

*Community engagement and student learning: Making community a
core element of teacher education*

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Abstract

Students' engagement in learning and schooling depends to a large extent upon how teachers can relate to the students, their communities and their worlds. The focus and direction of teacher education has been upon competency and skills, registration and accreditation. In contrast to the external requirements of teacher registration and teacher educators the realities, for many students, of school retention, learning achievement and engagement lie within the contexts of their varying learning communities within and beyond their schools.

Universities and teacher educators have begun to realize their own need to engage more with their varying communities if institutions and staff are to gain the confidence of students, parents and community members. The authors acknowledge the influence of service learning and the ways it has been incorporated into many teacher education programs, at times, as a core unit. However, this paper argues for a more substantive change in the preparation and role of teachers who need to engage

with communities if they are to meet the diverse learning needs of both mainstream and marginalized students. In this paper, particular learning needs about the issues of cultural difference, acceptance and listening to the voices of others are addressed through three case study representations: Indigenous, homeless people and East Timorese. It is through these examples that teacher educators develop their self-efficacy in being able to interact with community members from diverse backgrounds. This substantive change requires engagement with the communities to be central within the institution and its teacher education programs. Such community engagement, that moves beyond the concepts of service learning, is a key to student participation and learning and begins to address the socio-cultural needs of teacher education.

Introduction

The ‘war on terrorism’, the shooting at Virginia Tech, climate change, the increasing evidence of mental illness amongst students, the ‘emo’ generation, the global place of Indigenous peoples and the ever increasing pressure that comes with access to global communication gives rise to justice and social justice issues that impact upon the daily life of teachers and their students. It is reported daily that local, national and global communities are composed of people who have suffered social injustice, rejection and marginalization. Universities and their teacher education programs are commonly perceived to be powerful and privileged, not very accustomed to “getting its hands dirty”. Recently, the teacher registration requirements in Australia (Reid & O’Donoghue, 2004) and many other countries clearly articulate a set of key competencies that often do not recognize the changing context in which teachers teach

nor appreciate a teacher's role of engaging with their students in considering, discussing and acknowledging the social injustices that are evident within communities. Teachers have a community responsibility to address such issues. However, to do it purposefully and pedagogically depends upon them undergoing some form of initial community engagement process and social analysis within their teacher education programs.

“In teacher education, the focus is upon community as a context for learning and in that sense the community provides significant benefit to the university and its students” (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman & Thom 2002, p. vii). Teachers are encountering a diversity of student backgrounds in mainstream schools and classrooms. Such diversity may be cultural, physical, socio-economic, religious or politically based. The task for teachers is to welcome and include these students to relevant and connected pedagogy and curriculum. Often teachers may not have an appreciation for the diverse groups and locations they will encounter in their teaching. It is incumbent upon teacher education programs to provide students with community based as well as practicum based learning opportunities to develop their teacher knowledge and strategies to meet such diversity with purpose.

Community engagement has an important role to play in enriching the teaching, learning and research activities of teacher education. Teacher education programs often endorse principles of civic responsibility, however in most cases this is not an explicit focus. It is through an explicit focus on service learning, volunteering and community presence that teacher education programs can make their greatest contribution to the pursuit of teachers being engaged citizens. Such an explicit focus,

evolved with social justice as its frame of reference, is developed in the belief that educators have a responsibility to empower their students so that inequalities and injustices might be challenged (Howard, Butcher & Iskander, 2005). Indeed, this “is an expression of the commitment within teacher education programs at Australian Catholic University (ACU National) to be actively involved with the wider community with the emphasis has been on both building relationships with communities based on mutual benefits and participant learning which employs skills of social analysis and personal reflection” (Howard, Butcher & Iskander, 2005, p. 3). The aim is for ACU National graduate teachers to be engaged citizens who actively challenge inequalities and injustices (Gervasoni, 2005).

Nature and principles of service learning leading to Community Engagement

Theories of social and cultural reproduction have focused on the social and pedagogical relations of educational sites, and the unequal power relationships therein, to help explain why education tends to reinforce structures of disadvantage rather than challenging such structures. Education appears to maintain rather than change broad social and economic structures (Butcher, McFadden & McMeniman, 2004). ‘Australia is in the midst of a profound economic and social transformation’ requiring us to ‘re-think and re-configure our approach to social support’ (McClure, 2000: 1). This transformational process is not unique to Australia. Central to the re-thinking process is a focus on economic and social participation that provides the positive underpinning for the social support system. Thus, it seems evident that schools, educational systems and teachers have a role to play within this transformational process.

Reproduction theory suggested that education contributed quite straightforwardly to the maintenance of the social *status quo*. Broadly speaking, education served to produce educational outcomes in which the children of say working class parents remained in the working class, and those of the middle class stayed in the same class as their parents; that is, education reproduced the existing relationships between social groups and between their cultures. However, educational sites, including teacher education programs, can also be seen as sites for the promulgation of liberal democratic ideals where education is constructed in terms of a political struggle for social justice and democratic citizenship (Giroux, 1983). They can also be seen as possible sites of intercultural understanding or articulation (McFadden & Walker, 1997). With this in mind, service learning can be seen as providing a context for such intercultural understanding to take place. Where issues of social justice and notions of citizenship and community are central, as pedagogical strategies, they provide content and challenges for students to see varying learning experiences with differing cultures and situations as educationally valid.

Service learning can lead to moments of transformation, which emphasise the interrelatedness of knowledge and phenomena, and focuses on social and personal change. The selection of community service by institutions as a valid learning context conveys ‘powerful’ messages to teacher education students about what their particular institution considers important and worthwhile knowledge. Not only does it profile the importance of community as context but it also implies a more ‘open’, as opposed to a content focused and narrow, approach to teaching and learning (Butcher, McFadden & McMeniman, 2004). Service learning constructed within a social justice

framework and one of open inquiry uses curriculum and pedagogy to challenge explicitly ways of thinking, stereotypes and institutionalised assumptions about society and culture (McFadden, 1996). It forces students to look for solutions to the educational problems they perceive from outside the resources of their own cultural experience and group.

Providing teacher education students with service learning placements enables opportunities for students to experience other cultures and situations in such a way that these other cultures add to and supplement their own experiences. A liberatory pedagogical framework can, in this way, be said to be explicitly sensitive to cultural issues and difference, and to recognise the capacity of students to engage in decisions about their own learning. Indeed, it is the context and approach taken to learning about citizenship which will either help or hinder the development of teacher education students as ‘engaged citizens’ who are socially active and aware of their role in the broader community of which they are a part.

According to Prentice and Garcia (2000) service learning offers beneficial aspects such as flexibility and creativity, as they can fit into any academic area within a higher education institution. It can also be an enriching and enlivening teaching tool in that it enables both students and faculty members to recognise the interrelated aspects of all learning and life experiences, while encouraging faculty members to objectively assess their course objectives and methods of assessment to better cater to the learning needs of the students. Some important benefits for the students include:

- an enhancement in their self-concept, in their knowledge about issues in their community and in their willingness to become lifelong volunteers within the community;
- an opportunity to engage in career exploration;
- improved interpersonal and human relations skills which are viewed by employers as being increasingly important in the professional and personal spheres;
- the opportunity to make a real contribution to the community and see social participation and actions making a difference to people's lives.

At the core of community service learning programs are concepts of social and structural justice, diversity, human rights, and social inclusion (Butcher, McFadden & McFadden, 2005). For example, in programs where ACU National students and staff engage with Indigenous, homeless people and the East Timorese they promote the role of educators in the development of a just and diverse Australian society in which the cultural, economic and political rights of all are recognized and where *inclusion* is a declared goal. In any framework of justice and inclusion, there must be a consideration of the dynamics of power that lead to exclusion. Participation in society must be critical participation. Encouraging non-critical 'participation', within societies whose structures lead to exclusion, will perpetuate the exclusion and marginalisation. The teacher and the classroom present an interactive micro context into which global issues can be encountered. The teacher who accepts inclusion in the classroom can as easily exclude issues as a result of personal bias prejudice or stereotyping. A critical goal of education, and thus teacher education, should be the transformation of unjust systems and the building of a better world and more just society, through critical analysis and action. Developing teachers and their awareness

of community and society beyond the key competencies of curriculum enables them to be far more inclusive in the content and issues raised in their classes.

Nexus of community engagement, teaching and research

Whether teacher education, adult education, Indigenous education, rural education or early childhood education, purposeful learning is dependent upon teachers engaging with communities and people and acknowledging the importance of love, care and valuing the other. Such engagement is about informed teaching and learning together with rigorous research and scholarship for the mutual benefit of all concerned. Further, it is about teacher graduates bringing their various learnings to the place of engagement, so that the lives of all can be enhanced.

Teaching is an interactive process of gaining and sharing knowledge, valuing the learnings of others and appreciating the differing contexts in which learning both occurs and is applied. Teacher education has to be placed within the process of learning about the disciplines, seeking out applications of the learning, theorising and sharing personal learnings with others. Effective teaching is about developing learnings in an interactive construction of ideas rather than solely a sharing of learnings. Community engagement where student teachers actively and purposefully interact with others is foundational to bringing a reality to their teaching which enables them to appreciate the varying ways in which theory informs reality and reality modifies theory. These engagements with others always evidence a personal and professional risk of moving into uncharted waters, however, this is also the

reality of classrooms where teachers on a daily basis indirectly engage with unexpected and unplanned aspects of community.

Thus, there is this coming together, *this nexus*, between teaching and learning, research and scholarship through engagement with each critically linked to the other...not necessarily in a sequential way but in a continuing interactive process. An appreciation of the nexus of teaching and learning, research and scholarship is essential to inform teacher education students. *Why?* For when teachers graduate from ACU National they will engage with peoples and communities in the day to day events that influence and impact upon one another's lives. It is imperative that they come to appreciate the critical interrelatedness of engaging with communities, asking the relevant questions, learning with others and then sharing their gained knowledge. Such an integrated relationship between teaching, learning and community engagement brings about substantive personal and professional learnings which develop self-efficacy and act as a professional development pathway for teaching and learning. The following are three program examples of the way in which ACU National embeds social justice and community engagement within their education programs.

Engaging with the marginalised: three program examples

Indigenous

Across Australia, there is a history of Aboriginal children not achieving to their learning potential (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc & NSW Department of Education and

Training, 2004). Teachers' beliefs play such a critical role in both what and how teachers teach that any reform will fail if teachers' beliefs are not aligned to the possibilities of reform (Howard & Perry, 2005). In today's classes teachers believe teaching is harder than previously because of the differing levels of children's ability. They report difficulty in inventing appropriate teaching strategies for the wide range of children in their classes, including Aboriginal children (Howard, 2001).

However, teachers cannot devise appropriate educational programs for Aboriginal students by themselves. Teachers and systems need to listen to and take direction from Aboriginal people. Community partnerships need to be reflected in mathematics teaching and change has to be a whole school and community effort (Howard, Perry, Ziems, Lowe, & McKnight, 2003). When it comes to the development of curriculum, systems need to enact this agreement in developing documents through community partnership and shared ownership. If collaboration and change are to occur then the voices of parents, teachers and Aboriginal children have to be engaged (Matthews, Howard & Perry, 2003). Meaningful curricula have to be developed "if for no other reason than we need to break the cycle of school being a place of failure for young Indigenous people" (Buckskin, 2001, p. 10).

Teachers require continual support in developing their awareness of and implementation of appropriate teaching strategies to enhance Aboriginal children's learning outcomes. It is important to reform school environments where Aboriginal students learn "... [for without reform] methodology will tend to reproduce social inequalities of achievement and subordinate individual development to social domination" (Teese 2000, p. 8). Thus, teachers need to engage with community to

bring about purposeful change to impact upon the learning outcomes for Indigenous students. As teacher education students, they need to have the opportunity to engage with Indigenous communities to appreciate the educational benefits that can emerge.

Since 1989 ACU National has planned and implemented primary and secondary teacher education programs for Indigenous students primarily across the eastern states of Australia. Indigenous communities and ACU National have maintained a purposeful community engagement in the development of these programs with a focus on issues of access, social justice and achievement through placing equity “front and centre”. ACU National has a public commitment to community engagement, “which signifies a shared connection to the community that, in turn, widens access” (Poole, Sheehan & Reid, 2003, p. 3).

ACU National, through the Indigenous Education Units, has been proactive in engaging with Indigenous communities in developing programs and initiatives that have been far reaching in scope. Such engagement involves the presence of members from each community in each other’s community for the purpose of gaining knowledge about each other and developing an appreciation of each other’s culture and needs. This presence is stimulated by an explicit mutually beneficial purpose with a commitment to long-term planning strategies to enhance the sustainability of appropriate teacher education programs that recognize the realities of the students (Howard & Cooke, 2006).

Homeless people

An education program, for homeless people, called *Clemente* was trialed by the Australian Catholic University in East Sydney during 2003-2004 (Yashin-Shaw,

Howard & Butcher, 2005). Since this trial the program has been established in three sites (Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra) and now has involved more than 100 marginalised people in the study of Humanities subjects with the purpose of re-engaging them with learning and the community. The *Clemente* program was conceptualised by Shorris (2000) on the premise that education in the humanities would help move socially disenfranchised people out of the cycle of poverty and homelessness. The program is therefore different from ‘life skills’ or ‘vocational’ courses. It does not seek to train people directly for specific kinds of work, because work on its own is not seen as the “structural solution to poverty, particularly multigenerational poverty” (Shorris 2000, p.63). Rather it is premised on the belief that studying the humanities through courses such as philosophy and ethics serves to engage and empower people to think about and reflect on the world in which they live, so that they might become less likely to react simply to contexts and events and more likely to examine, question and contemplate. In doing so, learners would engage in “activity with other people at every level” (Shorris 2000, p.127) and become engaged ‘public’ citizens.

The *Clemente* program assumes that social isolation and the disadvantage that stems from that can, to some extent, be addressed through education that helps people to understand the inherent benefits of engaged citizenship (Butcher, Howard and McFadden 2003). Unfortunately such an education is often inaccessible to the very people who would benefit most. Because of the circumstances of homeless people, the *Clemente* program advocates that university level humanities courses with appropriately qualified university lecturers be taught in a community setting. Participants are supported between lectures with a one-on-one volunteer learning partner, recruited from businesses and government; and also, where necessary, by

welfare staff. It was expected that there would be substantial associated benefits in delivering the course in this way e.g. participants forming supportive relationships among themselves and with others (such as lecturers and learning partners); achieving personal responsibility; experiencing success and changing perceptions.

East Timor

East Timor was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and gained independence in 1999 after a referendum was held. In the aftermath of the referendum in which 78% of the population voted for independence a campaign of destruction was launched by Indonesian-trained and equipped militias. In the ensuing violence, most of the infrastructure of the country was destroyed, particularly what was provided by Indonesia in health and education. The political situation remains unstable, with an estimated 100 000 Internally Displaced Persons (10% of the population) living in camps and with host families in the districts.

The government of East Timor is heavily dependent on international aid, which will decrease as oil revenue becomes available. There is a lack of skills among government employees because most of them were only permitted to occupy low-level jobs under Indonesian rule. There is a critical need for infrastructure reconstruction, provision of employment and better health and education services. Life expectancy is on average 56 years and is combined with an infant mortality rate of 52 per 1000 live births. Maternal mortality in 2000 was at a rate of 660 per 100 000 live births.

ACU National has sustained its commitment to capacity building in East Timor since 2000. The institutional focus for the University's work has been with Instituto Catolica para Formacao de Professores (ICFP), Baucau. This collaborative work has contributed significantly to ICFP becoming an educational lighthouse and source of hope for East Timor nationally and internationally. The aim of the collaborative program is the promotion of the development of East Timorese personnel at ICFP, the financial and other resource development for ICFP, institutional sustainability, and international recognition of both ICFP as a tertiary institution and their academic awards.

The focus of the collaborative work with ICFP has included:

- * sustaining a supply of internationally qualified beginning teachers who are capable of assuming leadership roles in schools and communities;
- * having the teacher education course recognised nationally and internationally;
- * meeting quality assurance requirements for its educational, financial and management accountabilities;
- * being a provider of quality professional development courses to the education and other sectors;
- * implementing evidence-based reporting, which informs the research and publication agenda.

ICFP's capacity building achievements, sustained through ongoing periods of civil unrest since 2000, include:

- * the establishment, in partnership with Australian Catholic University, of the first internationally recognised degree course for primary teacher education in East Timor since independence;
- * 150 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching course;
- * the first graduation of 48 primary school teachers in November 2006;
- * graduates currently involved as teachers throughout the different districts of East Timor;
- * extremely high retention rate (more than 96 percent) and overall satisfaction of the teacher education students;
- * academic staff trained in current student-centred methods of teaching providing a strong and positive model for classroom instruction. The lecture/tutorial approach is regarded as a significant innovation by other higher education institutions in the country. These institutions have benefited from employment of ICFP staff who provide leadership in quality teaching and learning;
- * East Timor Ministry of Education involving ICFP in developing higher education policies;

Teacher education and community engagement: creating pathways of hope

These three programs have necessitated teachers being more aware of and appreciating the realities of their students, the Indigenous, the homeless and the East Timorese. The teachers needed to learn *about* their students, and create environments in which they can learn *with* their students (Nieto, 2000). The educators faced the critical challenges of designing curricula which were flexible enough to encompass the rapidity of knowledge production, while recognising their increasing awareness of

the issue they confronted in engaging with these communities (Reid & O'Donoghue, 2004). It is through such engagement, in such programs, that teacher educators and student teachers grow in their realisation of not only the real benefits to the individual and the profession that the marginalised can offer education but also the often unrecognized and untapped future that educators can offer the marginalized (Butcher, Howard, Labone & Breeze, 2004). It is through engaging with and learning about similar programs and experiences that student teachers can develop a more profound appreciation of the diversity of student realities that they may face in their own teaching.

Battistani (1996) states that service learning in higher education can be a powerful tool for educating 'citizens' by building students' concrete civic skills in the area of intellectual understanding, communication and problem solving, and civic attitudes of judgement and imagination. Service learning is based on a reciprocal relationship in which service reinforces and strengthens the learning, and the learning reinforces and strengthens the service (Prentice & Garcia, 2000). Prentice and Garcia believe a critical aspect of any service-learning activity is how closely it is related to the academic content of the course the student is studying. In addition, following completion of the service learning activity, they believe it crucial that the students engage in critical reflection about what they have learned. By combining service with a reflective framework, the benefits to students, faculty and community agencies far exceed those of service or learning offered separately. By engaging in community-based learning, the students are exposed to issues, such as low socio-economic status and its impact on personal health in a way that cannot be as effectively addressed in the traditional education setting (Waddell & Davidson, 2000). Such learning

opportunities enable students to be active rather than passive role players in their learning.

Usually, it will not be a case of re-inventing or re-structuring most teacher education programs rather a refocusing of the reciprocal engagement and interaction between school and community. The following is a possible structure across a four year teacher education program for the inclusion and re-focusing of the role of community engagement within a student teacher's learning and experiences.

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
The school and the societal context embedded within education units	Focused aspects of community explored within designated education units eg. Indigenous, Children with special needs	A core unit on social analysis and engaged citizenship in one's role as a teacher professional. This unit would be linked to a focused engagement placement within a community agency.	A clear focus within the practicum - internship of the teacher and the school within the community context, locally, nationally and internationally.

The three programs of Indigenous, homeless people and East Timor provide a community engagement focus nationally and internationally that enable ACU

National students to engage with others as they learn and reflect upon their experiences in a mutually beneficial context. The students encounter elements of community that they otherwise would not meet, they come to appreciate the people for the individuals they are rather than the issue that is reported. The university has adapted processes to establish teacher education programs for Indigenous since 1989, for East Timorese peoples since 2003 and, since 2007, have begun enrolling homeless people in education programs. These programs give evidence to the seven dimensions of community engagement based upon the Mission of ACU National: values, identity and mission; scholarship; nexus of community engagement, teaching and research; partnerships and relationships; public policy and practice; transformative role of community engagement (Butcher, Howard & O’Gorman, 2007).

Conclusion

The engagement of ACU National students and staff in the community is an expression of the University's commitment to be actively involved with the wider national and international communities. Teacher education programs need to prepare their graduate teachers so that they have the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and commitment to address the cultural diversity and inequities of their school and the wider community (Ball, 2000; Norberg, 2000). Teacher education institutions can only achieve the development of appropriate programs that recognize the realities of their students through partnership with communities and community agencies in achieving such teacher education outcomes (Butcher, Howard, Dockett and Perry, 1999).

Community Engagement is a clear avenue for ACU National to carry on its mission in a manner that highlights the University's distinctiveness. With its strong sense of (catholic) identity, it participates in the community as an equal with others in partnership to construct a more just society. The relationship is built on trust and mutual commitment and so cannot endanger the specific identity of either but rather be seen and experienced as affirming and enhancing those respective identities. In this way, both can be open to transformation and growth. The partnership empowers the community, the University and those individuals within them to work for a more just society. It is a concrete way to carry forward the concerns behind the institutional policies of inclusivity. The teacher education programs with the direct contact of students in schools and the various communities provide the opportunity for learning engagement with others that broaden the experiences and knowledge of prospective teachers and enhance their self efficacy to engage more meaningfully with the various relationships they will encounter in their profession.

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