## Connecting theory to practice: enhancing professional learning, engagement and identity in student teachers

### OVERVIEW: SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION AND CONTEXT

[This subject] has brought all the aspects of my course together. I have spent many hours reading and researching and understand that this will have to continue beyond the duration of my course. It has reassured me that education is the area that I want to pursue. It has also added to my social competence (i.e., dealing with adversities). I have learnt so much in this subject. It would have been great to have had this knowledge many years ago (Student evaluation, 2012).

Teaching for Learning presents a pivotal moment in the student experience. It is the foundational subject of the Bachelor of Education professional development strand, undertaken by second year students enrolled across all majors, and the only one wherein 10 half days of embedded professional experience unfold over the semester. In Teaching for Learning, we have designed curricula, pedagogical approaches, assessment tasks and resources to develop in 'novice practitioners' (Benner, 1984) the skills and dispositions necessary for critically reflective practice from the very outset of their professional experience.

Experiential learning is maximised through student reflections on the effectiveness of their lesson implementation, the resilience required to manage classroom stressors, and the ethical dimensions of professional practice. The subject supports students to reflect-on-practice in a structured, informed and scholarly way, as well as reflect-in-practice through questioning their assumptions and ways of seeing the world (Schön, 1987)

> I found this subject vital. It has influenced me greatly as a person and a pre-service teacher (Student evaluation, 2010).
>
> I have learnt more about educational concepts than I have in my whole educational experiences (Student evaluation, 2011).
>
> I have developed an increased confidence in my abilities (Student evaluation, 2012).
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> This subject was a lifeline to getting where I wanted to go. I feel accomplished after completing it (Student evaluation, 2012).
>
> This subject has helped me to develop a professional identity (Student evaluation. 2012).

Professional learning and engagement is enhanced through the richness of the knowledge, skills, life experiences and teaching experiences that emerges in the eLearning community. To support students to interact with peers in a respectful but intellectually robust way, we established norms regarding formality of their communication, scholarly values and courtesy. Research, conducted by colleagues in the School (Balatti, Haase, Henderson, & Knight, 2010), confirmed that participating in the blog tasks developed students' professional literacies and normalised the practice of sharing professional experiences with colleagues. At a time when teaching is being made more accountable and less autonomous, the professional identity resources related to deprivatising practice are especially important in developing the professional confidence necessary for sustainable teaching careers. Responses as detailed in Table 2 affirm that students gained confidence in their professional identity through the supportive structures and participation in the online blogs.

Table 2. Professional identity resources developed through blog participation

|  | Student survey response (2009) |
| --- | --- |
| Professional literacies | At first I really stressed out about my ability to write appropriately but now I feel confident with my writing abilities. |
| Sense of belonging | You start to feel more comfortable with your peers allowing more depth within the blogs. |
| Professional knowledge | Once I improved relating my response to theory, I became more confident. |
| Connecting theory and practice | As time passed I could base the blogs more on professional experi which also made the readings more clear. |

Source: Balatti et al., 2010

Authentic assessment tasks. Recent reviews of Australian teacher education programs 'identified key assessment challenges, particularly regarding the theory–practice nexus' (UQ, 2012, p. 11). Teaching for Learning 1 this challenge was met because students learn through clearly articulated assessment tasks that authenti(y)-4( r b)-3([-1(s)-1(m4( c)4(o)1(n)-n0(')1( )1((s)-1(Td (s)Tjm4((n)0 Td [(l)11()22(wi-5(n)-1(Td (s)   )1(p)-

2012, are presented on the JCU Teaching and Learning Development website (JCU, 2013) as an exemplar of good practice for purposes of staff professional development.

## WIDER RECOGNITION FROM SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY

Our capacity to develop curricula, resources and teaching and learning processes that reflect a command of our field has been further recognised by JCU staff and the wider scholarly community. In a 2010 Peer Review of Teaching, Dr Maree Dinan-Thompson, then Deputy Head of School of Education, concluded that:

> As a reflective practitioner, Michelle is always searching for improvement and committed to research led, authentic pedagogy, with links to professional applications. Her commitment to 'raising the bar' of teaching and learning is evidenced through a number of initiatives and roles.

In 2013, we were awarded a JCU Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning. In support of our nomination, Dr Cecily Knight, Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning, wrote:

> The recently released Commonwealth Government package of reforms for teacher education includes a focus on the teaching practicum and authentic assessment within schools. The strategy that Dr Lasen and Dr Balatti have used in developing a community of learners to connect university-based teacher educators, school-based teacher educators and the students is one that supports the approach being promoted at the national level. This shows they are at the cutting edge in their field.

A research agenda led by Jo engaged a team of School of Education colleagues investigating teaching and learning issues in Teaching for Learning. As a result, four peer-reviewed articles were published in the Proceedings of the 2010 Australian Teacher Education Association Conference. Subsequently, Jo has drawn upon her experience in Teaching for Learning and collaboration with academics across Faculties in the University and teachers in schools, to create a learning community that supports ongoing professional development of secondary mathematics student teachers.

In conclusion, we have documented very high levels of student satisfaction over four years and recognition from fellow staff, the institution and wider practitioner and scholarly community. These data attest to coherent and researched curricula, pedagogical approaches, assessment, resources and processes