

# **Developing Communities of Praxis: Bridging the theory practice divide in teacher education**

## **Développer des communautés de pratique : combler le fossé entre la théorie et la pratique au sein de la formation des enseignants**

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Article abstract

Teacher education in universities is under pressure. In many new education policies there is a renewed focus on teacher quality, and therefore quality initial teacher education. In some countries this renewed focus has led to a resurgence of “alternative approaches” to teacher education such as Teach for America / Australia. One of the most persistent complaints about pre-service teacher education is that educational theory presented in these programs does not relate sufficiently to the real work of teachers. In an attempt to overcome these real or perceived divides, tertiary drama educators at the University of Sydney constructed a professional experience program based on both the community of practice model (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and Frierean notions of praxis (1972). The *community of praxis* approach emphasises the importance of integrating theory and practice to support the development of beginning teachers. This article outlines the development, implementation, and evaluation of this approach, including the reasoning behind its foundation and the theoretical and practical significance of such an approach for teacher-educators.

# DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: BRIDGING THE THEORY PRACTICE DIVIDE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT.** Teacher education in universities is under pressure. In many new education policies there is a renewed focus on teacher quality, and therefore quality initial teacher education. In some countries this renewed focus has led to a resurgence of “alternative approaches” to teacher education such as Teach for America / Australia. One of the most persistent complaints about pre-service teacher education is that educational theory presented in these programs does not relate sufficiently to the real work of teachers. In an attempt to overcome these real or perceived divides, tertiary drama educators at the University of Sydney constructed a professional experience program based on both the community of practice model (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and Frierean notions of praxis (1972). The *community of praxis* approach emphasises the importance of integrating theory and practice to support the development of beginning teachers. This article outlines the development, implementation, and evaluation of this approach, including the reasoning behind its foundation and the theoretical and practical significance of such an approach for teacher-educators.

## DÉVELOPPER DES COMMUNAUTÉS DE PRATIQUE: COMBLER LE FOSSÉ ENTRE LA THÉORIE ET LA PRATIQUE AU SEIN DE LA FORMATION DES ENSEIGNANTS

**RÉSUMÉ.** La formation des enseignants au sein des universités est soumise à des pressions constantes. En effet, plusieurs nouvelles politiques éducationnelles réaffirment l'importance d'avoir des enseignants compétents et donc, une formation initiale des enseignants de qualité. Dans certains pays, le renouvellement de cet objectif a provoqué la réapparition « d'approches parallèles », telles que Teach for America / Australia, approches offrant une alternative à la formation des enseignants. Une des plaintes les plus tenaces à l'égard de leur formation est que les théories exposées au sein de ces programmes ne reflètent pas adéquatement la réalité professionnelle des enseignants. Afin de pallier à ce fossé réel ou perçu, des professeurs d'art dramatique en enseignement supérieur de l'Université de Sydney ont mis sur pied un programme d'expérience professionnelle en s'inspirant à la fois du modèle de la communauté de pratique (Lave et Wenger, 1991) et des notions de praxis de Friere (1972). L'approche de la communauté de pratique met l'accent sur l'importance d'intégrer la théorie et la pratique pour soutenir la formation des nouveaux enseignants. Cet article décrit le développement de la

mise sur pied ainsi que l'évaluation de cette approche. Il explique également le raisonnement qui sous-tend sa création et la signification théorique et pratique d'une telle approche pour ceux qui forment les enseignants.

*He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.* (Leonardo Da Vinci 1452-1519, cited in Kline, 1972, p. 3.)

Teacher educators are seemingly in a constant struggle to reconcile the theory of the lecture and tutorial room with the practice of the classroom (e.g Dempster, 2007; Kennedy, 1997; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Goodlad, 1990; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). The ideal, of course, is to provide teacher education that seamlessly integrates theory of education and its practice in the “real world of education” so that future teachers can “translate new views and theories about learning into actual teaching practices in the schools” (Lunenberg, Korthagen & Swennen, 2007, p. 586). As Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) suggested, however, a dichotomy has been created where theory is delivered in the university and practice is delivered in school settings. Educational theorists, such as Eisner (2002) argued that a revolution is required to bridge the divide where “universities come to realize that the long-term heart of teacher education is not primarily in the university” (p. 384). Eisner’s argument suggests the kinds of knowledge required in teaching is changing in a rapidly shifting school context, and that teacher education should be positioned primarily in the practice of schooling. It is a concern, however, that division into “theory” versus “practice” camps ignore the potential of both in a balanced approach to teacher education. Reconciliation between the two domains is essential if teacher education is to remain significant for pre-service teachers.

Critically, as Korthagen and Kessels (1999) reminded us, rivalry between the two corrodes the vital linkages that are central to the growth of competent teachers:

The polarization that is characteristic of this type of discussion is dangerous as it focuses on the question of whether teacher education should start with theory or practice instead of the more important question of how to integrate the two in such a way that it leads to integration within the teacher. (p. 4)

The theory-practice dichotomy is made and therefore can be un-made if there is the institutional will to do so. Goodson (2003) encouraged teacher educators to “remember the central historical point that theory and practice are not inevitably or intrinsically divorced: it is structures and institutionalised missions that have created the recent divorce. But new structures and institutionalised practices could consummate a new marriage” (p. 9). These issues have come into sharp focus recently with the ongoing debate about the optimal site for training high quality teachers, a debate which has generally dichotomised the university and the school rather than conceptualising them as complementary.

This article outlines the development and evaluation of a professional experience program run in the Drama Curriculum units at The University of Sydney. The program was developed to respond to the concerns explored above: that there is a dichotomy between educational theory and practice. The program, known as the *community of praxis* approach, is informed by the community of practice model (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and understandings of praxis (Freire, 1972). This article aims to provide teacher educators with an example of innovative practice specifically focused on bridging the theory/practice divide. While there are similar programs being undertaken in teacher education programs in Australia and internationally, the continuous evaluation of the approach reported here gives insight into the particular benefits of the program. This allows a deeper understanding of how participants make connections between the practical aspects of the approach and education theory. This article explores the evaluation data to make comments about the ability of the approach to: reconcile theory and research in education with the everyday practice of teaching; help pre-service teachers develop their identity as drama teachers; and build understanding of the importance of reflective practice in Drama education.

## THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

University-based initial teacher education is under renewed and heavy scrutiny internationally. The general trend emerging seems to be an abrupt shift from University-based teacher education to “alternative pathways” such as Teach for America (TFA). In the United Kingdom, initial teacher education is shifting under the Tory and Liberal Democrat coalition. There is a move “back to the chalkface” for the training of secondary teachers (Burton & Goodman, 2011). The mixed results schemes such as these have garnered notwithstanding (Carter, Amrein-Beardsley, & Cooper Hansen, 2011), these alternative approaches have gained currency in the United Kingdom (Teach First, Teach Now), the United States (TFA) and Australia (Teach for Australia). In the USA, data from the National Centre for Educational Statistics cited by Davis and Moely (2007) reported that “A majority of graduates of schools of education believe that traditional teacher preparation programs left them ill-prepared for the challenges and the rigors of the classroom” (p. 283). At the centre of these initiatives is a drive for students to receive more “relevant” contact with the realities of teaching. One of the strategies teacher education institutions have employed is the development of more intensive university school partnerships through internships and other strategies (Dempster, 2009). This paper reviews one such strategy that attempts to diminish the gap between the University and the school and create a space for a community of praxis to emerge. In essence, the approach attempts to implement the call to support the growth of student teachers in university pre-service education (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008, p. 1809).

In an effort to reconcile the theory / practice divide, a team of university teachers in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney developed an approach to professional experience influenced by the communities of practice model of Lave and Wenger (1991). The approach acknowledges that quality teaching is generated from successful and collegial communities of practice, and that understanding and developing the teaching community is a crucial component of initial teacher education. Often part of the unrecognised work of teacher educators is the development of pedagogies, models and structures that innovatively close the gap between practice and theory, making praxis possible. Freire (1972) referred to praxis as “the action and reflection of men [sic] upon their world in order to transform it.... Men are not built in silence, but in words, in work, in action-reflection” (pp. 75–76).

The development of praxis outlined by Freire (1972) is central to the program described in this article. Merging understandings of praxis and the community of practice approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991), this program is concerned with building *communities of praxis*, whereby pre-service and in-service teachers work together to reflect on their development as teachers in the ways Le Cornu and Ewing (2008, 2010) suggested. This approach aimed to encourage pre-service teachers to be involved in a community of learning in which they work with the mentor teacher, the university teacher, and their peers to create a reflective understanding of teaching. The approach provided work-based learning experiences for pre-service teachers to reflect on the connection between their university learning and teaching practice.

## COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE / PRAXIS

Communities of practice are pervasive in most areas of our lives, but especially in the world of work and schooling. Teachers achieve their work through the development and management of several relationships: with students, colleagues, school leadership, and state / national jurisdictions, just to name a few. Community of practice, as an approach, is based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), recognizing a shift from an individualistic cognitive approach to a sociocultural approach in teacher education (Barab, Barnett & Squire ., 2002, p. 489) as well as theories of learning more generally (Walker, 2003, p. 226). Wenger (1998) defined a community of practice to be the result of collective learning that:

reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities, *communities of practice*. (p. 45)

The community of praxis is a particular type of community of practice. A similar approach is the “community of learners” (Brown and Campione, 1994). The difference between the community of learners and the community of praxis

lies in the emphasis on reflection and conceptualising the theoretical aspects of learning in a practical classroom setting. While a community of learners tends to focus on theoretical aspects of knowledge, a community of praxis applies theory to practical situations. The community of praxis is concerned, in Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms, with the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise but critically it is seeking to reconcile the theoretical work done in university settings with the practice of everyday classrooms.

## THE SYDNEY CONTEXT

In an Australian inquiry into teacher education, concern was expressed regarding the link between practice and theory in pre-service teacher training. The Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training (2007) reported "many teacher education students and recent graduates expressed concern about the weakness of the link between the practicum and the theoretical components of teacher education courses" (p. 71).

Another recent shift in education in Australia has been the implementation of "teaching standards" in many states. In New South Wales (NSW), where this program has been developed, many teacher education programs are in the process of accreditation with the NSW Institute of Teachers (NSWIT); a process which ensures all graduate teaching standards are being met within pre-service training programs (NSWIT, 2009). These standards not only incorporate requirements such as effective planning, content knowledge, and communication with students, but also require graduates to engage in professional conversations, accept and offer constructive feedback, and critically reflect on their own practice (Rust, 1999).

The drama education team (the authors of this paper) teach the secondary drama education teacher preparation courses at The University of Sydney. This program serves approximately 90 full-time equivalent students per year in three units of study. The students enter this course through two main paths: as undergraduates enrolled in their third year of a five year combined degree or as postgraduates in their first year of a Master of Teaching. As a result, the students in the course vary in age and life experience and come from a range of backgrounds, including those who have trained and worked as actors and those who have had a more theoretical performance studies approach in their initial studies. A key goal of drama education is to create a community of learners who feel safe, supported, and able to take risks in their learning. With such a diverse group of students this can be challenging.

Previous student evaluations<sup>1</sup> of the drama curriculum courses suggested that students were feeling disconnected from classroom practice. In response to these concerns the community of praxis program was developed in 2003 to

align theory and practice more closely, and to develop a productive, collegial community of learners within the pre-service drama program. To achieve this, the program has a particular focus on theories such as Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice and Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner. While not suggesting that the outcomes of this program can be generalised to all initial teacher education, the community of praxis is one strategy<sup>2</sup> that demonstrates that change is achievable when individuals (students, teachers, and academics) and ultimately institutions (schools and universities) create productive and mutually beneficial partnerships.

## **METHODS FOR EVALUATING THE COMMUNITY OF PRAXIS PROGRAM**

The theoretical and practical reasoning that prompted the foundation of the community of praxis approach has been outlined above. The following sections explore the outline and evaluation of the approach. The program has been in ongoing evaluation since its conception in 2003. A variety of methods were employed to achieve a well-rounded, longitudinal understanding of the success and challenges associated with the program. All methods, however, were participant-oriented approaches (see Stake, 1994; Williams, 2002), aimed at understanding the experiences of the participants or stakeholders in the program. Evaluation strategies were mixed-method, aligning with a broader case study methodology (Stake, 1994; R. K. Yin, 2009) Data collection included:

1. Quantitative student satisfaction surveys administered by the University's Institute of Teaching and Learning. The surveys are conducted triennially unless otherwise requested. The Drama Education team has requested surveys be conducted in 2007, 2008 and 2009. These surveys gathered data on participants' overall satisfaction with their Drama Curriculum subject, but included questions pertinent to the community of praxis program such as the ability of the course to bridge the gap between theory and practice, the relevance of the assessment, and students' overall satisfaction with the course. The surveys include both closed and open-ended questions.
2. A review of the approach in 2005 undertaken by an independent evaluator who interviewed teachers in partnership schools and conducted focus groups with current and past participants.
3. Anonymous questionnaires with open response items were completed by participants in each year of the program. These surveys were specifically about the community of praxis program, including how participants feel the program could be improved.

Informal feedback such as unsolicited letters or emails from pre-service or mentor teacher participants are also included as evaluation data to develop a deeper understanding of the success or otherwise of the program. Before

discussing the beneficial and challenging aspects of working with pre-service teachers in classroom settings, the next section will summarise the phases and purpose of the community of praxis program.

## **OUTLINE OF THE PROGRAM**

The community of praxis program develops partnerships with local secondary schools and seeks to establish ways of integrating university-based teaching with school-based professional experiences. This program strengthens the relationship between students, the workplace (schools), and the university to create an authentic link between the academic components of their study and the practice they will enter as professionals. The program has the following features across three phases:

- Structured observations of diverse schools with teachers demonstrating best practice (2 days).
- Team teaching that integrates into the partnership schools' drama program.
- Intense reflection / evaluation by peers, teachers, and academic tutors on the team teaching experience, the observations and their university studies.
- Reflective and critical assessment that supports individual learning about drama pedagogy

### ***Phase one: Classroom observation***

The first phase of the approach asks students to consider the practice of an experienced teacher. In teams, the students observe and reflect on classroom drama practice in different schools. This reflection and observation alerts students to the tacit and craft knowledge central to practice. The craft of drama teaching (Ewing & Simons, 2001), or any teaching for that matter, can begin in theory but requires an understanding of the connection between that theory and practice to give insights into the tacit knowledge of teaching. The processes required for tacit knowledge to be understood by initial teacher education students is detailed by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002):

The tacit aspects of knowledge are often most valuable. They consist of embodied expertise – a deep understanding of complex, interdependent systems that enables dynamic responses to context specific problems.... Sharing tacit knowledge requires interaction and informal learning processes such as storytelling, conversation, coaching and apprenticeship of the kind communities of practice provide. (p. 9)

The observations of the first phase allow participants to discuss pedagogy in a critical and engaged way. They also alert student teachers to some of the issues that arise in classroom practice and how these relate to the theoretical

aspects of their study. There is a significant amount of time (approximately 4 months) between phase one (observation) and phase two (classroom professional experience). While necessary due to course requirements, this pause also facilitates student reflection on what they have observed. It allows students time to develop deeper content and craft knowledge through a process of reflection on their practice. These reflections then inform their planning for phase two of the program.

The observation and subsequent discussions with peers and the classroom teacher allow students not only to share their observations with their peers but also to study the particular ways experienced teachers respond to complex, context specific problems. These discussions also provide a crucial frame of reference for their own teaching in phase two and give pre-service teachers insights into how classes can be structured and taught within the curriculum.

### *Phase two: Classroom team teaching experience*

In the second phase of this program the pre-service teachers teach a lesson in teams of 2-4 students in a partnering school. The pre-service teachers are given information about the classes they will teach from the drama teacher in the partnering school. The content of the lesson planned to align with the students' regular classes. Academic staff, the classroom teacher, and their peers critique the lessons the teams deliver. The pre-service teachers then use the team-teaching experience and the subsequent critique from their tutors and colleagues to inform their work on a critical reflection assignment.

Team-teaching encourages the development of critical conversation (Brookfield, 1995, p. 9) amongst pre-service teachers in the planning of, and reflection on, their lessons. As Buchanan and Khamis (1999) argue team teaching and reflection facilitates understanding teaching as a community of practice.

The NSW drama teaching community is a generally successful community of practice (Anderson, 2004), one in which secondary and tertiary educators often work together to develop best practice in teaching and assessment. Korthagen, Loughran, and Russel (2006) suggested that modelling successful communities of practice is a key principle in teacher education. The community of praxis approach aims to both reflect current, and model best, practices when working with a community of educators.

### *Phase three: Critical reflection*

The critical reflection builds on Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner approach and calls for students to reflect on action. Hatton and Smith (1995) argued that a student who critically reflects "demonstrates an awareness that actions and events are not only located in, and explicable by, reference to multiple perspectives but are located in, and influenced by, multiple historical, and socio-political contexts" (p. 48). The critical reflection phase requires students

to reflect upon their experience in a more formalised critical reflection essay that constitutes 50% of their course grades. Student feedback has demonstrated that students find this assessment useful in a variety of ways. One student commented:

[The assignment] forced me think critically rather than superficially about the experience. It produced insights about my own skills and teaching practice that I can look out for in the future. (2005)

The reflection is proactive and aimed at supporting changes in the students' approaches to teaching as they enter their own classrooms as beginning teachers.

Although when evaluating the approach students have consistently expressed satisfaction with this program, modifications have been made according to the yearly feedback. For instance, students in 2004 expressed a concern regarding the link between peer / self evaluations and the high-stakes nature of tutor evaluations and feedback. As a result we have changed our approach to feedback to be more consistent with the community of practice approach. We now integrate peer feedback strategies before assignments are submitted. This not only provides alternative avenues for students to receive feedback on their work, but also allows students to become accustomed to giving feedback according to set criteria; an important skill for future teachers. The drama education team monitors this process closely to manage the flow of feedback and to ensure the quantity and quality of feedback; it is comparable from student to student.

## **EVALUATION FINDINGS**

The following discussion draws upon the evaluation data to explore the potential of the community of praxis approach for three main purposes:

- Reconciling theory and research in education with the everyday practice of teaching.
- Helping pre-service teachers develop their identity as drama teachers and make connections with the drama education community.
- Building understanding of the importance of reflective practice in drama education.

While these issues are interconnected, in both the evaluation data and quality teaching practice more generally, for the purpose of evaluating the community of praxis approach, they are discussed separately below. The discussion that follows also explores the tensions and problems with the current program and ways these issues could be addressed for future cohorts.

### *Reconciling theory and practice*

Every year since the beginning of the program, students have provided feedback that has been crucial to the evolution of the program. There has been continuous strong support for the approach. Table 1 outlines the results from the unit student evaluation (USE) survey question “I can see how the knowledge and skills I am learning in this unit can be put to use in my future professional work.” The high agreement indicates that the unit of study assisted them to reconcile their theoretical understanding with the practical demands of the classroom. It also provided them with practical demonstrations of educational theories such as constructivism and reflective practice.

**TABLE 1: I can see how the knowledge and skills I am learning in this unit can be put to use in my future professional work**

Year cohort	Agree or strongly agree
2007	92 %
2008	91 %
2009	94 %

In questionnaire responses from 2003-2009, students also made comments about the connection between theory and practice. One student commented that the phase one observations helped her to clarify her understanding of how theory actually becomes practice in the classroom.

Reflective Practice: this was made more concrete for me. I have always regarded it as a rather fluffy practice, but now I do see its value when applied to teaching. In fact I now see it as essential and invaluable. The experience has made many theoretical ideas clearer as it has allowed me to experience learning and teaching first hand. My observations at schools really confirmed my belief in social constructivism as I watched students learn new ideas and difficult concepts through interaction with one another. (2005)

Another student commented on how the professional teaching experience provided him with an enhanced understanding of the social construction of learning and its links to classroom practice:

The practical experience has really consolidated the theoretical perspectives on teaching.... Theories such as social constructivism, which includes concepts of modelling and scaffolding really became clear after the team teaching experience. The experience has certainly enriched my theoretical understanding of teaching perspectives because it was experiential and actually made the theories real. (2006)

The community of praxis approach is structured to allow students the opportunity to deliberately and explicitly apply what they have learned in their education and curriculum courses in a safe and supportive environment. To this end, one student commented:

The day gave me a sense of security I wasn't thrown in at the deep end but I felt able to apply what I'd learned, whereas in tutorial groups as a student [in performance studies] everything is on "acting teaching" not really up there doing it. I felt the feedback session was very helpful and made the experience more real. It wasn't like getting a report just on paper it made the experience more vivid. (2007)

Theory and practice are reconciled as students reflect on this opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of teaching. Our aim as teacher educators is to create a learning environment where this deeper understanding makes future university learning directly relevant to the pre-service teachers' understanding of practice.

In terms of more specific drama curriculum theory and teacher craft knowledge, many students commented on the potential for the teaching experience to uncover the importance of the educational theory learned in university. Through this, students appeared to gain an understanding of the need to apply their theoretical understanding of drama curriculum to the realities of the drama classroom.

Critical reflection is integral to shifting pedagogical content knowledge bases to suit the needs of your given students. Certainly, I need to shift my decidedly theory-oriented approach to improvisation and incorporate more of an experiential orientation. (2004)

I think this experience really highlighted for me the need to constantly "read up" on my craft and stay up-to-date with the material and the method of teaching. (2007)

This motivation to engage more thoroughly with theory is an indicator of the success of the program. Students are better able to see the connections between theory, research, teaching practice and reflection.

The students' responses here suggest that there is strong potential for this approach to provide some bridging between theory and practice. Unlike some other professional experience approaches, the feedback from their peers and teachers provides an intense and timely opportunity to link their theoretical understanding with classroom experience. The other heartening aspect of these responses is that elements of these students' theoretical knowledge such as social constructivism and reflective practice were taught to these students at least 12 months before this experience. Many of these students have actually made connections beyond drama curriculum to foundational educational theory and understood how theoretical aspects (including curriculum) operate in practice in the classroom.

### *Developing identity as a drama teacher and connecting to the professional community*

One of the desired outcomes of this program is to encourage students to make relevant connections between their learning experiences and their chosen

careers. The program not only gives students a deeper understanding of the link between their current university work and teaching practices, but also gives students the opportunity to begin to form an identity as a classroom teacher and the confidence to approach their first extended professional experience. Student evaluations and questionnaires suggest that this outcome is often achieved. One student commented:

I believe this team teaching experience was integral to developing not only my drama pedagogy but also my 'drama' self-concept. Indeed, this was my first drama teaching experience and, certainly, there were apprehensions about my ability as a drama teacher. Consolidating independent thought through collegial dialogical discourse was fundamental to affirming my theoretical knowledge and creative ability. This collegial interaction was also integral to identifying the frailties and gaps in my theoretical and experiential knowledge. (2007)

Within this program, students are given the opportunity to visit and work in diverse schools in Sydney, to meet and develop relationships with practicing drama teachers, and to engage in conversations about current issues in drama education. A key factor of this program is the connection between the university and the professional community. Having supportive and productive relationships with the professional drama education community allows for more effective training of our students, a more holistic understanding of both the connection between theory and practice, and a better understanding of the importance of collegial relationships. The program encourages students to develop this holistic understanding through their engagement in school-based workplace settings. The independent external evaluation of the program in 2005 included the following finding:

The process simulates a laboratory experience for student teachers assisting them to develop long-term collaborative professional relationships. A teaching experience on this intense, challenging and enriching level can create shared understandings of teacher craft knowledge as well as respect for personal and professional endeavour.

The program was also found to be beneficial for building students' confidence as teachers, building their professional knowledge, and developing stronger collegial relationships amongst all involved, particularly amongst the pre-service teacher peer group. Recently, calls for a more collegial and peer-based approach to teacher education have grown more prominent. Korthagen et al. (2006) argued teacher education must include more horizontal relationships and move away from the vertical teacher-student relationship. They comment:

If, in teacher education, students get used to learning in collegial relationships, this will help to bridge the gap between what is done in teacher education and what those learning to teach actually need in their future practice. (p. 1034)

One of the strongest responses from the student participants in the evaluation of the community of praxis approach was the value they saw in the feedback they received from, and gave to, their peers. Participants have commented:

I enjoyed the different types of input from the classroom teacher – which related to how the class responded. This approach is much better than feedback from supervisors on practicum, who normally have very little time to spend with you afterwards. Also those supervisors don't know you and are not seeing you in other contexts. The great strength of the day was the debrief and being watched – and watching my peer group gave me a whole lot of different ideas on how to tackle things. (2008)

Hearing my teaching approach critiqued was just as important as the teaching itself. Feedback is essential if we are to develop. We are peers in this game and feedback from one another as well as our supervisors allows us to really be open to change, to identify areas we need to work on, and develop as a whole. It is all about creating “you” as a teacher and without feedback it would be easy for superficial and non-questioning teachers to enter the workforce which I think is dangerous. (2008)

It was very important to reflect on my lesson with everyone else, especially because the teacher and peers would be seeing the lesson with a whole other perspective. Also, being the person giving feedback was a great learning experience, as it gave opportunity to observe, think and reflect. (2008)

These responses suggest that the discussion and feedback aspects of the program were as, if not more, beneficial for these beginning teachers than the actual teaching experience. The evaluations indicate a strengthening of the community in this situation. Consistent with the Vygotskian principles that underpin the community of praxis, students have learnt about teaching through their socially mediated relationships with their peers, the classroom teacher, and their university teachers. Korthagen et al. (2006) suggested that: “Fellow-students can become valuable supervisors, thus taking over part of the role of the teacher educator” (p. 1034). Our experience of ceding some of the supervision to students enhanced the depth of the feedback and provided an enhanced learning experience for students. More importantly, this approach models a process of collegial interaction that students might use when they begin teaching.

### *Becoming reflective practitioners*

The development of reflective practice is one of the most important and effective ways this program influences the practice of pre-service teachers. This program provides students with unique experience of being both inside and outside the experience of teaching and learning. Not only are students actively engaging in teaching themselves, but they are simultaneously analyzing the teaching of their peers. The immediate feedback discussion with the classroom teacher, tutor, and their peers allows for a scaffolding of reflection-in-action that accomplished and experienced teachers engage with daily (Hatton

& Smith, 1995). Teachers are not born as reflective practitioners; it is a skill that needs to be developed, practiced, and explicitly outlined within teacher education programs (Hatton & Smith, 1995). While extended professional learning experiences are important in developing this, the pre-service teacher is often not in contact with their peers or tutors for this extended period of time during these practicums. As a result, scaffolding into reflective strategies does not take place until after the practicum is completed. The community of praxis program provides pre-service teachers with models of reflective practice, engagement in reflective and critical discussions, and, importantly, time and space to begin to critically reflect on their own work in classrooms.

Indeed, we argue that the connection between experience and theory, central to this program, is made possible through critical reflection. Hatton and Smith (1995) argue “the descriptive [form of reflection], it would appear from this study, is more easily mastered and utilised than either the exploratory dialogic or demanding critical forms, both of which require knowledge and experiential bases that take some time to develop” (p. 46). The reflective processes in this program were intended to move students beyond merely descriptive engagement with drama teaching toward critical reflection. Student responses about the critical reflection processes in this program indicate some movement toward a critically reflective stance:

Critically reflecting on the experience allows you to discover the “why” behind the choices you made, reflect on what was successful or not and why, and what you can change in the future. These are things that teachers need to be doing all the time, especially beginning teachers. (2006)

Reflection is so important. This is how we grow as teachers. It allowed me to compose my thoughts and think hard about the experience not allowing it to just wash away. The reflection means that this experience will stay with me. (2005)

The reflection is a good way to look at the things I need to improve on when teaching, as many things are only looked at twice when actually reflected upon by yourself and others. (2006)

Within the program, the formalized critical reflection assignment has provided an effective adjunct to the feedback. The student’s reflection that “critically reflecting on the experience allows you to discover the why behind the choices you made” reveals a growing ability to reflect on action that can lead to changes in practice. The shift from a purely descriptive approach to a more critically reflective stance is consistent with Grushka, Hinde-McLeod, and Reynolds’ (2005) approach to reflection in teacher education that focuses on the analysis of relationships and ultimately analysis of the self in teaching. This approach complements Schön (1983) and Hatton and Smith (1995) who argue that reflection should occur *in* and *on* action. This occurs so that a practice base is established by professionals that supports a spontaneous, tacit and automatic response to teaching (Grushka et al., 2005). While the evaluations here do

not suggest beginning teachers were readily able to reflect *in action*, there is evidence that they reflected *on action*. These students also identified a critical awareness through reflection that identified areas for future professional growth and development.

### ***Tensions and potential issues***

As with many programs, and as discussed above, feedback, evaluation, and refinement has been necessary to make the program as effective as possible for the students involved. While most students have evaluated this approach positively, there are areas of the community of praxis approach where these evaluations identified space for improvement. In particular the structure and intent of the observation and the explicitness of individual tasks. Some of the challenges and tensions of this approach were articulated by the students:

I have to say I really wasn't sure what was expected of me and what to expect. Explaining more clearly how the day will run, what to expect, what the lesson plan should entail and so on. It worked out fine and I still learned from this experience but I can't help feeling I could have been better prepared had I known more. (2004)

Understanding the expectations, both on the day and in reflections following was problematic for some students. Explicit understanding of expectations is an important aspect of quality teaching (NSW DET, 2003). Not only does it allow students opportunities to engage in high quality work, but it also provides a safe learning environment in which students feel comfortable – both very important elements of the community of praxis program. Following the comments made by this student and others in 2004, the tutors have been more deliberate in their explanations and more class time has been allocated to discussing the program. However, comments from later years have still found this an issue and so a written outline of the program is being developed for future years.

Explicit expectations were not the only concern of the students. Some also raised a concern that the purpose of the initial observations was not explicit. One student commented:

The observation approach was not made explicit whether we were meant to do more than just sit back and watch the class – some people joined in the activities, some played the role of teacher in small groups, but I just observed. This was still valuable in itself but it caused a disparity between my experience and those of my peers. The very act of observing is itself quite unnatural. From my experience I could see that it altered the way the class was run and the way the students engaged / didn't engage in that particular lesson. (2006)

In our initial planning, the assumption was that students with some (albeit limited) classroom experience would know what to look for in a classroom observation. These student responses suggest the act of observation does not

“come naturally” to students, even those with some experience of classroom teaching. To make these observations useful for the pre-service teachers, the program draws on the NSW Department of Education’s Quality Teaching Framework (2003). This framework is introduced to the students prior to their initial observations and they are asked to observe for specific elements of the framework in practice. Time is now allocated after the observations to reflect on what quality teaching “looks like.” This not only provides more explicit guidelines during observation, but provides students with further opportunities to reflect on the connection between education theory and practice.

## CONCLUSION

The community of praxis approach brings together classroom teachers, pre-service education students, and university educators in ways that are consistent with the calls for closer collaborations (Dempster, 2007; Barab et al, 2002). While this is a relatively small, context-specific project, there are many positive aspects of the community of praxis approach in linking educational theory with educational practice, developing pre-service teachers’ identity as part of the drama education community, and in establishing reflective practice.

Most pre-service teachers found the feedback from the community of praxis program as just as, if not more, beneficial to their emerging practice than their observation or the team teaching experience. This is potentially an area that would benefit from further investigation; perhaps this kind of mediated reflection broadens the range of responses making it potentially more useful than the traditional practicum reflection. The other striking feature of this approach is that it affords pre-service teachers the opportunity to reflect on their development through the theoretical (university based) and practical (school based) elements of initial teacher education. This approach may act as a connecting space between theoretical and practical elements of teaching practice.

Teacher education, like all professional disciplines, is in a constant struggle to remain relevant to the profession it prepares students for. The current international trend towards “alternative pathways” like TFA provides a stark reminder of the threats to the integrity of teacher education that bifurcates rather than integrates theory and practice. While Eisner’s (2002) call that teacher education be located primarily in schools appears to be gaining support in government policy in Australia, there is perhaps a less radical, more pragmatic ground to be inhabited, a space where practice and theory are considered in a closer relationship. The community of praxis approach outlined here, albeit modest and context-specific, demonstrates the potential for effective partnerships between secondary and tertiary education in teacher education. The community of praxis program offers one approach to responding to the seemingly intransigent divides between theory and practice. It offers educators

a partnership model that can be achieved within the current constraints of initial teacher education given the willingness of students, teacher educators and classroom teachers to engage in productive partnerships.

## NOTES

1. Unit of study evaluations (USE) are generic, quantitative, student surveys. The University requires all courses to be evaluated at least once every three years.
2. The community of praxis approach is one approach that develops mutually beneficial partnerships. There are many other approaches in Australia and other jurisdictions that are building productive partnership relationships for change (see, Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; 2010)

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