

**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 1 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 1*, 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 students’ 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). Formal evaluation on the subject and teaching communicates an emerging confidence in students’ professional knowledge, skills and identity, as they take first steps in becoming reflective, resilient and ethical teacher practitioners.

In this citation, we highlight the complementary contributions of Michelle, as lecturer and tutor, and Jo, as subject developer, to influencing students’ professional learning, engagement and identity through (1) high quality curricula and resources; (2) promotion of a professional learning community; and (3) authentic assessment tasks, purposefully designed to support students in connecting theory to practice. Disconnection between university and professional experience components remains ‘a perennial problem’ in teacher education (Zeichner, 2010) and one that impacts the overall student experience. This subject strengthens connection. We draw upon outstanding levels of satisfaction for Cairns students over the years 2009 to 2012—involving a combined total of 254 students—and recognition from supervising classroom teachers, fellow staff and the wider academic community to demonstrate the effectiveness of the subject in engaging students in learning at the theory-practice nexus.

*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).*

*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).*

CRITERION 2: DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICULA, RESOURCES AND SERVICES THAT REFLECT A COMMAND OF THE FIELD

High quality curricula resources: Our collaboration allowed for a creative re-imagining of *Teaching for Learning 1*. Over the years 2009 to 2012, we developed a rich and coherent eLearning environment to enable a weekly learning cycle wherein students first build foundational understanding by independently working through eLearning modules. These modules include clear objectives and expectations for student learning, detailed content guides, links to professional experience and assessment, and instructions for further readings and online blog tasks. Student evaluation attests to the impact of the modules and associated resources on their learning and engagement:

***Expectations are clearly defined** right from the start. Everything is **clearly planned out and accessible** (Student evaluation, 2010).*

*The **week by week modules** were very useful and **kept me on track** (Student evaluation, 2011).*

*The teaching has been **well supported with online tasks and readings**, which contributed to **my learning** (Student evaluation, 2012).*

In *Teaching for Learning 1*, we have purposefully designed curricula to continuously engage our students in *in-time learning*. On a weekly basis, they are introduced to, gain some confidence with, and then have the opportunity to apply teaching and classroom management principles and strategies. A Professional Experience Handbook was developed to provide students with clearly articulated tasks and templates for weekly classroom observation, lesson planning, data collection and reflection. Jill Sugden, primary classroom teacher and year-level coordinator, St Andrews Catholic College, states that, “while the second year students are at a very early stage in their development, the sequence of learning activities that has been designed is undoubtedly setting them up for success in the teaching of first lessons and beyond. The handbook is set out so clearly and concisely, ensuring both the students and the supervising teachers know exactly what they need to be doing” (2013 email). Survey data (2009) also reflects teacher satisfaction with the design of professional experience tasks and supporting resources.

In the week’s learning cycle, we intentionally position lectures and tutorials as culminating experiences, with a view to deepening student learning and engagement through active pedagogies, involving question and answer, peer to peer sharing, cooperative group learning and problem solving, and the viewing and practising of skills and strategies. Very high levels of student satisfaction, sustained over four years, in terms of lecturer organisation, knowledge, communication and support for student participation and learning is evidenced in student evaluation feedback and mean scores (see responses from well over half to four-fifths of cohorts in Table 1):

Her knowledge of the subject matter is outstanding and clearly communicated to students (Student evaluation, 2009).

She has an enormous array of techniques to convey what she wants students to learn (Student evaluation, 2011).

Provided in a clear and logical way that allowed all students to participate (Student evaluation, 2011).

The tasks are very good in that they encourage the preservice teacher to “unpack” the fundamentals of pedagogy and curriculum. I found the Profex handbook very comprehensive. It gives clear examples of what is required (Early Childhood teacher, State school, 2009).

The tasks were very appropriate and effectively oriented the preservice teacher into the practicalities of a classroom (Primary teacher, Catholic school, 2009).

The tasks are essential for directing focus on who the learners are and management of teaching and learning strategies (Secondary teacher, Independent school, 2009).

Table 1. Cairns student evaluations of teaching, 2009-2012

Scale: 1=completely unacceptable; 2=not really acceptable; 3=acceptable; 4=more than acceptable; 5=outstanding

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012
Response (% of cohort)	55.6%	76.8%	74.6%	79.7%
Is well organised/ organisation	4.72	4.79	4.93	4.79
Appears knowledgeable/ understanding in this subject area	4.72	4.83	4.84	4.83
Communicates clearly/ quality of explanation	4.48	4.42	4.70	4.72
Involves students/ interest in assisting students to learn	4.64	4.28	4.73	4.64

Promotion of a professional learning community: Student teachers develop their professional identity by acting and interacting with others as if they are teachers. In *Teaching for Learning 1*, we extended the space and time in which this occurs, beyond the 10 half days of professional experience, by promoting weekly participation in a peer eLearning community. We designed online blog tasks to model features of Louis, Marks and Kruse’s (1996) professional learning community, involving commitment to ‘learning, collaboration, deprivatised practice and reflective dialogue’ (p. 760). In these tasks, students engage different theoretical lenses and frameworks to reflect, from a teacher’s point of view, on experiences in their classrooms (e.g., behaviour management challenges, ethical dilemmas) and from their own school years (e.g., recollections of highly effective teachers, times of experiencing difference). They respond to their peers’ contributions, critique one another’s lesson plans, provide support and offer alternative perspectives. They act as if they are teachers.

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 Jo and 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. Survey 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	<i>At first I really stressed out about my ability to write appropriately but now I feel confident with my writing abilities.</i>
Sense of belonging	<i>You start to feel more comfortable with your peers allowing more depth within the blogs.</i>
Professional knowledge	<i>Once I improved relating my response to theory, I became more confident.</i>
Connecting theory and practice	<i>As time passed I could base the blogs more on professional experience which also made the readings more clear.</i>

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). In *Teaching for Learning 1*, this challenge was met because students learn through clearly articulated assessment tasks that authentically connect theory with practice and align purposefully with subject outcomes (see mean scores in Table 3).

Table 3. Cairns student evaluation of teaching (79.7% response) 2012

Scale: 1=completely unacceptable; 2=not really acceptable; 3=acceptable; 4=more than acceptable; 5=outstanding

Connected theory and practice	4.70
Connected the information and activities to the context of professional practice	4.72
Connected subject aims and activities and assessments	4.53

In their final portfolio, students synthesise key themes from reflections that are written over the course of their professional experience. These reflections are informed by the scholarly literature, the data that they collect on engagement and achievement of students in their classrooms, and the feedback that they receive from their supervising teachers. A 2011 *Teaching for Learning 1* student stated that, "The assignments allowed me to successfully demonstrate my knowledge and the support that was available was brilliant" (Student evaluation). A 2012 student reported that, "The detail in the subject outline for both assessment tasks was very thorough" (Student evaluation). Student evaluations of subject for 2012 (33.9% response) show recognition of '**clearly specified assessment requirements and criteria**' (mean=4.68) and a very high level of student '**motivation to do their best work**' (mean=4.85).

Assessment is a powerful driver of learning and engagement in higher education (Brown & Race, 2013). In *Teaching for Learning 1*, we have continually refined assessment task descriptions and accompanying rubrics in response to student feedback, staff feedback from assessment moderation meetings, our own evaluations within the subject, and feedback from colleagues teaching in the second-year suite of subjects, and in the professional development strand across the third and fourth years. Peta Salter, a *Teaching for Learning 1* staff member and a 2011 JCU Sessional Teaching Citation winner, reflects that, "moderation processes facilitated critical reflection on both student achievement decisions and the effectiveness of assessment to give students opportunities to demonstrate the learning outcomes of the subject" (2013 email). Consensus moderation processes undertaken in *Teaching for Learning 1*, and video-captured in

2012, are presented on the JCU Teaching and Learning Development website (JCU, 1995-2013) 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** that 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 in investigating teaching and learning issues in *Teaching for Learning 1*. 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 1* and collaboration with academics across Faculties in the University and teachers in schools, to create an eLearning 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 communities. These data attest to coherent and research-led curricula, pedagogical approaches, assessment, resources and processes that maximise professional learning and engagement, enabling student teachers in their journey to becoming critically reflective, resilient and ethical practitioners.

*[This subject] shaped me to be a **confident learner and pre-service teacher**. The **skills and self-esteem** I gained from taking [this subject] have allowed me to **push myself beyond my boundaries** and I will continue to **strive for excellence**. The subject has changed how I approach areas of my life and teaching career. I would not have [otherwise] achieved **Honours** or be involved in the Mount Stewart Cluster **Teacher Education Centre of Excellence** through Education Queensland (Julie Ballangarry, 2011 *Teaching for Learning 1* student, 2013 email).*

Balatti, J., Haase, M., Henderson, L., & Knight, C. (2010). Developing teacher professional identity through online learning: A social capital perspective. Proceedings of *Australian Teacher Education Association Conference, 4-7 July 2010, Townsville, QLD, Australia*.; Benner, P. (1984). *From novice to expert*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley; Brown, S., & Race, P. (2013). Using effective assessment to promote learning. In L. Hunt, & D. Chalmers (Eds.), *University teaching in focus* (pp. 74-91). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.; James Cook University (1995-2013). *Consensus moderation: An exemplar of post-assessment moderation*. Retrieved from http://www.jcu.edu.au/teaching/JCU_106056.html; Louis, K., Marks, H., & Kruse, S. (1996). Teachers' professional community in restructuring schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 33(4), 757-798. ; Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.; University of Queensland. (2012). *An investigation of best practice in evidence-based assessment within preservice teacher education programs and other professions*. Toowong, Qld: Queensland College of Teachers.; Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college- and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 89-99.
