

The Centrality of Teaching Practice in the HCT Bachelor of Education

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Introduction

Teaching Practice (TP) is an integral part of the Bachelor of Education program at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT). This paper describes the overall structure of the program and the way it links the theoretical aspects of the course to best practice. As the program has developed, there has been a growing appreciation of how central TP is to the successful development of teachers. The program emphasizes the implementation of current educational theory, taking into account local context. The paper outlines some strategies trialled at Dubai Women's College (DWC) over the four years of the B.Ed program, including the placement of students in private schools during their first semester. This is seen as a key for the success of graduates in a context where there is acknowledgement that an enormous amount of change needs to take place to improve educational outcomes for the local population. One crucial aspect of this emphasis is on HCT faculty acting as mentors while student teachers are in the classroom. This shifts the focus of class observations from assessment to reflective practice, which is a skill that needs time and practice.

The UAE and Emiratization

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a progressive and rapidly developing country and there is a growing recognition that education needs to become an important focus if Emiratis are to be competitive in a workplace dominated by expatriate workers. The government has increasingly supported a push for Emiratis to assume positions previously held by expatriate workers, particularly in areas such as education. According to data from the McKinsey Institute, the biggest challenge facing Emiratis seeking employment in the region is that private companies do not want to employ locals because they believe the educational system has failed them, and therefore locals are not fit for purpose. With fewer than 1% employed in the private sector, the UAE holds the unenviable position of having the lowest percentage of locals working in the private sector in the region (Al-Kibsi, Benkart & Schubert, 2007).

Arabic is the first and only official language in the UAE but English is becoming increasingly prominent. There is wide criticism of current teaching practices which are considered to be ineffective and failing to prepare Emirati children adequately (Barber, Mourshed & Whelan, 2007, p. 39). In Dubai, the recently-established Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) has been created to take on the task of implementing change in education, and English language teaching and learning is an important part of this brief. Likewise, the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) has been founded with a similar mission.

The HCT Bachelor of Education

The Higher Colleges of Technology four year Bachelor of Education program, designed to prepare Emirati women to teach English in primary, preparatory and secondary schools in the UAE, recognises the importance of teaching practicum in the development of young Emirati women trainees. Each year student teachers spend several weeks in schools in the UAE to observe, teach and reflect on the teaching and learning cycle. Teaching practice takes place throughout the four years of the degree with the first teaching practice experience scheduled in semester one of the first year.

In an attempt to prepare teacher trainees for the UAE Ministry of Education and Youth Vision 2020, in which "the focus will shift from teaching to learning, from the teacher to the learner, from memorization to creativity, reflection, imagination and innovation" (UAE Ministry of Education and Youth, 2000, p.87), Dubai Women's College recently trialled new approaches to school placement. It was recognized by staff that students were not experiencing models of teaching and learning which the program promoted. On teaching practice in local schools, students were more commonly exposed to a traditional, teacher-centred methodology which was at odds with

methodologies being advocated at the college. It became increasingly clear to staff that students were being asked to critically reflect on methods of teaching which they had not experienced or had exposure to. Therefore, an attempt was made to place students in educational contexts where approaches to learning and teaching based on more recent theoretical principles were being implemented. In Dubai we are fortunate to find many international schools with teaching environments which reflect the models promoted in the Bachelor of Education Program. These schools have welcomed our students to their classrooms to observe and assist in the classroom.

An argument used in pre-service teacher education is that knowledge involves lived experience and not just accumulated information (Johnson, 2006). Accordingly, it is recognized that students bring their own experiences, values, beliefs and personalities to the learning-teaching cycle. Learning is “not the appropriation of skills or knowledge from the outside in, but the progressive movement from external, socially mediated activity to internal meditational control by individual learners which results in the transformation of both the self and the activity” (Johnson, 2006, p. 238). It follows that it would be beneficial to give students the experience of interacting with teachers and children in classrooms where contemporary models occur and to then link this with theoretical understanding. Without hands-on experience of recent methodology, new approaches become theoretical ideas, but not necessarily part of the students’ repertoire of knowledge from which they can draw, as theory does not necessarily translate into Second Language (L2) teaching practices. The theory/practice debate might better be focused on “creating opportunities for L2 teachers to make sense of those theories in their professional lives and the settings where they work” (Johnson, 2006, p.238). From this perspective pre-service teachers can benefit from a range of educational settings giving them the opportunity to capture how theory and practice inform one another so that they can consider how to become active users of these ideas in their own contexts. This process informs teachers’ work.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice as a principle embodies key ideas which highlight the importance of reflection and inquiry into teachers’ experiences as mechanisms for change in classroom practices. It is used by professionals who are willing and able to reflect upon the ideological principles that inform practice, who connect pedagogical theory with practice to wider social issues, and who work together to share ideas. This model enables students to experience alternative methodologies while considering local contexts and personal values. It encourages peer coaching, cooperative development and teacher study groups. It also encourages answers to real questions and solutions which are contextually appropriate. Reflective practice suggests the idea of student independence through self reliance and an ability to be self critical. Through exposure to contemporary models of learning and teaching, as demonstrated in international schools in Dubai, where general principles of good practice are established, students would be empowered to reflect and comment critically on their practice. This would give them a wider repertoire of ideas to draw from so that they could come up with their own solutions to issues in local contexts.

These ideas are supported by feedback in student journals where observations and reflections are recorded. Reading through student entries it became clear that students were gaining a deeper and more varied level of understanding of teaching and learning from their international school experience:

“They also enjoy P.E, which is quite understandable for children of their age, that’s because they simply like to move, run after their friends and play with balls and hula hoops. For them, this period is all about playing and having fun, but they don’t really realize that the games that they’re playing actually develops so many aspects at the same time. The difference between this period and the developmental play period that they have at the beginning of the day is that the coach is the one who chooses the games, which enables him to manage the part that he wants to develop in the children” (M, 2007).

Students noted that these experiences changed not only their ideas but also changed them on a personal and deeper level:

"These moments might not be a big deal for other people, but it is for me, because these are moments when you feel that there are children who actually think of you as their teacher and their role model. It's a total different feeling that no one would understand except those who experience it" (M, 2007).

"Honestly I'm a moody person, and I know that this would definitely affect my future in teaching. Before coming to this program I used to deal with everything with anger... However, I have realized that there is no solution when dealing with problems by anger and shouting. I really, really want to change this and I'm happy that I'm starting doing that. .. Now I'm learning new techniques to deal with difficult children and especially the noisy ones but calmly!" (E, 2007).

Pre-service teacher training is not something that is done to teachers but should encompass an approach which combines hands-on experience, theoretical knowledge and an ability to ask questions and link personal experience with current views on what constitutes effective teaching and learning.

Teaching practice

Teaching practice is viewed as central to the HCT Bachelor of Education program. The teaching of educational theory is seen as essential but the classroom is where theory becomes practice. While still following the required format of the Bachelor of Education program at the HCT, some new initiatives were trialled at DWC in the hope of further developing the links between theory and practice. The following section presents those initiatives and student responses to them.

International primary school placement

For the first time in the academic year 2007-08, Year 1 students of the B Ed English Language Teaching in Schools (ELTS) strand at DWC spent their first semester conducting various observation tasks in private international schools, rather than their government counterparts. The decision to pilot this change the focus was based on the fact that we wanted our students to be exposed to models of more modern and more communicative teaching. We were hoping that the international school placement would allow them to witness positive attitudes and strong links amongst schoolchildren, their parents, teachers and administrators and the work ethic that we would like to instil in them as future teachers. Our students were supported by committed and experienced teachers who implemented the ways of teaching our students knew about from their college classes and their textbooks.

The students were placed in schools once a week for 10 weeks. In this way, each week they were able to discuss their experiences and be given guidance as to how to observe and reflect on their experience. The weekly feedback sessions were invaluable in helping the students to reflect on their learning. Our students developed close working relationships with their mentor school teachers, many of whom had never worked with Emirati women before. The reciprocal relationship enhanced the value of the interaction both personally and professionally. As a result, a trust relationship developed and many of the students were given the opportunity to work with the children beyond the observation requirement. They read stories, assisted with one-to-one assessments, helped build displays, worked with the children on computers, took them to the swimming pool and gained rich insights into teaching and learning inside and outside the classroom. One of the significant learning outcomes was about classroom management. By the end of the 10 day placement almost every student could articulate methods to manage children, to discipline them positively, to move them from place to place and as a class they were

able to share a huge repertoire of management techniques.

The results of implementing this approach have been invaluable. The journals of this group of students reflect a depth of analysis and understanding and critical thinking in tackling the various challenges they had not experienced or even expected before. The journal entries also reflect their new perceptions of what their role as a future teacher is and how they could try to put into practice theoretical models once they find themselves in the local school setting.

This group of students was able to give clear examples of the theory of childhood development they had been studying, showing that they were making links between what was taught in the college and the way in which children grow and learn. One journal entry demonstrates this: *“From what I’ve learned in Piaget’s theory that children in their age can’t really understand something they can’t see or feel, so she did an activity with them...”* (M, 2007).

Kindergarten: private and international experience

Dubai Women’s College was the first HCT campus to offer a new program offering in Early Childhood Education, in academic year 2006-7. To ensure a breadth of program options at the college, the beginning cohort alternates each year between this program and the B.Ed – English Language Teaching in Schools degree.

In their first year, the Early Childhood Education students spent one day a week placed in private nurseries or kindergartens, assisting teachers and observing children’s behaviour and learning strategies. In semester 2 of their first year, teaching practice was extended by an additional week compared to what was originally envisioned for the program, to allow for consolidation of knowledge and a more continuous and hands-on experience with children. Although our students sometimes found the international environment of the schools challenging at first, they witnessed numerous examples of effective teaching and could see what they had been studying in the college. Again, their observation tasks, weekly journals and post-observation discussions with the teachers in the college showed a depth of thinking, with the students asking pointed questions and analyzing the observations they had made by relating them to theory.

In academic year 2007-8, Early Childhood student in Year 2 of their studies students undertook teaching practice placements in government nurseries. Though culturally more familiar with the setting, they often found the atmosphere frustrating. In classes back at college, students discussed the change process and reflected on what is needed to improve current practices, for example:

“In order for the teachers in the (government) kindergartens to change they need to feel that they are most important people, and that they are the ones that are initiating the new generations. I feel that the teachers do not know or do not understand how important their role is. The government, the media and the community around them should support them in this as a start to change the way they feel towards this profession” (F, 2007).

Online coffee shop

During semester 2 in academic year 2007-8, year 4 students were given access to an online ‘coffee shop’ while they were on TP. This is a discussion group using Web CT/Blackboard Vista which to support of student teachers while they were out in the various schools around Dubai. It offered students an opportunity to offload, chat and problem-solve without any agenda or assessment requirement. Faculty had access to the site but only for the purpose of support when it was needed. The site was used regularly by students who appreciated the opportunity to share feelings, problems and successes with their college colleagues while they were in schools. Because the online coffee shop proved to be effective and appreciated, since then

similar discussion forums have been opened up for students in other years as well.

Moderation

Another ongoing and important TP initiative at DWC has been the introduction of teaching practice moderation. All Bachelor of Education faculty have students assigned to them for teaching practice, but in addition every student is visited by another college faculty member at least once during the placement. This benefits the faculty as well as the students. It gives staff a chance to discuss the lessons, reflect on their perceptions of student performance and evaluate students' progress from semester to semester. Teachers can evaluate the way in which students are prepared for placement, as consistent weaknesses become evident, and assist each other in finding ways to rectify the issues. This moderation process is used to set standards and moderate grades. Additionally, if not more importantly, students gain the advantage of advice and support from another mentor which often results in new perspectives due the varied experience and foci of the individual teacher mentors.

Peer mentoring

According to Robertson (2005), a coaching model encourages peers to work together to find solutions to real problems at a local and practical level. Coaching is a "special, sometimes reciprocal relationship between two people who work together to set professional goals and achieve them" (Robertson, 2005, p.24). The coach has two roles either as mentor/coach (more of an instructional role) or a coach who asks questions which enable the practitioner to find answers to issues s/he identifies. As suggested by Rogers (2007), good coaches ask 'better questions' giving students the tools to enable them to ask the "taken-for granted assumptions about what is and what is not possible within the contexts within which they teach, systematically problematize their own everyday practices and regularly ask broader questions not just whether their practices work but for whom, in what ways and why" (Johnson, 2006, p.249).

In the forthcoming semester, Year 1 students will be paired with our Year 4 cohort. The year one students will learn about planning for the first time. Our seniors, who will be in schools for 9 weeks on their internship, will talk through a lesson plan with the Year 1 students. They will explain the lesson planning process and the various strategies and techniques they will use in the lesson. Year 1 students will then observe the lesson and complete observation task questions about the lesson, the plan and then reflect on the lesson based on their own and the individual Year 4 student's perceptions. The task will be reflective rather than evaluative in nature. The goal of this placement is to have students learn about planning through experience – by being involved in and seeing the process of their more skilled peers. Naturally, this pairing will also be beneficial for our senior students, who will need to reflect carefully on their planning before the lesson and explain how they will evaluate the children's learning after the lesson. It will also act as an introduction to the government teaching context for our year one students.

Staff as mentors and coaches

Although Bachelor of Education faculty are required to assess students on placement, their main role is seen as mentoring, shifting the focus from assessment to facilitation. During the feedback sessions, students are asked to reflect on the success of their lessons and they are guided as the mentor asks questions which stimulate ideas about the success and failure of the lesson based on the perceptions and feelings of the trainee. "Part of the mentor's role is emotional support but more important is the ability to also challenge that teacher in a supportive way ... It's not putting your judgement on it but asking questions so they think about it. It is challenging practice but it's also about fostering reflective practice" (Shaw in Education Gazette, 2009).

Future development

In the future, it is hoped that teaching practice will be developed to include more peer observation and mentoring. Students will be trained with specific techniques which will enable them to provide helpful feedback: "It is most important that any coaching partnership maintains the principle that, first and foremost, coaches are effective learners and enter the coaching relationship willing to learn. To be effective, coaches need to be equipped with specific skills" (Robertson, 2005, p.109). These skills include techniques which encourage the reflective process and need to be actively taught. "Coaches need quite specific guidelines when conducting reflective interviews. They also need to consider afterwards how effective the interview session was in stimulating their coaching partner to think critically about their practice" (p.120). Robertson provides examples of specific techniques based on the use of non-judgmental wording and questions at three levels. Level 1 questions are designed to clarify thinking about what happened, level 2 questions clarify purpose and level 3 questions look at outcomes, such as "*What impact will this have ... ? How does this support your goals and aims... ?*" (p.120). It is useful for students to act as coaches but this does require very specific training if the process is to be effective. Effective questioning from a mentor should empower the person being observed to also ask questions and find solutions to her own questions.

Students will also be encouraged to use video cameras to record lessons so that they have the opportunity to watch themselves teaching at a later stage. This will facilitate very detailed observations of teachers and children which can be conducted with both teacher and peer mentors. This approach requires consent from the participants to comply with ethical considerations.

The students, it is hoped, as agents of change, will find contextually appropriate solutions to issues identified in their teaching. As Emiratis they are well placed to understand local issues and agendas and to find solutions to improve education at all levels. It is a demanding task and one which can be overwhelming for new graduates who often find they are given major responsibilities in their first year of teaching. Reflective practice including peer mentoring is seen as a way to provide skills which can be used both pre- and post-service for young teachers in a very challenging context at a time of great change and possibility.

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