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Reconceptualising the Role of the Visiting Lecturer: Using Educational Technology to Enable Practicum Placements in the 'New Normal'

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The international pandemic and the national lockdown during semester one of 2020 meant the Auckland-based Manukau Institute of Technology Early Childhood teams needed to revisit the existing requirements of their programmes and particularly in terms of practicum. In response, the teams developed 'virtual' meetings to replace the usual observation visit by a Visiting Lecturer. In this revised approach, the students and lecturers engaged in weekly conversations and in these meetings the role of the Visiting Lecturer was significantly changed. By using communication software (Microsoft Teams with cell phone back up) the student and Visiting Lecturer engaged in critically reflective conversations that mentored the student in thinking about their practice, setting goals to work on and articulating their learning. By using the software in this way, the Visiting Lecturers changed their role from the final assessor of practice to a more complex approach which now began with a mentor and guide role. In the online triadic meetings (also using Microsoft Teams and cell phone back-up) it became clear that the traditional model of the student being told how the assessor felt they had met the practicum criteria was replaced with one where the student was able to articulate for themselves.

Key Words: initial teacher education, early childhood, COVID19, professional experience, practicum

Introduction

The year 2020 will remain in memory and experience as one where the world was fundamentally challenged by the Covid 19 pandemic. The 'old normal' ways of doing things had to change and teaching and learning transformed for long stretches into fully on-line environments. As a result, what marks this period is the surge in the use of electronic and digital tools to enable all the recognised and important elements of vocational programmes to continue.

This paper reports on a portion of the findings of a larger project that examined this phenomenon in the context of practicum placements in an initial teacher education field-based programme. It details how the early childhood education team at Manukau Institute of Technology redesigned practicum during the first lockdown of 2020. Traditionally one of the essential elements of the practicum process centred on the role of the Institution-based Visiting Lecturer which solely focused on the assessment of the student in practice. However, as a result of the changes made, this role was re-visioned and redesigned. Although not a focus of the research

from the beginning, this became a key finding. It also showed how the incorporation of simple educational technology tools like cell phones and Microsoft Teams enabled new mentoring approaches at the beginning of the practicum based on reflective conversations between the student and Visiting Lecturer.

Review of the Literature

Definitions

The concept of 'practicum' has been well-documented in the research literature. This process is described by Havlik et al. (2019) as "active engagement in a rich experience that provokes reflection and change" (p. 1). A key value of field-based learning noted in much of the literature is how students are better able to make strong connections between theoretical and content knowledge developed in the classroom and to contextualize this in terms of their teaching (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Havlick et al., 2019). The experience of working in an authentic early childhood environment is argued by Coombes and Downie (2014) to allow students to experience the complex, and multifaceted nature of teaching. Further, practicum experience allows student teachers to develop the skills to form and maintain relationships with all members of their early childhood communities (La Paro et al., 2018).

The Roles of Practicum

The Practicum in Field-Based Learning

Practicum plays an integral role in pre-service teacher education as it informs the critical balance between theoretical and practice- based knowledge for beginning teachers. Field-based experience provides opportunities for student teachers to actively engage with those already working in the field and to develop skills and knowledge through a process of discussing and reflecting on these experiences. "Repeatedly, practicum experiences have been highlighted as crucial to becoming a teacher and have been identified as one of the most important experiences in teacher education programs" (La Paro et al., p. 366).

In 2020, the traditional practicum experience with the final assessment triadic meeting was not possible, so an alternative approach was developed that was enabled by educational technologies with surprising ease. Aziz (2010) describes educational technologies "...as the considered implementation of appropriate tools, techniques or processes that facilitate the application of senses, memory and cognition to enhance teaching practices and improve learning outcomes (2010, para 1). Reflection on personal learning and growth incorporates these elements whether inter-or intra-personally and has long been a focus of the practicum in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The literature also examines the roles of all those involved in the practicum experience. One of the complexities of practicum is the duality of the Visiting Lecturers, and to a degree, the Associate Teacher's, roles as they act as both mentor and assessor. Likewise, Aspden (2017) asserts that the "assessment of practicum must weave together elements of supportive guidance for the student alongside judgements as to the achievement of expected competencies and ultimately, gatekeeping into the profession of teaching" (p. 128). These two roles operate in antithesis of each other in that the trust built during the mentorship period of the practicum can potentially be destroyed by the assessment of practices at the conclusion of the practicum.

Traditional Roles in the Practicum

The traditional roles in the early childhood education practicum are three-fold consisting of the student, a centre-based associate teacher (AT) and an institute-based Visiting Lecturer (VL). The AT and the VL take the assessor role, coming together with the student in the triadic meeting after the VL has observed the student in

practice for approximately 1.5-2 hours. It is a traditional face-to-face approach. In this model, "students are observed in practice by their Visiting Lecturer, and then engage in a triadic discussion which includes the Visiting Lecturer, Associate Teacher and the Student." (Perry & Probine, 2020, p. 5).

Importantly for understanding this event, the student is told by both the AT and VL how they feel the criteria of the practicum have been met by the student. Although the student can also have an opportunity to voice their perspective during this meeting, theirs is essentially a passive role. With the restrictions in place after the first national lockdown, there could not be a visit from the Visiting Lecturer. Therefore, evidence of meeting the practicum criteria had to come from other sources and be delivered by the student and the AT. This led to a complete change in the accepted role of the Visiting Lecturer.

Power Relationships

The most surprising set of ideas in this set of literature could be considered those surrounding the idea of the power inherent in the relationships between the three people involved in the practicum. These focus on first, the context which is external to the Institution meaning the VL is a guest in the Centre (Ortlipp, 2003, 2009) and secondly, on the appropriateness of the role of the VL as the assessor when they do not have longitudinal knowledge of the student's practice built up across time. Aspden (2017) suggests that the VL and student both see much of the power being held by the AT in this process. Whereas the AT may see the power resting with the VL who represents the institution (Dayan, 2008). The traditional triadic conversation therefore is always a delicate, yet dynamic interplay of all these, as well as simply the characters involved.

Background

Manukau Institute of Technology is a tertiary education institute situated in South Auckland which offers a range of field-based, early childhood teacher programmes. These include a certificate (level 4), diploma (level 5), and a Bachelor of Education (level 7). All of these programmes are field based in nature. Each week, students attend face to face classes and then spend a required period in an early childhood setting. This setting is known as their 'home' centre. In addition to these weekly hours, students to spend a number of weeks (ranging from 3-5) each semester on a sustained practicum experience. These placements take place either in students' 'home' centre, or at a different setting (known as their 'away' centre). 'Away' centre practica are arranged for students by the Institute. During each sustained placement students' teaching practice is assessed against a set of criteria which have been developed by the teaching institute. In establishing if the student has met the criteria, there is input from the Centre-based teacher (AT), Institution-based lecturer (VL) and the Student Teacher.

An alternative approach to assessing students' practice was required as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The lowering alert levels meant students were able to return to their 'home' centres. It was, however, deemed too risky for VL's to visit these settings as they would be moving in and out of multiple 'bubbles' as they visited students, potentially increasing the risk of cross infection. To respond to this issue, three virtual meetings replaced the traditional observation and triadic model. The first two meetings required just the VL and student. To guide these conversations a reflective framework based on the practicum criteria, was created to support students to think about and discuss their practice. Using three reflective questions, students were encouraged to look inward and backwards as well as to record the day's events. Students drew upon this as they articulated their thinking during these weekly conversations. The third meeting in the final week of practicum included the Associate Teacher and replaced the traditional face to face triadic meeting. This meeting was held via MS Teams or by mobile phone. The inclusion of the Associate Teacher at this final meeting was critical as they provided a triangulating perspective which determined if the student had met the criteria.

Design of the Project

Given that this approach was new and untested, utilising constructivist grounded methodology (Charmaz, 2009; 2014) enabled both the acknowledgement of previous experiences of the researchers as well as the possibilities

inherent in following the data as it emerged. This methodology takes an inductive approach with a continuous exploration and analysis of the data. This empowered the team to look across all three groups of people involved focusing on how each responded to the new practicum structure. From their experiences as having been both Associate Teachers and Visiting Lecturers, the researchers were also bringing layers of perspectives to the analysis and interpretation of the data.

The data for this project was collected through an anonymous survey of the three groups involved and two questions were asked of everyone:

- *What are your thoughts about the practicum you have just completed?*
- *Did you find the reflective framework useful in your learning? How and why?*

Choices About Technology

Given that this process was far more technologically driven than usual, the focus had to remain the learning not the tools in use (Tertiary Education Commission, 2009). Händel et al (2020) highlight that available equipment, previous experiences of technology, skills for using technology and student's capacity to share information in a digital environment all impact how prepared students are to engage and learn in a digital space. Working from this idea, the choice of the technology for each student was based on access, the perceived skill levels amongst the people involved and the familiarity with the tools by this stage of Lockdown 1.0. In some cases, these choices were further constrained by accessibility of technology and in some cases, Wi-Fi, in the early childhood centres. A range of tools was important as assuming a one-size-fits-all approach would potentially have disadvantaged some students. As Bowers et al. (2000) suggest "computers are not culturally neutral, patterns of thinking adapt to the requirements of the machine and the thought patterns of the people who wrote the software" (p. 189). In this case, the technology had to adapt to the needs of the student and the VL.

Findings and Discussion

The data was analysed by thematic analysis which, underpinned by the methodological approach, enabled us to keep returning to what had emerged from the survey feedback and to consider how it supported our growing reconceptualization of the VL role. The themes that emerged were used to first deconstruct and then rebuild the role. These were mentorship, power relationships and deep learning.

The anonymous survey was sent to 183 students (103 B.Ed (ECT); 53 Level 5 Diploma; 27 Level 4 Certificate). The questions were also sent to 11 VLs and 80 ATs to gain a full understanding of all of the parties involved. Responses were received from 81 students (44.26%), 8 Visiting Lecturers (72.72%) and 18 Associate Teachers (22.5%).
Amongst the students 79.02% included positive comments in their responses about their experiences. For example:

> *"Was the best practicum since I started the degree" (Student Response)*
>
> *"It was challenging but so worth it" (Student Response).*

A further 20.98% took the opportunity to comment on the accompanying workload.
Of the Visiting Lecturers who responded, 5 out of 8 commented not only on the shift in the student's learning:

> *"...it was exciting to hear them talk about their professional growth" (VL Response)*

but also the new role they were now playing:

> *"I like the idea that I wasn't telling them about their practice just asking questions that provoked thinking"(VL Response)*

All 18 responses (100%) from the Associate Teachers included positive comments about their experiences.

> *"I liked how my Student had lots of questions" (AT Response)*

There were three main themes that emerged from the data in this project. These were deep learning, the power relationships, and the addition of the mentor role.

Deep Learning

Using MS Teams and cell phone support enabled the weekly conversations to occur, creating safe spaces for ongoing learning. In many of the responses, students focused on how challenging it had been but also how much they had learned and grown in the process:

> *"I enjoyed it, found that being forced to talk about my own practice gave me opportunities to identify my growth in an authentic way. "(Student Response)*
>
> *"Expressing it in words is more challenging" (Student response)*
>
> *"It was very good as I had to really think for myself and be accountable for my learning" (Student response)*
>
> *"I was more aware of my practice and learned more during it" (Student response)*

Students were clearly positive about the change in their role and recognised the advantages that this gave them. Likewise, Visiting Lecturers responded:

> *"…it was exciting to hear them talk about their... deepening understanding of their practice and growing confidence over the three weeks. I think that students having to articulate how they practice and why was really challenging for some, but also hugely beneficial" (VL response)*

Cuenca et al. (2011) found in their study that "limited contact and a lack of access to both spaces of the student teaching semester led university supervisors to feel disenfranchised in their power to influence the development of their student teachers" (p. 1069). The deep learning that the students described was empowered by the collaborative reflection and mentoring relationship with the VL who could be seen as what Vygotsky called a 'more knowledgeable other'. The new mentoring process was enabling a classic Zone of Proximal Development relationship with the student where the VL was empowering better understanding of the events the student was experiencing and interpreting for their practice (Vygotsky, 1962). Lloyd, & Fernnyhough, (1999) also reflect this concept when they suggest that this is where new and often deeper learning for the student is supported by a second individual or teacher. This was something that had not been part of the practicum discussions before and yet it was so strong across the data that it impacted greatly on the interpretation of the responses and the new understanding of the VL role.

Power Relationships

The data showed that the weekly technology-enabled conversations between Visiting Lecturers and students shifted the balance of who held the power. Students expressed that they felt empowered because a space had been created in which they were guided through preliminary conversations with their VL in a collaborative reflective environment to think about what they thought they were doing to meet the criteria. For the triadic,

they took these experiences together with the responsibility for articulating and justifying their own practice over time instead of listening to what had been observed by the VL after simply one visit.

> *"I enjoyed it because it was the students who got to tell the lecturers about our practice" (Student response).*
>
> *"In previous years, we would just be told how our VL thought we met the criteria but never had to justify our practice for ourselves…I believe I gained a better understanding of the criteria and how I personally show this is practice" (Student response)*

The Visiting Lecturer's role had previously held much of the power because the VL had been positioned solely as the assessor of practice. In many cases, the practicum visit and observation was often the only time the VL was able to observe the individual student's practice. It was essentially a snap-shot of a moment in time that contained no individualised context or knowledge of the pre-assessment work of the student. The Visiting Lecturers and Associate Teachers also commented on this shift:

> *"I like the idea that I wasn't telling them about their practice just asking questions that provoked thinking" (VL response)*
>
> *"I will be thinking now about how I can create a more supportive space that will encourage students to speak about their practice in a more authentic way. I think that establishing a relationship with the student is a very important part of this process. I have been thinking a lot about power relationships and how students must feel in these meetings" (VL Response)*
>
> *"They had shared that they had been having catch-ups with their VL each week so that was really good too" (AT response)*

There is a strong level of subjectivity in applying professional knowledge and experience to assessing whether the student meets the practicum criteria or not (Ortlipp 2009). The VL must draw on their own experiences and understandings to establish matches between the criteria and what is observed in practice. The same can be said if the AT disagrees with the VL in their assessment. In the new organisation of the triadic, the student is expected to explain how they think they meet the criteria and the AT and VL can draw on their own observations of the student to add more or question what the student has said. Thus, the VL and AT roles become more balanced in both the assessment of practice and what Aspden (2017) described as 'gatekeeping into the profession of teaching" (p. 128).

Mentorship

The traditional role of the VL was to observe and then tell the student how they felt they had met the criteria. In other words, the student's role was fully passive with the VL taking control with input from the AT. In the new model the VL began first as a mentor, listening and asking questions across the first weeks of the practicum and then supporting the student in deciding what goals they could set next. Students responded:

> *"…it was nice to have extra guidance available towards being reflective in our practice and experiences" (Student response)*
>
> *"…I believe I gained a better understanding of the criteria and how I personally show this is practice" (Student Response)*
>
> *The VLs also commented on the idea of mentorship:*
>
> *"It was also great to be able to revisit and draw together threads of stories that continued to be built and revisited over the three weeks" (VL Response)*

The multiple meeting format also served to clearly define the mentorship aspect of the VL's role. Instead of the VL carrying a single role into the triadic as they had done in the traditional single visit approach, now, they spent two meetings discussing, provoking, enabling, suggesting and above all listening to what the student was reporting to them prior to the triadic. Throughout this period, the students were challenged to reflect on what had happened across the week and identify and explain their own learning with the use of a reflective framework based on the practicum criteria. It was also important that the AT and VL were both involved in mentoring and assessing rather than the traditional division of roles in which the AT had mentored the student and the VL had been responsible for the assessment part (Dayan, 2008; Ortlipp, 2009). The use of digital tools enabled this process and, essentially, conserved this important element of initial teacher education.

As we experienced the first practicum placement using this framework, it became clear that although assessment has still to take place, these new processes of co-constructing new knowledge were strongly embedded in a socio-cultural approach that aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of early childhood education. The relationship between the VL and the student now reflected the use of the Zone of Proximal Development and moved accountability to the student. This meant that the process enabled visible growth in the establishment of praxis through a clearer understanding of the relationship between theory and practice for the student and also how to interpret this growth and articulate it strongly and confidently in the triadic meeting. For the student, moving to graduating and in some cases, the registration process, this deeper knowledge of themselves and their own practice can only strengthen them as teachers.

What Are the Wider Implications Of This Research?

The wider implications of this research will now inform how practicum will be approached as part of the redevelopment of the Bachelor of Education early childhood teaching programme at MIT. The challenge in implementing a more student-centred, relationships-based approach to practicum lies in also recognising the limitations of time and resources in an already challenging tertiary education environment. Adding digital tools like MS Teams and Google Docs can support the mentoring process across the practicum and include feedback and evidence from students, VLs and ATs using the reflective framework. This counters the idea of the single snap-shot in time approach of the assessment of practice observation.

Conclusions and Implications

What Does Changing The VL Role Mean For Practicum?

In creating a mentorship element in the VL role, the social construction of knowledge was strengthened. In the traditional model, the VL, with support from the AT, interprets the student's practice with often little input from the student. In this project, the use of electronic tools for pre-visit meetings with the student meant that there was already a relationship in place and the VL knew much more about the student's practice and could encourage them to speak for themselves. The findings revealed that the virtual practicum experience provoked clear shifts in the relationship between the Visiting Lecturer and student and the VL and the AT.
The primary emphasis on the assessor aspect within the VL's role was not something that had been considered before this experience, however, analysis of the data showed that previously a space for mentorship within the VL-student relationship had not been created and thus was had not been factored in to how the practicum was structured.

In adding a mentorship role via the electronic meetings with the student, the VL scaffolded the process of collaboratively reflecting on their practice enough for students to then be able to speak for themselves. In essence, this empowered them to have confidence in their own voice rather than allowing the VL to speak about what they had seen and interpreted in practice. These first two meetings then, encouraged the student's reflection on their own practice in a way that they came to know about it far more than previously.

This new space that was opened up by the virtual practicum experience now requires some attention. As this was not a physical meeting, it maybe that the relationships changed in this more neutral space. Similarly, Cook-Sather (2017), in their examination of email as a neutral space, suggests that:

> *This use of email creates an always-accessible platform, which to both high school students and prospective high school teachers feels safer and more deliberate than many face-to-face exchanges might feel. This is predominantly due to the ways that positions of power and authority tend to be reinforced in the context of a physical meeting. (p. 1146-1147)*

The use of the digital tools to support the practicum seemed to have created a different kind of space to operate in. Cook-Sather (2017) agrees, arguing "all of these uses of digital media create virtual forms outside of the traditional spaces (literal and conceptual), synchronous times, prescribed positions and typical modes of interaction through which students and teachers generally engage" (p. 1149). The weekly technology-enhanced meetings became, essentially a place to figure out who the other person was as much as it was about mentoring and relationship building. Within this space, the traditional roles became more indistinct, and the consequent spaces empowered the student to be able to show their understanding of the interplay between theory and practice in their work with children. Cook-Sather (2017) found in her research that "...the student was more comfortable 'talking' via e-mail than in person where my gender, age, and general 'presence' would shut her down." (p.1149-50). The data revealed that collaborative reflective conversations are precursors to an empowered and articulate student explaining how they meet the practicum assessment criteria. The roles of the VL and AT are still in assessment but are not seen as the 'holders of knowledge' but instead, as enablers of student growth even if it is in supporting student's understanding why the criteria have not been met.

The use of educational technology throughout the virtual practicum experience enabled a significant shift to be made in the VL/student relationship. The reflective framework further supported this process and could be opened further to include the AT if the document became a shared digital artefact. In this manner, there is potential for everyone to have access to the document throughout the length of practicum or even prior to the practicum starting. This would open more input from all the players in practicum (AT, VL and student) and further strengthen a shared space for the co-constructed development of new knowledge for the student.

This research is part of an ongoing project examining the interplay between the different roles and the value and importance of collaborative reflection in the practicum process. What this work highlights is that even small shifts in approach, in this case, the move to a series of online meetings and the introduction of a reflective framework, can have significant implications for students. In this research, the strengthening of the mentoring element of the VL's role served to empower students to reflect on and articulate their practice and the theories and ideas underpinning their pedagogical choices. Foong et al. (2018) support this argument and suggest that "a collective approach to reflection is capable of bringing new meanings and deeper engagement" (p. 50). The next phase will be to examine the impact of our application of what we have learned from this project through the implementation of our reconceptualised model for practicum.

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