courses taught at the teacher training institution to classroom teaching and student learning. It is a core component of any teacher training programme, giving trainee teachers the opportunity to put theory into practice.

Key components of any teaching practice are planning, creating a positive classroom learning environment and interacting with students to achieve learning outcomes. Trainee teachers must know how to create teaching plans and implement lessons that reflect appropriate educational goals, that respond clearly to learning objectives within the curriculum and that take account of student learning interests and needs.

The teaching practice gives trainee teachers the chance to apply their practical and theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning to a real life classroom. Their theoretical knowledge should be evident in their selection of resources



and teaching approaches. Trainees should be equipped to present content and ideas in ways that are pedagogically powerful and that will motivate and engage learners.

Our group was asked to describe the teaching practice models used in our teacher education institutions; to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of teaching studies courses in preparing trainee teachers for their school experience; to assess how theories of teaching and learning can be more successfully integrated with a student's teaching practice experience and vice versa; and to reconceptualise the teaching practice models and strategies that prepare trainees for the world of work. We have attempted to do this not small task, and also to provide some suggestions and guidelines to improve the teaching practice in our Pacific teacher education institutions.

The purpose of teaching practice

In our view teaching practice is a playing field or stage, providing trainee teachers with the opportunity to become familiar with the nature of teachers' work and the ways professional teachers operate in practice. As trainees experience teaching practice, they become confident to enter a classroom; to explore the rationale of teaching and learning in the modern world; to understand the role of schools within communities; and to manage the programmes taught to children in schools. They also become familiar with the 'duty of care' and the legal responsibilities of being teachers. At the same time they develop a collaborative, professional relationship with other staff.

Teaching practice provides hands-on experience in a variety of educational school contexts. In these contexts teacher trainees are able to develop rapport with children of different ages, cultures, intellects and social backgrounds as they interact with them on a daily basis during the practice. Before this, their experience of the classroom was as one of the pupils: from where the teacher stands, things look different, especially as the former pupil has now matured and begun thinking about a much bigger picture of 'the school experience'. Teaching practice is also a time when trainee teachers increase their understanding of the ways in which both children and educators operate



within the educational setting. Additionally, trainees gain an awareness of different teaching styles and learn to observe and manage the ever changing physical and emotional learning environments prevalent in schools.

The teaching practice must be the link between course content and fieldwork experience. By collecting information and carrying out observational tasks related to teaching and learning in the classroom, trainee teachers have the opportunity to explore the link between practical experience and theoretical course work.

Reflection is an important element in the teaching practice. Trainees need to be skilled in reflecting on all aspects of their classroom teaching and how it links with coursework. As well, they should be encouraged, early in their training, to reflect on whether or not they have made the right career choice.

Models of teaching practice

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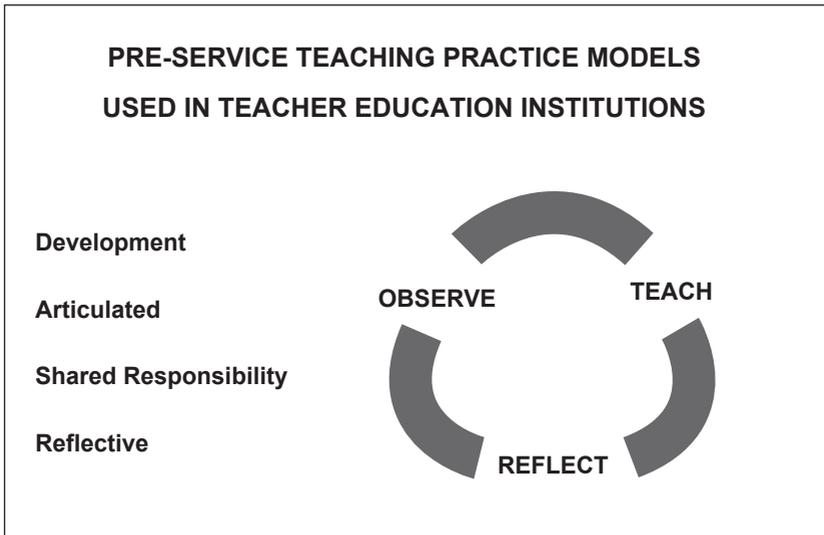
Though various pre-service teaching practice models are used by different Pacific Islands nations, the one we present in Figure 8.1 is the most prevalent. We argue that courses developed in teacher training institutions should be designed to develop the competencies illustrated in the model: observation; classroom teaching; and critical reflection. These competencies flow into each other in a continuous and mutually reinforcing stream. From observation of experienced teachers and themselves, trainees develop their repertoire of skills for use in the classroom, and from their critical reflection on how these practices ‘worked’, that is from their observation of themselves and their effects in the classroom, they refine or remake their skills and techniques. Courses, discussion and feedback offered by their trainers should be deliberately fostering their conscious employment of these processes.

Combined with the objective of achieving these competencies, the teaching practice needs to be:

Developmental: Trainee teachers progressively need to learn and practise the attributes, attitudes and competencies provided in the assessment standards.



Figure 8.1 Teaching practice: a generic model



Articulated: The academic, professional and social development integrated into their training programme is linked to or articulated with school experience through the teaching practice.

A shared responsibility: College lecturers, teacher trainees, associate teachers and teachers in schools are the key players in the teaching practice. This provides an opportunity for an equal sharing of voices in the processes of planning, delivery and assessment of trainee teachers before, during and after the teaching practice.

Reflective: The teaching practice should produce beginning teachers who are reflective and reflexive in their professional practice approach.

We envisage that every teaching practice should be focused on improving the teaching skills of trainees and the learning outcomes of all children in schools. Such an objective will be achieved only if there are good quality learning



courses and learning opportunities within teacher training institutions for all trainee teachers.

Preparation for teaching practice is no 'soft cop'. To execute teaching practice effectively, trainee teachers need to have a thorough professional knowledge of child growth and development that includes a study of how individuals and groups learn. As well, they should understand the role of education in society and be aware of relevant theories of education. Subject knowledge and skills are essential and a thorough knowledge of curriculum objectives, content and methodology is, likewise, vital. Trainees should also be familiar with particular ways of thinking about subjects or key learning areas in the curriculum. Additionally, they need to be able to teach and assess those subjects or key learning areas.

The relevance and effectiveness of teaching practice

Our group maintains that the relevance and effectiveness of teaching studies courses in preparing teacher trainees for their teaching practice is largely dependent on the issues raised above. However, not as yet mentioned is the need for proper evaluation and evaluation tools to measure the effectiveness of theory, and of the practice of theory in the classroom. There is also a need to examine carefully the link between the curriculum content taught and the teaching practice. Other critical questions that teacher educators need to ask themselves are these:

? *Question 1*

When the trainees take with them into the classroom the curriculum content they have been taught in the training institution, is the transition a smooth one? Are curriculum content lectures too theoretical and not practical enough?

? *Question 2*

Are the teacher trainees equipped to be reflective enough? Do they have the necessary skills to reflect constructively on the teaching practice?



? *Question 3*

Does the teacher educators' model of teaching practice presented here really reflect effective teaching practice in the Pacific Islands? Could a more culturally appropriate model be created locally?

? *Question 4*

How effective are teaching practice assessment procedures? How can the assessment model be more collaborative?

Theories underpinning teaching practice

Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, Maslow, Gardiner and Bronfenbrenner are some of the leading Western theorists whose theories of learning are widely used in teacher training institutions in our Pacific region. Our group felt serious disquiet about whether these theories are the best basis for understanding our Pacific Islands classrooms and students. The question of developing our own theories of learning and the need to do more research into how Pacific Islands children learn best should be seriously considered. When that is done, teacher educators need to apply these theories to their own teaching.

Some good teaching–learning models for the Pacific are already available and have been field-tested. These need to be tracked down, shared or 'borrowed', recontextualised, practised and used in our education institutions. For example, in Sāmoa there is a local theory that has been used in some of the teaching and learning programmes at the National University of Sāmoa.

We support the view that if all key players collaborate, share and reflect on their experiences from teaching practice, new contextualised models for the Pacific could evolve.

The power of feedback

Constructive feedback can be pivotal to the success of teaching practice. It is vital that associate teachers, lecturers and tutors provide teacher trainees with helpful feedback during the teaching practice. This can be done on a daily basis during block teaching sessions. It can be the most effective way to

help trainees learn about teaching and to develop into successful beginning teachers.

The purpose of the feedback is to support and direct student teachers' learning and development. It should recognise their strengths and successes as well as focusing on developmental needs. We suggest that an effective means towards this end is a *learning conversation* between the teacher trainee, the associate teacher and the lecturer or tutor. The learning conversation should focus on an aspect of the student trainee's work that has been recently observed.

It is necessary, when conducting feedback learning conversations, to keep the following principles in mind.

- Begin and end on a positive note. Lecturers, tutors and associate teachers need to help the trainee teacher see the feedback as part of the learning process, a form of encouragement rather than blame, fault-finding or a negative judgment.
- Select an appropriate time and place to hold the feedback learning conversation. It is important to ensure that the environment is as unthreatening as possible for the teacher trainee.
- Check that the teacher trainee understands the feedback by asking him/her to respond to feedback given by the team. Feedback must, as far as possible, be constructive.
- Assure the trainee teacher that the learning conversation is private and confidential, i.e. between the associate teacher, the lecturer, tutor and the trainee teacher only.
- Focus on the key issues and encourage and help the trainee teacher to reflect on the learning conversation.

Strategies to prepare teacher trainees for the world of work

We suggest the following strategies will help to prepare trainee teachers for the world of work:

- creating and maintaining positive relationships between teacher educators and trainees
- developing appropriate values for the teaching profession. (Possible inclusions are character building, a commitment to work, passion for teaching and a thirst for knowledge)
- developing literacy skills, critical and analytical thinking, and computer literacy
- allocating mentors or experienced teachers to work alongside trainee teachers during teaching practice
- building a support system for new teachers in the field; a mentoring system would be appropriate
- providing timely staff development for teachers and teacher educators to enable them to remain aware of contemporary issues and pass on educational innovations to trainees
- putting in place incentives for associate teachers who coach trainee teachers during teaching practice
- enabling teacher trainers to use feedback as an effective evaluation tool for the teaching practice
- developing closer links between curriculum developers, the Ministry of Education and teacher educators in the preparation of teacher trainees.

A teaching practice handbook that is useful, user-friendly and affordable can provide core information to all stakeholders involved in the teaching practice. The handbook must include a code of conduct for teaching practice that is determined by each Pacific Islands nation.

Learning through critical dialogue

Learning through critical dialogue is another strategy that we have found very useful. Using this technique, lecturers and tutors challenge trainee teachers' thinking and give them almost daily opportunities to talk about what they know and believe about learning and teaching. Trainees need to 'talk new



learning into existence' (Marsh, 1996). The importance of having lecturers and trainee teachers to talk with each other in a 'critical' (meaning 'analytically evaluative'; not meaning 'making adverse judgments') way about learning and teaching must be recognised. This dialogue is essential if student teachers are to grow into knowing and understanding what they are doing, why they are doing it and how they might improve their teaching practice. Such growth will ultimately benefit the children in their classes.

Trainee teachers need to write daily critical reflections about their observations and their teaching practice. Lecturers and tutors can draw on the reflections provided by trainee teachers. Topical issues raised can be discussed in regular focus group meetings with a group of trainee teachers in the same school. On the other hand, lecturers and tutors can pose topics for discussion as learning and teaching problems to be solved by the focus group.

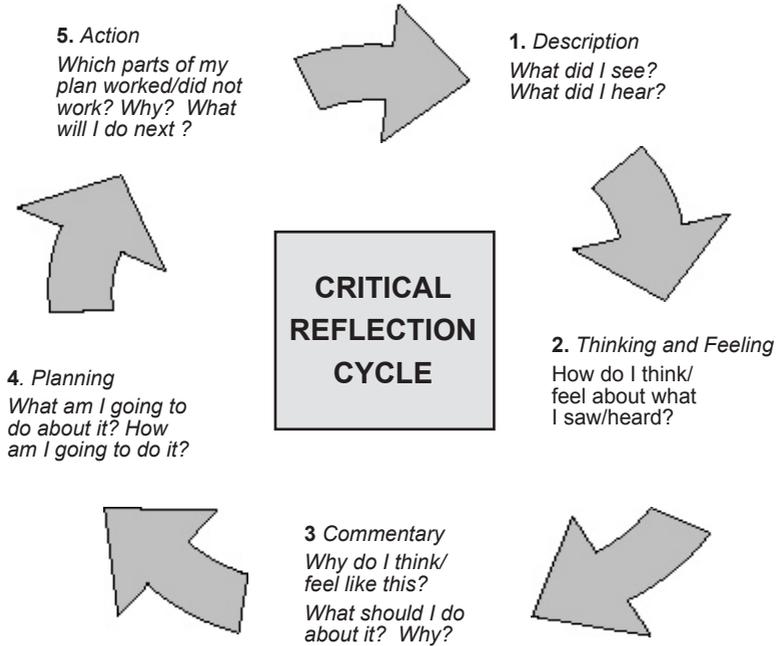
Trainee teachers and lecturers need to talk about problems that come up in the teaching practice; about what they know and believe; about possible ways of solving problems; and about what they have learned through the process of critical dialogue during the practice. It is envisaged that trainee teachers use their critical reflective journals to help them to think and to talk about their learning and their teaching on a daily basis. Therefore being reflective in this way is vital as it will guide trainee teachers on how to improve their work once back in the classrooms. In other words, trainee teachers should use the outcomes of their thinking, writing and talking to improve their college-based and classroom-based learning and teaching practice. The diagram of this cycle from the Lautoka Teachers College Professional Practice Strand Master Handbook (2005) best illustrates this reflective process (Figure 8.2).

A teaching portfolio

From our collective experience, we felt that another important strategy that works well is a teaching portfolio. This is a resource kit prepared by teacher trainees to take into their teaching career and to assist them as beginning



Figure 8.2 Critical reflection cycle



teachers. A trainee should re-arrange and re-organise his/her teaching portfolio regularly, as new ideas and resources are added and as things that are no longer useful are removed and replaced. It is important that at any time, the teacher trainee should be able to justify why each item has a place in his/her teaching portfolio.

By the end of the final block of teaching practice, the trainee teacher should have developed a collection of relevant and useful resources that will serve as a 'survival kit' for those early days of teaching. It will also serve as the basis for a living resource kit that will be further developed and refined with each year of professional experience.



In addition to structured lesson observations and critiques during the teaching practice, trainee teachers should systematically make copies of school and classroom records, teaching ideas and resources for inclusion in their portfolio. They need also to participate in and to keep records of other school activities such as assemblies, sports programmes, excursions, library use, staff meetings, school community projects, religious services, cultural programmes and any other relevant school activities. When trainee teachers have compiled a comprehensive portfolio they will feel far more confident and better prepared when faced with the realities of teaching.

Concluding summary

Drawing upon our first-hand experience of teacher education programmes in Pacific Islands nations, our group has put together some thoughts and ideas on the teaching practice. A teaching practice model has been identified and described. The relevance and effectiveness of teaching studies courses in preparing trainee teachers for their school experiences has also been highlighted. At the same time, the matter of theories of teaching and learning has been identified and discussed. We believe there is a significant challenge, for all of us who are Pacific Islands teacher educators, to develop our own theories to match the way our trainee teachers think and learn. We have also highlighted some strategies whereby teacher education programmes can best prepare trainee teachers for the world of work in the Pacific.

Though trainee teachers learn many important things in their initial preparation for teaching, in both courses of study and the teaching practice, there is still a great deal to learn during their first years of teaching and throughout their teaching career. This message should be passed on to them in pre-service training.

Teacher trainees sometimes see teaching practice as demanding and even too difficult in some situations. However, with strong well-taught teacher education programmes and the implementation of a thoughtfully prepared, innovative, culturally appropriate teaching practice, it can be an exciting, rewarding experience for trainees just starting out on a teaching career. Are we, the teacher educators of the Pacific, ready to accept this challenge?



Walking ahead

To ensure that our teaching practice in Pacific Islands nations continues to be relevant and effective we offer challenges to teacher educators in teacher training institutions across the region. To walk ahead we suggest, then, that:

- learning in Pacific Islands nations be localised through a process of observation, imitation and immersion in our own unique cultures
- the Pacific way of thinking communally and relationally be affirmed and incorporated in our education programmes. (Unlike those brought up in Western ways of thinking, we are not individualistic in our approach; we live and learn alongside others in our community) ¹
- we reconceptualise and encourage cooperative and active participatory learning
- we teach observational and questioning skills to teacher educators, teachers and trainees, to improve the overall quality of learning
- teaching in our own vernacular languages become an integral part of the teaching–learning process.

Note

- ¹ Konai Thaman has frequently written and spoken on the importance of embracing cultural understanding of ourselves within our pedagogy (see, for instance, Thaman, 1997).

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