Better than best practice: Site-based teacher education that prepares graduates for the complexity of teaching

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Amanda coordinates the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program at FedUni. Amanda’s interest in school/university partnerships stems back to 2002 when she was appointed by the university to work across the boundaries of teacher education and school leadership.

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Sharon began working in teacher education after a 16 year career as secondary school teacher, and has an interest in providing learning opportunities for pre-service teachers, and is committed to supporting the ongoing learning of pre-service teachers, teachers and teacher educators.

Conceptions of ‘best practice’ determine what is done in organisations and how what we do is measured. In education, where we work in diverse contexts with individuals in complex situations, what should be done and how it should be achieved is not easily captured or evaluated. Site-based teacher education, or teacher education which is led by universities in partnership schools, better prepares graduates to teach and learn in complex educational settings (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007).

In the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program at Federation University our focus on school-based, theory-informed teacher education enables pre-service teachers (PSTs) to learn in the context of practice; in the reality of “unforgivably complex” (Cochrane-Smith, 2003, p. 5) school contexts.

Lefstein and Snell (2014) argue that because teaching and learning are unpredictable and complicated and because the goals in education are contested, we should resist the reductionist notion of best practice (p. 6). Alternatively, Lefstein and Snell (2014) suggest that approaches which focus on sensitivity, interpretation, a flexible repertoire of methods, and being able to exercise judgement in the moment provide a better basis from which to learn and improve teaching.

Here at Federation University our unique Master of Teaching (Secondary) program is taught largely in diverse school settings where PSTs learn to differentiate their teaching to meet the diverse needs and interests of young people. In practice-based, theory-informed learning experiences PSTs examine and trial effective teaching and learning practices, receive feedback from
multiple sources, conduct practitioner inquiries, and critically attend to the challenging nature of teachers’ work. Our approach to learning is people-centred and so in our work with PSTs and partnership schools we aim to be responsive, flexible and to foster innovation and change.

Site-based teacher education is not new in America. Research conducted in the US suggests that those who graduate from site-based teacher education programs are better prepared to teach (Darling Hammond & Baratz Snowden, 2007). We suggest, like Cochran-Smith, Ell, Grudnoff, Ludlow, Haigh & Hill (2014), that teacher education is a complex system involving “multi-dimensional relationships and dynamic interactions among agents and elements” (p. 106) and should be appreciated, understood and represented as such.

We seek to provide multiple opportunities for PSTs to build their understanding of what it means to teach. With our school partners we carefully construct a range of engaging professional learning experiences. One of those is the Classroom Intensive where PSTs, teacher educators and experienced teachers closely observe students’ learning in classrooms using a thinking routine. This process that is repeated in different school contexts throughout the program, builds deep understandings of learning in classrooms and builds PSTs’ repertoire of teaching approaches. Through this experience PSTs activate the disposition to critically attend to classroom interactions. The activation and enhancement of key thinking dispositions is at the heart of our program and our research (McGraw, McDonough, Wines & O’Loughlan, 2016).

This year we have been involved as a collaborating university in Associate Professor Caroline Mansfield’s National Teaching Fellowship, Staying BRITE: Promoting Resilience in Higher Education (https://www.stayingbrite.edu.au/). As part of this project we have explored ways to embed a focus on teacher resilience into our program. Through this project we are conducting research into our practice as teacher educators and examining the link between teacher resilience and thinking dispositions. Our work in this project enables PSTs to understand how thinking dispositions support problem-solving, situational judgment and resilience in classroom environments. You can read more about our involvement in this project by visiting the Staying BRITE website.

In the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program we work beyond Graduate Teaching Standards and notions of ‘best practice’ and also focus on developing dispositions that enable graduates to deal with challenging teaching situations, learn in ongoing ways in the context of their work, and to importantly, enliven learning through people-centred approaches.
References


