

Student-teachers' experiences of situated learning within the primary school classroom

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the perceptions of a group of student-teachers while they complete one of their six professional teaching practices. These perceptions are described through the reflective practices of a lecturer who visits these students as part of her role in teaching Professional Studies and Practice, and through her interactions with those students when she debriefs them when they return to College. The paper highlights the experiences of student-teachers as they engage in professional situated learning within the contemporary workplace of primary school classrooms. The significance of this evaluation is that it shows both the positive aspects and the difficulties students can have in trying to “break in” to a new community of practice and a new classroom “workplace” as they move from novice to expert over their three years of training.

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Introduction

The student-teacher sat in my office with her head hung low. On my desk was a plethora of paper – her folder, assignments, college documents and the all-important assessment and evaluation report from her supervising associate teacher. This was the culmination of evidence from her just completed five-week teaching practice. She proceeded to explain to me why her placement “hadn’t worked out” and why she had felt “helpless” in her efforts to succeed in that particular classroom, in that particular school, and at that particular time. Her associate teacher had been too busy to meet with her regularly to discuss how she was faring, to find out what guidance she needed, and to give her regular helpful feedback. The class had some children with “challenging behavioural problems” and she had found it hard to manage and motivate them. The topics she had been told to plan for and implement were “boring” and she did not feel knowledgeable enough to teach them properly.

Her distress reminded me that, for student-teachers, the learning they engage in within the complex environment of the primary school classroom “workplace” must provide them with experiences that are positive and authentic in terms of equipping them with appropriate pedagogical knowledge and identities as effective

teachers. Thus equipped, students can carry forward and successfully employ their learning in each new community of practice. As Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) argue, learning is meaningful only when it is embedded in the social and physical contexts within which the knowledge arising out of that learning will be used. Their notion is at the heart of successful situated learning – that is, learning which occurs in situations that closely approximate the culture and context of where the knowledge gained from that learning will be applied (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Teacher education has long provided student-teachers with opportunities to learn through situations and contexts commensurate with their eventual workplace – the classroom. This present article accordingly describes a small study wherein the researcher reflected on the extent to which the paradigm of professional practice used by primary school student-teachers from a college of education was grounded in the precepts of situated learning.

The study in context

Relevant research

Learning theorists stress that knowledge is not some independent entity, but is a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed (see, for example, Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Thus, learning is situated in the context in which it is taught and, as a corollary, in the activity in which the learner is engaged at the time of learning. As Wilson (1993, p. 71) observes, “Learning and knowing are integrally and inherently situated in the everyday world of human activity.”

Situated learning thus emphasises teaching knowledge and skills in contexts that reflect how the knowledge will be used in real-life situations. In line with this, Gilbert (2005) suggests that knowledge has recently assumed a new meaning. She claims it has become a verb, not a noun, and is something we do, rather than something we have. If learners can perceive a relationship between the “how” and “why” of what they are learning, they will not only effectively store this information as part of their knowledge network for use at appropriate times, but also draw in and utilise other items of information that they already have at hand.

Situated learning places the learner within an instructional process consisting of context (the situations, values, beliefs, and environment governing and/or held to by the members of a learning community) and content (the facts and processes underpinning the activities in which those members engage). As Lankard (1995) explains, knowledge arising out of situated learning is knowledge that is co-produced by the learner and the situation. Engagement of the learner in the situation is therefore crucial and, because the situation involves authentic social contexts, learners learn by encountering and solving problems related to everyday life. Learners then, state Choi and Hanafin (1995), transfer the knowledge they gain from these situations to other like situations. Situated learning environments, they go on to say, give learners the “ability to retrieve relevant information when needed” (p. 66).

Social interaction is thus a critical component of situated learning, as Lave and Wenger (1991) stress. They contend that learners start out as apprentices, observing a community or culture of practice from its boundaries, a situation they term “legitimate peripheral participation”. From there, the learners progressively

move to the centre of the community, engaging with others in the community and piecing together an understanding of it. Eventually, the learners gain sufficient knowledge of the culture and context of the community to act as fully functioning agents within it, and to take on the status of “expert” or “old-timer”.

For the beginner, the process of moving from novice to expert requires gaining and mastering content by creating meaning from the situations in which they find themselves, the activities in which they engage, and the problems they have to solve, then negotiating these understandings with those already expert in that community (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). The members of particular communities of practice, such as teaching, share with one another the experiences and local competencies that form their knowledge. They set the boundaries and the common practices to create a learning community, and by sharing their stories, their conversations, and their discourses, they make that community successful. As teachers in schools share with and learn from one another, they enhance the professionalism of teaching. To use Wenger’s (2005) expression, their common identity allows them to “click”.

This identity, Wenger (2005) goes on to explain, assumes that within each context or community of practice, there is a concern with learning to speak, act, and improve in ways that make sense to the members of that community. For those within the community, learning is set within an evolving, continuously renewed set of relationships with others. Wenger states that if a person’s identity is not known to others in the community that person cannot expect to be taken notice of immediately. However, by engaging with and learning from others in the community, the learner eventually assumes an identity that the others recognise and accept.

For student-teachers, learning situations, within the context of situated learning, that provide systematic, direct, and ongoing links to application in the primary school classroom “workplace” are essential. Gunzburg (1994) argues that transfer strategies such as action learning, role playing, simulation activities, action research, and ongoing access to authentic classroom experiences need to be an early and integral part of their pre-service education, and to provide them with tools that they continue to use to their learning benefit once employed by the school system.

The elements of situated learning therefore that the researcher was interested in exploring in relation to the professional practice experiences of a group of student-teachers were:

- learning situated in authentic contexts
- engagement between novice and expert
- strategies that assist learning, especially reflective practice
- transfer of knowledge from one context to another
- communities of practice.

The College model of professional practice

The Christchurch College of Education expects its student-teachers to successfully complete throughout their three-year training, six periods of professional practice as part of their Professional Studies and Practice course (PS/PP 371). Each practice requires the student-teachers to manage the teaching and learning environment of classrooms at local schools for a specified number of days. This number ranges from three half days in the students’ first year through to 15 days for their last

placement in their final year. To pass their professional practice, students have to employ and successfully demonstrate specific practices taught and discussed during their classroom-based learning at the College.

The College places its students in a variety of school communities and classroom levels throughout their training to give them a very broad and realistic perspective of teaching as a profession in the New Zealand classroom. Each setting is deemed authentic by the College and each associate teacher is recommended by the school principal as a suitable role model (expert) from whom the student can learn. Each subsequent professional practice builds on the skills from previous ones and enables students to refine and perfect their skills as a reflective practitioner and a professional learner. Tasks and assignments are set to assist each student to meet these outcomes.

During the fifth period of professional practice, students are expected to teach for 12 full days in all curriculum areas and manage the pupils' entire classroom learning during that time. Students are visited twice by their observing lecturer, as a matter of course, but subsequent visits can be arranged if required by the student, the associate teacher, and/or the lecturer. The lecturer debriefs each student after each observation, gives feedback on their performance and documentation related to it, and then conducts a more formal debrief interview after the placement ends. The lecturer therefore has several opportunities from which to reflect on each student's progress and achievement and to act as an observational researcher because the lecturer has been party to the students' practice from beginning to end. In addition to working closely with their associates, the student-teachers are expected to employ certain learning strategies or "tools of the trade" while on professional practice. For their fifth practice these specifically include:

- Proactivity – students take charge of and direct their learning, creating a sense of empowerment and confidence in his/her teaching practice.
- Critical reflection – students "identify" and make explicit values and assumptions about what is done in the school and the classroom and by the associate, then uses the insights gained to make choices about how they will conduct their own teaching practice. Critical reflection is formalised through a mini action research project whereby the students identify an issue they observed while in the classroom, research theory around the issue, develop a research question, choose strategies to use in dealing with the issue, action these strategies, collect evidence, analyse this, and then draw conclusions. Weekly critical incident reflections are also encouraged. Here, students each choose a significant event each week. They then describe the incident and reflect in depth about how it has affected what they believe about teaching and learning.
- Creativity – the students think beyond their own points of view by using analytical observation to help them see situations in different lights.

Method

This study involved a small group of 10 College of Education student-teachers who were half way through their last year of training. All 10 were the entire group of students for whom the researcher, as their professional practice tutor, was responsible for at the time, and all agreed, on being asked, to participate in the study.

Data were gathered during the students' fifth period of professional practice. Data-gathering included observations of the students while they were teaching and their

engagement with the children and their associate teachers, non-directive interviews with the students about their teaching practices, and transcripts of accounts of critical incidents given by the students during their post-section debriefing. The lecturer looked at the amassed information critically, reflecting on what it meant in terms of the above-identified aspects of situated learning.

Findings and discussion

The findings indicate that during their fifth session of professional practice the 10 students who agreed to take part in this study all experienced elements of situated learning. An account and description of the findings in relation to each of these elements follow.

Learning situated in authentic settings

First, and most obviously, the student-teachers were engaging in situated learning, in that their learning was taking place in an authentic classroom setting and school environment where they could experience the cultural and interpersonal aspects of working in the teaching profession. Further, unlike the teaching practices that student-teachers learn about in the college classroom, the activities the student-teachers were engaging in while on practice were set within the noise, confusion, and group dynamics of an actual primary school classroom.

I couldn't believe how busy this class was – there was so much going on, it was difficult to get my teaching requirements done!! (Mary)

Learning in the authentic classroom context provided the student-teachers with the opportunity to clarify their understanding of each classroom and the children in it, within its social context, and to reduce the incidence of misinterpretation or faulty learning. Their behaviour in this context was learned initially by observing the associate and then modelling what he or she did. They remembered, as they did this, what they had been told back at the College, namely, that what they observe and trial is just one possible model or paradigm to follow, and that they need to think how it might work for them in different situations. All of the students said that their associate teachers were most helpful in providing feedback to assist them to do this.

The students all affirmed that the classroom settings they were in had a marked impact on their learning as practising teachers, with each class offering a unique number of factors that contributed to the learning environment for children and the opportunities for each student to engage in successful situated learning.

It was such a great environment for me – everything worked in my favour this time. The kids were great and my associate let me have the run of the class right from the start. It was awesome!! (Kirsty)

Students generally felt that this practice gave them a true understanding of what it was like to be teaching full-time, as the requirement for this particular placement required them to be responsible for the teaching, management, and learning in their respective classrooms for 12 days. Several commented that they appreciated the increasing number of days they were expected to teach as they moved through their training. Fewer days at the beginning allowed them to build confidence in a new environment, while more days towards the end gave them more opportunity for practice to observe trial and learn in the authentic setting of the classroom.

Engagement between novice and expert

The professional practice sessions required students and their associates to work closely, with the associates as experts assuming a modelling and mentoring role for the students. The associates did this by providing both oral and written feedback for the students as they began teaching and assuming full management of the class. Lave (1997) identifies two main facets of this process whereby student-teachers, as apprentices, begin, under the tutelage of practising teachers, to develop professional expertise. These are “way in” and “practice”. Way in is a period of observation in which the learner, as apprentice, watches a master (in this case, the associate teacher) and makes initial attempts to teach the class using the knowledge gained from observation. Practice is refining and perfecting the use of this knowledge, which students had plenty of opportunity to do over the five weeks of their fifth period of professional practice.

Observations of the students as they refined and perfected their teaching skills during this placement demonstrated the variations in confidence and success that each student exhibited during their first two weeks on the placement (each student was visited once at this point). Success at this point was measured against some of the factors of situated learning. These included the success they were experiencing in transferring their skills and knowledge from past placements, how well they were able to temper their personal characteristics with those of their associate in order to learn from the associate, and the degree of confidence they exhibited and later reported as they moved from an observational to a teaching role.

I found it a bit more difficult in this class, as the kids were so different from my last class – the age, their social and economic backgrounds and just their attitude towards me. It wasn't anything like last time where I fitted in really well.

(John)

My associate was SO helpful – he set up regular meeting times right at the beginning so we could talk about what I was going to teach and how I was going. I knew from then that he would always be able to have time to talk to me and give me feedback.

(Kirsty)

My associate was acting Deputy Principal, so had to spend a lot of unexpected time out of the classroom, and while this didn't help me much in terms of getting feedback, it really gave me a lot of time in the classroom where I felt like I was the teacher – I was the most stable teacher model they had at that time. It actually worked out to be a blessing because I did so much more teaching than was expected.

(Pam)

As part of their professional practice requirements, students took detailed observation notes of their associates, their routines and the teaching processes they utilised for successful management of the children and their learning. Most had done so and were using this material to reflect on and guide their work as they began teaching in Week 2. However, two students had written their observations down in limited detail and were observed to be the students who had the most difficulty planning and implementing effective learning episodes for their class and managing the children's behaviour. Their failure to record their observations sufficiently and the difficulties they experienced once teaching might both have been products of their personalities. However, there is some support here for the

importance of novices taking a formal, measured and respectful approach to their learning from their expert (in this case, writing down their observations in detail and reflecting on that material).

Opportunity to employ strategies that assist learning

The individual debriefing sessions after the practice gave the students opportunities to discuss with their lecturer their “tools of the trade”. All the students said in the debriefs that they found the mini action research project particularly valuable in eliciting quality critical reflection and said the weekly critical incident reflections gave them particular opportunity to appraise specific and detailed aspects of their teaching and the children’s learning, and to draw conclusions that could inform their future practice. The action research reports that they handed in at the end of the placement for marking affirmed the value that this exercise held for the students. When questioned more closely about the project, the benefit most commonly cited was that the action research process enabled them to gain valuable insights into managing real issues within their classrooms. Their comments suggested that the project allowed them to be proactive in relation to a classroom-based situation that was “bugging” them (to use one student’s terminology), and that they could then draw on their existing repertoire of skills, whether learned through their course work, from their associate, or during their previous practice, to make positive changes.

I couldn’t believe how well it worked. They stopped telling tales to me and simply wrote them onto paper and put them into Mr Bucket’s “mouth”. At the end of the placement, there were hardly any tales posted. It proved to me you need to attack some of these little things straight away and do something positive to change them, otherwise they will grow into much bigger issues.
(Sarah)

Some students said that without recourse to, in particular, College-learned strategies, they would probably simply have “parroted” what they had observed their associate doing, rather than critically reflecting on that person’s practice and whether or not they should emulate it.

According to the students, and evident also from the classroom-based observations, the action research project also gave the students a strong focus point from which they, as novices, could discuss with their associates and their lecturer (the experts) what the students encountered during their placement. It also built their confidence in allowing them to see how using their previously gained knowledge and their own creativity was allowing them to enhance their classroom management skills and to provide valuable learning experiences for the children. They felt this was helping them gain more experience and move more towards becoming a beginning teacher. Several said they were finally beginning to feel less like students and more like teachers.

All the students said that debriefing sessions with the lecturer provided opportunities to discuss insights and issues gained through critical reflection and also enabled them to realise how much they had learned and how they were continually adding to their “tool kit” to make them a better teacher. Their increasing confidence appeared to be helping them to move beyond the novice observing from the boundary to a person with increasing agency, able to work increasingly successfully within the classroom context.

The students all drew from their reflections that having the ability to use and adapt previously acquired knowledge to each new classroom and school setting was important to ensuring the success of their fifth professional practice. While some students rated the success of their placement more highly than others, they all independently acknowledged that what was important was the learning they took away from their experience. They realised the need to reflect on what had and had not worked during their placement, and to be proactive in suggesting and discussing with their associates and lecturer possible reasons why this was so and what the solutions might be.

I realised on this placement, that if I didn't do something about the restless behaviour on the mat, all of the time, I would never have the chance to teach all of the fun and creative activities I had spent so much time on planning. I had to get this right. No one else could really do it for me . . . so I did!
(Anna)

Opportunity to shift learning between contexts and situations

Student-teachers need to be able to transfer their knowledge and identities into new communities each time they go out on their professional teaching practices. They can do this by constantly reflecting on their experiences, engaging in dialogue with others, and exploring the meanings they gain from each new experience. For students, each authentic context needs to show them how their acquired knowledge is used in real life and allow them the security to ask for clarification of their existing knowledge in relation to what they observe and do in that new setting.

Over their five professional practices, all the students had experienced a variety of classroom and school cultures, which meant, as they themselves observed, that they had encountered different contexts in which to situate their practice. They commented that they were having to use and adapt knowledge gained from their previous four contexts within their present one. Hager (1997) suggests that non-routine circumstances stimulate significant experiential learning and force professionals into the kind of reflective thinking that changes their beliefs, values and assumptions. Certainly, as observations of the students and their written assessment reports showed, it was generally the unexpected, non-routine events that they experienced in the classroom that elicited the most analysis and reflective thinking, and/or changed their perceptions of what they are doing (or might do) and its effectiveness.

During the interviews, every one of the 10 students identified at least one incident or event that occurred during their first two weeks of the fifth session placement that conflicted with what they had learned from their previous professional practice sessions and gave them pause for questioning and reflection. These "disruptions" to the schema of practice they had already built for themselves caused them to think more critically about what they believed about teaching and learning. Among the incidents mentioned were a first-time experience of constantly disruptive children, having a child in the class being "stood down" for three days, having a reliever come in and teach the class, and disagreeing with the way an associate handled a particular child. Such comments as, "I would never do that to a child in front of the class," and "I absolutely felt like the real teacher when the reliever was there!" exemplified how they integrated what they experienced into their own values and practice of teaching, or used it as a marker of their progress from novice to expert.

Opportunity to engage in communities of learning and practice

Student-teachers on professional practice come into each new school community as a newcomer and have to project their personality/identity as one that deserves to be welcomed and nurtured. Their identities thus act as a “filter” through which the existing members of the community decide whether they, as newcomers, should enter their specific community or not. Student-teachers thus have to “find a position” each time they go into a school that will “fit” with that community and their own identity. However, even students adept at accommodating their identity with the character of the new community will be unable to move from the boundaries if a particular school community is unable and/or does not wish to include them, for whatever reason (for example, overworked associates).

The students all acknowledged that each school they encountered on their practice sessions had unique characteristics and that even with the benefit of knowledge gained from their previous placements they needed to start their placements on the periphery. They also acknowledged that they needed to work their way into the community by being sympathetic to the demands on their associates’ time and teaching practice. However, they said that the need to accommodate their associates in this way often made it difficult for their learning needs to be met, and for their learning to occur at a pace (generally slower) that they felt comfortable with. For example, two students had associates who were unexpectedly given extra management duties during the placement and spent more time out of than in their classrooms. In the debriefs, the students said this absence had made it difficult to find regular times to observe their associates and meet with them, and that they had felt vulnerable being left to work out for themselves some of the routines and management specifics of their classrooms.

Of the group of 10 students, nine said that their school communities were very welcoming of them and that they were encouraged to become involved in the classroom and the wider school. These efforts to foster inclusiveness on the part of those already in the community acknowledge the student-teacher as someone engaged in “legitimate peripheral participation” and who has a right to move in from the boundary by interacting with the members of that community. The remaining student’s experience was not so positive. She felt that the tension between her associate and the other members of the staff made it difficult for her to move from the periphery into being more included.

It was a new experience for me, as I had always felt welcome in all of my other schools – it made it really hard to feel part of the staff this time.

(Mandy)

Through reflection during the post-placement briefing, this student realised that she personally was not at fault but rather that factors within the school were contributing to a situation that was not conducive to allowing her to engage with its resident “community of experts”.

When schools accept student-teachers into their communities, they invite these “newcomers” to share their experiences and use their knowledge. In so doing, they give them legitimate peripheral participation and continue to move them away from the boundaries. By encouraging students to engage with their associates, other staff members and the children, schools give students the confidence to attempt to solve problems, to try out new ideas and practices. The students’ learning therefore

increasingly rests on opportunity to negotiate meaning with all participants in the community (Stein, 1998).

Being accepted and mentored by an associate gives student-teachers legitimacy within that community. However, the students also have to be accepted by the children in the class if they are to be fully situated in and learn from the particular social and pedagogical contexts of the school. All 10 students said during the formal interviews that they felt accepted by the children in their classes, and the researcher's observations of them and discussions with their associates confirmed what they said. All the students recounted incidents relating to their engagement with the children that enhanced growing perceptions of themselves as effective teachers. These included the children responding positively to the student's management of their behaviours, the students being introduced to the children as a teacher, not a student, the students using previously learned strategies to gain the children's acceptance, and everyday occurrences that made the students feel that the children liked and respected them

Summary and conclusions

Given that the students' learning during their professional practice occurs in real classrooms with real teachers, it quite obviously takes place in the authentic settings integral to situated learning. Although the quality and value of the experience differed from student to student depending on a number of factors (such as the type of school and their relationship with the associate), the practice gave them opportunities to develop in an authentic classroom the skills, attitudes and knowledge they would need to practise their profession as qualified teachers.

The engagement between novice and expert (the associate teacher) was a vital aspect of how successful the students perceived their practice to be. Their comments suggest that associates who encourage student-teachers to engage in workplace conversations while on professional practice can help them access the rich unwritten knowledge held by the associates and then use it as a measure against which to apply previous learning, whether acquired in their college classrooms or in earlier professional practice. For the students, their experiences during their practice appeared to be enhanced by a willingness to watch and emulate their associate's teaching, to embrace the image of themselves as workplace learners, to tell learning stories, to listen and question rather than offer solutions, and to seek specific learning through critical thinking and the giving and receiving of feedback. These are all elements of successful situated learning, because they involve "learning partnerships . . . [that offer] highly constructive responses to contemporary professional development needs" (Fisen, 2001, p. 10).

All stakeholders in pre-service teacher education need to work together to ensure that student-teachers successfully situate (transfer) their earlier learning in each new context (placement). The role of the associate teachers in coaching and mentoring the student is vital to the process. It is they, in particular, who support and encourage students to move away from the periphery of each new community of practice they encounter. That some students found it difficult to keep pace with their associates suggests that the "expert" may not always be mindful of the needs and position of the "novice" or, more likely, that the demands of today's busy school environment mean they cannot provide the degree of support a student-teacher needs or would like. Given that the associates have a major influence on the success of their students' situated learning, it is imperative that associates continually develop and improve their skills in this role. The work of the associate

thus needs the support and understanding of school principals, and strong partnerships forged with the students' college-based lecturers.

The findings of the study also support the notion that feedback, reflection and review need to occur at critical points throughout student-teachers' professional practice and in course content related to that practice. Directing students in how to apply their college-based learning in the school and the classroom workplace and then commenting on that application are important aspects of lecturer and associate feedback. The feedback also needs to align with the students' own reflective practice, by giving students the confidence and security to try out ideas, to ask questions and to seek answers and support from their associates and lecturers.

The students' appreciation of the action research project during their fifth practice session is particularly pertinent here. All of the students reported and demonstrated success in improving aspects of their teaching and development as professional learners through use of this tool. The discussions with their associates, the feedback they received from them and their lecturers, their everyday ongoing evaluations and informal reflections, and the formal reflection requirements of their professional practice enhanced their learning by allowing them to trial, consider and (where necessary) match their emerging teaching skills to the situations they were encountering.

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