

EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING MEDIUM IN SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the varied learning experiences that integrated socio-cultural theory, community engagement, and e-learning offered by the “Diversity, Social Justice and Schooling” subject at the University of Western Sydney. This subject engaged university students in the learning process in a reflective and critical way by responding to a need identified by community. Together with education technology, subject content knowledge, and community engagement, the social justice subject aimed to enhance the educational achievement of marginalised groups, while simultaneously supporting pre-service teachers in the context of their development as educators committed to a social justice ethos.

Introduction

Schools in Greater Western Sydney, where most UWS education graduates will work as teachers, now enrol children and youth from first or second generation families from more than a hundred and fifty nations. As school populations become more diverse in cultures and languages, the need for pre-service teachers to better understand and work with issues of difference in the classroom becomes critical. For pre-service teachers this means being able to understand and examine their own values and beliefs about the role of education in creating social justice and cross-cultural understanding. To address these learning needs, connections are made between the teaching unit “Diversity, Social Justice and Schooling” and the community engagement/service learning programs Refugee Action Support (RAS), Crossing Borders, and Community Action Support (CAS). Pre-service teachers are encouraged to articulate a vision of teaching and learning within the diverse society we have become and then use that vision to infuse social justice and cultural issues throughout their teaching. Moreover, pre-service teachers are provided with an opportunity to experience the social justice unit through e-learning pedagogy and academic service learning projects and activities which enable them to understand the broader societal implications of being a teacher and appreciate the ultimate aims of teaching: to help students learn, to respect each other, and to become active agents in their own professional development by having the ability to keep open minds and bring about change in the teaching-learning process.

The analysis of the content of discourse within the online reflective journals provides a useful example of transcripts of discussions that are easily accessible and noteworthy evidence of learning among the participants. Using a social constructivist view of learning allowed me as a researcher to focus on a search for evidence in the online discussions in which participants link new knowledge to their prior knowledge (Boekaerts & Simons, 1995) and make meaning through their experience in the service learning programs (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Further, by using a socio-cultural theory framework, that learning is a process of participating in cultural practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991) — in this case in the various community programs analysis of the online reflective journals was possible. The e-learning component of the service learning initiatives was able to guide, facilitate, and structure the contributions of pre-service teachers and others, and in so doing assisted pre-service teachers to modify and develop their own learning processes. In conceptualising the role of social justice for teacher preparation, the focus in the paper is on the role of e-learning in assisting educators to critique the larger socio-cultural, political dimensions of teaching and schooling. This is in keeping with the assertion by Cochran-Smith (1999) that “part of teaching for social justice, is deliberately claiming the role of educator as well as activists” (p. 116).

The Delhi Declaration (UNESCO, 1994), clause 2.8 states that:

Education is, and must be, a societal responsibility, encompassing governments, families, communities and non-governmental organizations alike; it requires the commitment and participation of all, in a grand alliance that transcends diverse opinions and political positions.

The implied relationship between learner and teacher is one of partnership and social justice that promotes collective action. In the context of education, social justice means examining why and how schools are unjust for some students: “It [a concern for social justice] means analysing school policies and practises. . .that devalue the identities of some students while overvaluing others” (Nieto, 2000, p. 183). This means that both teachers and students are jointly constructing knowledge in an environment of mutual respect and technology to improve the quality of the learning experience. Eisen (2001) investigated peer-learning partnerships used as a professional development tool for community college teachers, and identified a ‘peer dynamic’ important to transformative learning. Particularly important to establishing authentic relationships was the equalization of power between teaching partners, allowing for learner autonomy and the development of trust. Providing direct and active learning experiences (e.g. e-learning and service learning), the availability of a process for fostering transformative learning, the importance of e-learning as pedagogy and the nature and importance of support when fostering transformative learning (Naidoo, 2009).

Service-Learning, Social Justice and Teaching

Service learning is used as both a philosophy of teaching and as a pedagogical tool. As a philosophy of teaching, service learning reflects a broad social justice approach to

teaching which is innovative, reflective, engaged, and is informed not only by research on disadvantaged and mobile communities but by the teaching and learning mission of the University of Western Sydney, that is the active and responsible participation of students in a changing world. As pedagogy, service learning involves a blending of service activities with the Diversity, Social Justice and Schooling unit in order to engage students in activities that address real community needs. This allows pre-service teachers to gain an understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of social justice issues, and an enhanced sense of civic and social responsibility. The active construction of knowledge leads to a deeper understanding of the unit objectives which are designed to introduce pre-service teachers to the roots of social differences and social inequalities and to motivate and inspire engagement through critical pedagogy. Both the social justice unit and the sixty hours of service learning encourage pre-service teachers to analyse their own previous understandings of teaching and learning and preconceived notions about people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The combination of course content with e-learning and service learning moves pre-service teachers from accepting the school and/or society status quo to a position where they are motivated to observe and question the status quo. Ultimately such questioning leads to altered understandings, a catalyst for transforming thinking.

If teachers are to develop skills that change the life chances of the students they teach (Cochran-Smith, 2001), then efficacy to engage with the community, particularly the community within which the students live, should be considered as central to the task of teaching. While such engagement is confronting, preparing teachers for such academic service learning in pre-service education is important in that it allows teachers to gain an understanding of the contexts of the lives of the students (Dunkin, 1996) and helps teachers develop flexibility in their teaching that accommodates and supports diverse student contexts. Consequently, it may be necessary to assess what teachers are actually doing in the classroom, not simply check their credentials, in order to evaluate teacher quality. Teachers need to be prepared to give students in classrooms a quality education and this requires that the focus not only be on pre-service teachers and pre-service education but also on those in the service itself. A major concern is that many teachers have a limited understanding of broader social and educational issues (Hartshorne, 1992, p. 253). There is concern about the increasing social and cultural differences between teachers and students (Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; Kugelmass, 2000). This has an impact on teachers' attitudes to students whose home contexts are outside the teacher's own experience. Teachers lack adequate knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary to successfully teach diverse student populations (Sogunro, 2001). It is necessary therefore for teachers to develop skills that enable them to change the life chances of the students they teach (Cochran-Smith, 2001).

To adequately equip pre-service teachers for diverse classrooms requires a shift in emphasis from syllabus and curricula alone to a focus on curriculum change, in the "what" and the "how" of young people's learning. Critical reflection is really about emphasizing one's own agency so that one assumes responsibility for one's own actions and ability to explore alternatives. Palmer (cited in Hinchey 2004, p. 1), referring to the connection between good teaching, knowledge of students and knowledge of self,

suggests: “When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. . .and when I cannot see them clearly I cannot teach them well.” As Banks (1999) stated, “teachers cannot transform schools until they transform themselves” (p. xi). Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie (2003) point out:

We recognize that there are a number of factors that impact upon students’ success at school, and that it would be both dangerous, not to mention foolish, to attribute students’ lack of achievement solely to the quality of teaching.

Similarly there appears to be a high correlation between the extent to which a teacher articulates a belief in making a difference, and rejects deficit models of students and their families, with the quality of their pedagogies (Lee & Smith, 2001, p. 37). For the individuals and groups of students historically at risk in our education system — such as Non English Speaking Background students, rural and remote students, students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander students and students with learning difficulties and disabilities — “apart from family background, it is good teachers who make the greatest difference to student outcomes from schooling” (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2005, p. 1). If teachers are integral to making a difference in these times of increasing student diversity, we need to find ways to improve “the school success of ethnically diverse students through culturally responsive teaching and for preparing teachers in pre-service education programs with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to do this” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). “Ties are needed between schools and ethnic community groups and between parents and teachers. Adults from ethnic communities can be employed to serve as a bridge between the communities and schools” (Zhou & Bankston cited in McBrien, 2005, p. 354).

To do this, we as educators in higher education institutions like universities must prepare the professional teachers to develop, lead, manage, teach, work within, and influence society’s institutions, including the most basic foundation of education. Besides training future teachers, schools of education at university strongly influence the learning framework of school education. The unit pedagogy therefore includes blended learning strategies, learning guides, written and visual presentation assessment tasks, collaborative group work, guest lectures and deconstruction of case studies. The use of online assessments is co-trialled to diversify the types of assessments required of students. Online sites that are integral to students’ learning in this unit are created, particularly through uploading and discussion of learning logs (reflective journals) and hyperlinks to other related sites. Outcomes for service learning are aligned with curricular goals and assessments thereby ensuring that the pedagogy of service learning is explicitly taught and reflected upon. Further, to provide targeted literacy and numeracy support to students from disadvantaged and mobile communities while building the pedagogical and cultural understandings of the pre-service teachers through individual and/or small group tuitions, service learning programs namely Refugee Action Support (RAS), Community Action Support (Tennant Creek, N.T) and Crossing Borders were initiated. Reflective journals and web-based discussion sites are used to encourage pre-service teachers to integrate formal academic knowledge with their community experiences and to establish connections between campus-based learning and site-based learning.

The RAS program began in 2007 and provides targeted literacy and numeracy support to humanitarian refugee students who have transitioned, within the previous two years, from Intensive English Centres (IECs) to mainstream secondary schools in Western and South-Western Sydney. All tutors (UWS pre-service teachers) undertake approximately 18 hours of targeted literacy and numeracy training supported by the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation. The training focuses on small group instruction, language and scaffolding literacy teaching strategies, deconstruction, and resource creation. Training includes English Second Language scales which it is envisaged will provide tutors with greater knowledge to analyse refugee students' abilities. The involvement of pre-service teachers, as tutors in refugee students' learning, provides a way to support the young student's transition into and engagement with mainstream education, whilst also providing a valuable social justice learning experience for the teachers-in-training. Through an evaluation of online reflective journal entries, it was established that several tutors thought that service learning provided opportunities to know school students in ways that are rarely achieved by teachers working with full classes, particularly in the secondary school situation where students move through several different classes and teachers throughout the school day. Some of the pre-service teachers (as indicated below) selected RAS for altruistic reasons and were keen to support refugees, recognising the potential hardship and deprivation that refugees frequently experience.

I just thought it [RAS] was quite interesting, like helping refugees out in the school environment and. . .I don't want to travel overseas so I thought at least this helps in the local community.

I guess if you're a teacher. . .you want to help young people out, and refugee students, they probably have the hardest time of anyone so it seems like a good place to start.

RAS was also viewed by pre-service teachers as an ideal opportunity to engage with individuals and communities from different backgrounds, and to use one's own experience as an immigrant to support people from marginalised groups.

I spent most of my higher education in the Middle East and I was everyday in contact with refugee problems and what the refugees were going through so I thought maybe with my information and also I had the experience in teaching these people when I was overseas English.

I chose RAS because I came to Australia as a refugee as well, and so I thought it would be very rewarding to give something back to the community and I also worked — I did my first prac at [names school] and I found it really rewarding working with the refugee kids there and I thought it would be interesting to keep going with that

Crossing Borders is a peer-mentoring program that also started as a pilot in 2007. It includes on-campus academic support to international and overseas trained students including Chinese academics on scholarship programs. These students have an

opportunity to practice their literacy skills in a collaborative environment with guidance and feedback from peer mentors. The central component of the academic support is a weekly seminar group session organised in conjunction with the UWS Learning Skills Unit that focuses on the development of critical thinking skills; raises self-awareness and understanding of others; provides opportunities for refining a wide range of interpersonal skills; helps define the elements of effective group interactions; encourages transnational students to reflect on aspects of their own culture and those of others. It also provides the opportunity for cross-cultural experiences for domestic students and is one effective way in which all pre-service teachers in the program can be empowered to see themselves as part of a learning community. The online reflective journals expressed nuances of the complex personal and cultural identities of mentees who felt marginalized between two cultures, who struggled with an oppositional bicultural identity, or simultaneously negotiating two cultures with different peer groups. So Crossing Borders was considered essential for the acculturation and adjustment of transnational students. The peer mentoring empowers the transnational pre-service teacher and leads to a greater likelihood of academic success at the university while at the same time encouraging social integration. Social capital, including programs like peer-mentoring, play a particularly important role in helping transnational students navigate the complexities of university life. One peer tutor commented in the reflective online journal that:

Overall, this opportunity has helped me to appreciate and understand what mentoring should be about- building respectful relationships and friendships

I could speak and write English well, I experienced disorientation adjusting to the 'Australian colloquialism' used by teachers and 'slang' used by students. I had to train myself to distinguish the language of the text from the language of instruction. This interaction was very enriching as we discovered that we had a lot in common and that we could also learn from each other.

Community Action Support (Tennant Creek) is a program where pre-service teachers act as mentors to Year 11 Aboriginal students completing the Community Studies subject in Tennant Creek High (Northern Territory). By providing literacy support both face-to-face and online, pre-service teachers not only help retain these Year 11 students at schools but they also train them to become cross-generational mentors to aboriginal students in primary school and even help them consider a transition into further education. This program not only helps to maintain and strengthen the identity and cultural practices of Indigenous communities so that they can co-exist with those of mainstream society but it also respects their difference and celebrates it within the diversity of the nation. For indigenous students in the Community Action Support Program, access to “wiki” and e-learning possibilities enables learners to have access to community knowledge, support structures and shared interests (McLoughlin, 1999a). As one pre-service teacher noted:

I think that we should give and contribute whatever we can back to the community and in the process, we can reflect, learn and appreciate things that we might have neglected in life

The most common community engagement outcome identified by pre-service tutors was gaining a sense of personal effectiveness. Often this feeling of empowerment is coupled with a heightened sense of civic responsibility:

It helped me to understand Aboriginal students better — their culture, learning needs and styles. It also helped me to re-examine the many society-built myths and stereotyped views of Aboriginal students and this knowledge can be passed on to fellow teachers and friends.

Electronic Learning, Diversity and Community Engagement

The above discussion has mentioned possibilities for e-learning to connect both the teaching unit and the community engagement programs. Electronic learning represents an extension to face-to-face teaching and learning which has been defined as:

a wide set of applications and processes allied to training and learning that include computer-based learning, online learning, virtual classrooms and digital collaboration. These services can be delivered by a variety of electronic media, including the intranet, internet, interactive TV and satellite (Beamish et al., cited in Mihhailova, 2006, p. 271).

Chen (2003, p. 37) claims that telecommunication technology has “shattered the boundaries” of educational institutions, making possible “the formation of regional, national, and even global learning communities.” As such, e-learning offers the potential for the sharing of knowledge among diverse and marginalized groups as is reflected in the community engagement programs at UWS. In the teaching of the coursework, knowledge sharing is fostered by designing discussion boards for students to discuss assignments and seminar presentations and to offer peer support and feedback. Using web-based tools, tutors can engage with pre-service teachers in dialogue through discussion forums and can provide additional information of learning processes that are required for specific tutorial tasks or for assessments. Through the use of chat rooms and discussion sites, pre-service teachers can share ideas, discuss topics, and participate in a virtual classroom.

The reflective space (an online journal) enables pre-service teachers to consider decisions taken in regards to classroom strategy and pedagogy and to make adjustments to teaching and learning. Shared online spaces are also provided for seminar groups of pre-service teachers working on projects. One assessment encourages pre-service teachers to locate and theoretically analyse two websites that may be of interest to, or accessed by, young people. Their understandings for this analysis stems from the unit readings, lectures and tutorials, as well as their own research. They are expected to incorporate readings and appropriate references to key theorists in their analysis. Pre-service teachers may choose to compare and contrast the websites or treat each individually. They may be examining the various ways that identities are constructed, how issues pertaining to equity or discrimination are represented or explored, the underlying power relations and their

broad social, political and educational implications, the reinforcement of particular social and cultural understandings.

The online reflective journals for the coursework and all three community engagement programs indicated that pre-service teachers utilized processes such as observation data on student actions, analysis of student work, and scripts of teacher-student interactions to focus in on students and to reflect on their own pedagogy in the classroom. Pre-service teachers in their self-reflection were able to analyse the differences between their own culture, language and ability and that of the students they mentored. Such reflection assisted mentors/tutors assess their pedagogical approaches to teaching diverse students and enabled them to consider different styles and ways of learning in order to move forward. This is in keeping with Lave and Wenger's (1991) proposal that social practice is the primary generative phenomenon, and that learning within a social environment provides the supports that community members need. The processes of learning are achieved through "increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performance" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 17).

Additionally research on the impact of the service learning programs, found that pre-service teachers were "transformed" in significant ways by a tutoring experience that was integrated with their social justice course. Pre-service teachers found particular benefits when they were matched with tutees that were significantly different in terms of ethnicity, culture and socio-economic status. The research also found that students developed new understandings about their preconceptions and stereotypes of marginalised and disadvantaged communities. While initially believing that they were open minded and fair, many of their online reflective journals and data from interviews showed their growing awareness and understanding of their biases toward persons from backgrounds and cultures different to their own. This research also showed that the integration and reconstruction of knowledge through e-learning and service learning gave these pre-service teachers early field experiences and strategies for success. By exploring how learning takes place in a variety of settings, (formal and informal, online and off-line) and by engaging pre-service teachers in critical sustained reflection on their emerging practice, these pre-service teachers were able to design rewarding educational experiences underpinned by principles of social justice and educational equity. So, in service learning programs like Refugee Action Support, Community Action Support, and Crossing Borders that conform to the ideals of collaborative resonance, pre-service teachers become committed to collaboration and reform in their own classrooms, schools, and communities.

Conclusion

E-learning therefore provided mentors with 'greater motivation and opportunity to articulate, discuss, and reflect on their learning strategies and the changes within themselves' (Chen, 2003, p. 36). In this way, it was possible for pre-service teachers and students to explore questions in distant settings (Tennant Creek) via e-learning networks that offer "meaningful contexts for project-based and problem-based learning" (Levin et

al. cited in Chen, 2003, p. 37). Networked e-learning available in the coursework and the community engagement projects allowed for “dialogic interaction,” that is, knowledge to be “socially constructed through interaction with others in various on-line environments” (O’Dowd, 2003, p. 132).

E-learning also enabled students to retain their own intellectual culture rather than ‘take on’ without question the target educational culture. This is because the new blended learning strategies are “authentic, learner-centred, relevant to students’ lives,” allowing them to “explore their own social and cultural identities” (O’Dowd, 2003, p. 121). Teaching for diversity and social justice requires learners to reflect on “their own environment and culture by interacting with foreign partners and answering their questions about the home culture” (O’Dowd, 2003, p. 129). The interaction helps develop in pre-service teachers and students “intercultural communicative competence [or] highlights the components which required further attention” (O’Dowd, 2003, p. 134). It is evident from the above-mentioned community engagement programs, Refugee Action Support, Crossing Borders, and Community Action Support, that knowledge production was stimulated and collaborative learning through e-learning facilitated to the advantage of individuals and their learning communities. The advantages of e-learning according to (Zhao & McDougall, 2008, p. 61) are:

real participation with peers, focused interactions, fewer language barriers, possibility of arranging personal meetings with group members, ability to work on their own projects and ideas, and increased intellectual interaction with their [local] peers).

This means that for disadvantaged and marginalised groups such as refugees, indigenous students and international students, e-learning offers cross-cultural learning experiences, recognizes students’ bilingual capabilities and acknowledges their formal and informal learning. There is then a valuable link between academic knowledge, service learning knowledge and e-learning as all three as argued in this paper have contributed to social change knowledge. Social justice pedagogy provides a method for educational institutions to meet human social and academic needs as well as value the unique contributions of the different cultures and groups in society to our world community. It is a network of global educators who through e-learning possibilities provide broader social change initiatives by unlocking the transforming power of education.

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