

Socio-cultural theory and its place in the development of the Teacher Education Program at the Higher Colleges of Technology

Khadar Ali

Khadar Bashir-Ali has a PhD. in Foreign and Second Language Education from Ohio State University, USA, and worked for 17 years as a k-12 public school teacher in Ohio, teaching ESL and foreign language. She was also a visiting assistant professor at the Ohio State University, training in-service and pre-service language teachers. She was a faculty member in the teacher education program at Higher Colleges of Technology's Abu Dhabi Women's College for five years, before taking a leadership role in a USAID project in Somalia in 2010. Dr Ali's research interests include second language acquisition, teacher training, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, equity and access to education, research, curriculum development and assessment.

Introduction

Teaching and learning are socially situated activities that include human interactions, and all social interactions exist fundamentally in any educational context. Kublin et al (1998) indicate that “Vygotsky described learning as being embedded within social events and occurring as a child interacts with people, objects, and events in the environment” (p. 287). In this sense it is important to recognize that all teaching and learning activities take place in a social context where communities of practice function. Within this context, all participants in the communities are engaged in social actions and activities. Current research on learning indicates that there is now recognition of the relevance of the social context in which the teaching and learning communities are situated (Walker, 2003). Consequently, a paradigm shift which involves a critical re-evaluation of the teaching profession and subsequent reform of the professional formation of teachers in training is taking place in many educational institutions. Importance is now given to the social construct of teaching and learning contexts and of the communities that are engaged in collective practice. Hence, pedagogical practices are being related to social situations and grounded on critical socio-cultural theories.

Educational activities within a social and cultural context stem from the seminal work of Lev Vygotsky (1986) who indicates that optimal learning and cognitive development associated with higher order thinking are often socially situated. One of the central points of Vygotsky’s theory is that when students learn, they are not independent from their learning context and that their learning is influenced through their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1986). Similarly, teacher training in schools is influenced by the social and cultural realities that exist within those schools. Does socio-cultural understanding, awareness and training have a place in teacher education programs? Putnam and Borko (2000) claim that teacher education programs should take into account theories of socio-cultural understanding of the environment where student teachers learn and practice their profession. The adoption of socio-cultural theory approaches, which are collaborative by nature, attempts to provide solutions for existing pedagogical issues largely by acknowledging that teachers in training do not work in isolation. The support available within schools and universities can shape their future development. These learning experiences are socially dictated and support professional formation within the boundaries of the immediate social context. According to Tharp and Gilmore (1988) socio-cultural theory:

Has a profound implication for teaching, schooling, and education. A key feature of this emergent view of human development is that higher order functions develop out of social interaction. Vygotsky argues that a child’s development cannot be understood by a study of the individual. We must also examine the external social world in which that individual life has developed...Through participation in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions, children are drawn into the use of these functions in ways that nurture and ‘scaffold’ them (pp. 6-7).

We need to understand that from a socio-cultural perspective all teaching and learning activities involve social participation and interaction. In addition, all knowledge presented and acquired happens through continuous negotiation among all parties involved. Teachers negotiate with their learners and look for ways to make their teaching effective so that learners can achieve the knowledge. In addition, teaching in itself is a product of continuous exchange and sharing, both teachers and students participate in the exchange and this happens particularly in authentic contexts.

This chapter aims to discuss how socio-cultural theories and social learning shape pre-service teachers’ understanding of their profession in teacher training programs at the Higher Colleges of Technology’s (HCT) system of colleges in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The focus of the chapter is to discuss the impact of establishing communities of practice in the preparation of pre-service English language teachers, and to provide a critical re-evaluation of the state of teacher training in the UAE by looking particularly at experiential learning and how our student teachers’

cognition of teaching and learning is socially situated. Collins (1988) defines “situated learning as the notion of learning knowledge and skills in contexts that reflect the way they will be used in real life” (p. 2). Preparing teachers to learn new pedagogical skills includes the integration of both the theory and practice of teaching. The main educational theories are introduced in the colleges, however the practice of teaching, the actual real life application of the theories learned within the confines of the college classroom, take place in the schools. Tennant (1997) argues that all new knowledge and learning must be grounded within a context and this new knowledge and learning are properly conceived as being located in communities of practice. Hence the pre-service teachers are totally immersed in real life contexts at the apprenticeship stage of their teaching practice and acquire their skills and knowledge about teaching within a community context.

The chapter begins by looking into the existence of communities of practice (Rogoff, 1994), and how these communities contribute to the professional formation of the teachers in the education division at HCT. The chapter also looks at the relationships among all parties involved in training these teachers and discuss how these relationships that support their apprenticeship are formed, and how they impact on the professional development of these future teachers. Finally, the chapter offers some suggestions as to what can be done to create a community of practitioners and learners that share the same values about the teaching profession.

Establishing Communities of Practice

Although the term ‘communities of practice’ is not used in the preparation of our pre-service teachers, there is ample evidence that our future teachers enjoy the support of both their university teachers/supervisors and their school mentors. All of these parties work together and actively contribute to the professional growth of these teachers. Both the teaching and learning environments allow these future teachers to grow in their understanding of the competencies associated to the teaching profession, while, during their apprentice stage in the schools, they actively demonstrate their performance and the application of the theories they investigated in the college. Hence they learn and practice their trade within a community of practitioners.

One of the most important elements of teacher training is to understand the value of collaboration between university faculty, pre-service teachers and their school mentors. Prior to their graduation, all pre-service teachers must undergo an extended period of practicing their profession in local schools. This is their apprenticeship stage, where future teachers practice and hone their skills in preparation for their own teaching careers. This process is not performed in isolation; rather, it requires constant collaboration between all parties engaged in the development of the pre-service teachers’ professional formation. These student teachers engage with the theories and concepts related to the understanding of teaching approaches in their university classrooms, then they go to the schools where they attempt to put into practice the theories they acquired under the direct supervision of their university teachers and their school mentors. Consequently, professional relationships are formed between all these entities. These relationships are grounded on continuous discussions, negotiations, exchanges and reflections, where all the participants negotiate their actions leading to active engagement and collaboration. These collaborative practices are what Wenger (1998) calls “communities of practice”. These are based on collaboration and team work and are thus the property of a kind of community “created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise” (p. 45). It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities - communities of practice. All of these active experiences are grounded on the perception that teachers learn by experimenting teaching methods and approaches within the framework of a community of practice. Our pre-service teachers are situated in this social milieu where they get to try, practice, make mistakes, and learn to overcome challenges related to their professional formation. As these experiences take place in a social environment, our future teachers observe practices modeled by both their university supervisors and their mentor teachers in the schools. Providing models of best practices is one of the essential elements of teacher training. This is also a notion supported

by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. In this theory, Bandura puts great emphasis on the relevance of observation and modeling of optimal professional behaviors. He states:

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (p. 22).

At the basis of this theory is the constant practice and revision of best professional behaviors. The pre-service teachers are likely to emulate the behaviors they observe and take on some of the characteristic of their teachers and mentors.

These student teachers are also engaged in continuous reflection throughout their teaching practices in the four years they are in the college. They perform a series of tasks and activities related to teaching, and they get to experiment transformational pedagogical methods where they discuss the outcomes with their university teachers and their cooperating mentor teachers. Continuous support and scaffolding is offered to these teachers. They gradually acquire the concepts and theories related to teaching and learning throughout their four years in the college. Contemporaneous to their acquisition of learning theories and concepts in the college, these pre-service teachers are afforded the opportunity to perform gradual teaching tasks during their four year of teaching practice. This practical experience is in four highly integrated stages.

- Stage one: Year one: Students begin with simple observational assignments and performing limited task with few responsibilities under the direct supervision of both their mentor teachers and university supervisors. Their tasks will gradually increase as they move on to the next stage.
- Stage two: Year two: Students get the opportunity to observe and experience teaching in private schools, then they move to government schools where they get to implement some of the teaching strategies they observed in the private schools settings.
- Stage three: Year three: Students spend four weeks semester one in a preparatory school and four weeks in a primary schools. Their teaching time has gradually increased along with their responsibilities as teachers.
- Stage four: Year four: In this stage, students have an extended time in the schools. They spend 16 weeks teaching in the schools. During this time, they are expected to assume full teaching responsibilities, teaching half of their mentor teacher's teaching load. In this final stage of their professional development, these pre-service teachers are required to assume full teaching duty, and participate fully in the school life.

During these practical experience placements students develop their teaching skills in the schools while continuing to investigate and develop educational theories and beliefs at their colleges. It is hoped that one outcome of this process is the understanding of the need for continuous improvement through professional development and reflective practices.

At the basis of the communities of practice are the continuous social interactions and negotiations between the pre-service teachers, their university teachers and their school mentors. These pre-service teachers move from the margins of their profession into the centers of that profession, where they will gradually develop and become teachers.

Mentoring and Scaffolding

According to Vygotsky (1986), shared enterprises such as collaboration, modeling, scaffolding and peer support lead to cognitive development, and these elements are vital to the professional growth and knowledge acquisition of our future teachers. It is crucial to understand that learning how to teach is not an easy feat. Our student teachers face a number of challenges and they struggle with many issues during their professional formation. Gold (1996) talks about two fundamental concepts pre-service teachers must be aware of as they prepare for their careers. These are instructional and psychological awareness. Instructional support helps the student teachers to succeed in classroom and school settings, while psychological support facilitates self-confidence, self-esteem, self-reliance, and ways to handle stress. Instructional issues are associated with how teacher training institutions prepare pre-service teachers, and in the case of the HCT the communities of practice model fits. Although acquiring instructional strategies are essential, the psychological factors of how these teachers views themselves as professionals, improve their confidence in teaching, and boost their self esteem as professionals while they adopt their teacher identity, are also of great importance. Teacher training institutions should also encourage their students to actively contribute to their learning process by bringing their own social and cultural experiences into their teaching. Teaching is a multi-dimensional job, to learn to be effective teachers, individuals need to master a number of skills. These include: 1) knowing your subject matter; 2) knowing your practice and your instructional methods; 3) knowing your students; 4) knowing your classroom and school environment; and 5) knowing the community you serve. It is not an easy task for pre-service teachers to master all of these skills.

Teaching and learning do not happen in isolation; rather they are highly integrated and grounded on multiple perspectives. In fact, McDermott (in Murphy 1999) indicates that:

Learning traditionally gets measured on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads... [Here] learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part (p. 17).

In the true spirit of communities of practice, learning to teach is a shared enterprise. There is an entire community that forms around the student teachers and supports their professional growth. This notion is also based on the old African adage that states "it takes a village to raise a child"; based on this premise, in our context, it takes a community of practitioners to make a teacher. Each member in the community has a set of skill and expertise which they contribute to the future teachers. For instance, the college faculty facilitate pre-service teachers' understanding of concepts and theories related to teaching and learning. In the same fashion, mentor college teachers assigned to each student, support the professional formation of the student teachers by shaping their way of thinking about pedagogical application and the practicality of teaching. They observe them in the schools, guide them by offering examples of best practices, and team-teach with them by modeling good practice. During their teaching practicum, student teachers are mentored by their cooperating mentor school teachers. These in-school mentor teachers guide the pre-service teachers through their quest of becoming teachers. Similarly, student teachers enjoy the support and assistance of their peers. With their peers, these pre-service teachers learn to explore and experiment new teaching approaches and they do so with each others' support, as they are going through the same experience together (Eick, 2002). All of these experiences are what contributes to the making of a truly collaborative experience for these new teachers. The teachers in training receive continuous scaffolding from the day they enter the education program. We have to keep in mind that their beliefs about teaching and learning during their apprenticeship stage shape their entire teaching careers. For this reason, I believe the communities of practice that shape the professional formation of these students

teacher must offer optimal examples of teaching and these teaching experiences must be continuously scaffolded Vygotsky (1986). Zhao and Orey (1999) state, "scaffolding is a special type of instructional process which works in a task-sharing situation between the teacher and the learner" (p. 6). Scaffolding the teacher's new knowledge as they are acquiring it provides them with a sense of support all around them. The university supervisors are there to evaluate and build the learning of the new practicing teachers; in the same fashion these teachers receive support from their school mentor teachers and their peers.

Scrutinizing the Communities of Practice

As stated above students really enjoy a great deal of support and continuous scaffolding, however, not all these relationships are grounded on effective models of teaching. If we closely scrutinize the support mentor teachers in schools give our students, we can safely say that not all of them know about effective pedagogical teaching approaches. As a result, some of our pre-service teachers learn to emulate professional behaviors that are not based on teaching practice as taught at HCT. Bandura's social learning theory can in fact be a detriment to these teachers as they emulate poor teaching behaviors. Another concern is based on the fact that some schools now have in-house educational consultants. These expert consultants from predominantly western countries provide guidance, support and resources to teachers in the school and to our students. In their capacity of teacher mentor, they observe the teaching of our students. However, these experts do not necessarily share the pedagogical approaches of the HCT and a pedagogical conflict can arise. This works against the true concepts of community of practice. Wenger (1998) clearly stated that to be in a collaborative relationship, there must be true reciprocal exchange of ideas and knowledge. There is no room for relationships that follow positions of domination and subordination, whether those positions be real or perceived. The quality of these relationships should be re-evaluated where it applies, and a true reciprocal exchange of knowledge must be initiated. Although our students are still learning to teach, they can in fact contribute to the teaching and learning contexts, and they should be encouraged to participate. As educators of these pre-service teachers, we should also build their confidence and self esteem and encourage them to think of themselves as professionals. We should also address issues of poor teacher models and encourage our students to actively participate in their teaching and in their students' learning.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed issues related to building communities of practices in the professional formation our pre-service teachers. I also raise the need for careful evaluation and re-evaluation of the relationships within those communities. All of us involved in preparing these pre-service teachers share a common interest, which is supporting these students to enter the teaching workforce well prepared and ready to contribute to the education of the country. In addition, since we share a common goal, we should acknowledge each other's expertise and encourage all involved to participate.

It is clear that there are some challenges discussed in the chapter, however, it is safe to assume that we are making progress on how we prepare our teachers. For a community of practice to function, there must be true collective interdependence and all involved must contribute. For example, we can encourage our students to share their practical lesson plans, activities, vocabulary flash cards with their mentor teacher. We can ask mentor teachers to support and model effective practice. The university supervisor can be the critical friend that provides constructive criticism while scaffolding learning. This collaboration and integration of theory and practice are true examples of communities of practice and support Darling-Hammond (1999), who states:

Teachers learn just as students do: by studying, doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning cannot occur either in college classroom divorced from engagement in practice or in school classroom divorced from knowledge about how to interpret practice. Good settings for teacher learning – in both colleges of education and schools – provide lots of opportunities for research and inquiry, for trying and testing for talking about and evaluating the results of learning and teaching (p. 28).

To sum up, we must support strategic engagement of our pre-service teachers. We understand that teaching is not separated from its social context; therefore, we need to encourage our students to be actively engaged in their professional formation through the integration of their newly acquired theory to their practice in the schools, and find ways to contribute to and advocate for quality learning for their students. As college teachers and supervisors, we must carefully appraise our involvement in our students' professional development and provide opportunities for them to be engaged freely in activities and tasks where they have the opportunity to interrogate themselves and others in the community as they build their own professional identity.

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