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Home > Publications > Teacher Newsmag > Archives > March 2013

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[Current Issue](#)[Archives](#)

The rEvolution: A beginning

By Steve Collins and Hermia Ting

For the first two weeks in January of 2012, 31 teacher education students from UBC participated in an innovation in the delivery of teacher education courses. They were immersed at Hamilton Elementary School in Richmond to complete an integration of two courses: Elementary Social Studies Methods and Educational Studies.

The outcome was beyond our expectations in terms of support from all stakeholders, the hard work of our students, the quality of the final product, and mostly, the learning that our students were able to express articulately.

Teaching is complex

Current approaches to the education of new teachers in universities tend to mirror the "reductionist" approach that is prevalent in modern society. It is the practice of breaking down complex processes into arbitrarily delineated elements so that they can be examined apart from the chaotic interactions throughout the system.

Our philosophy of teaching and theoretical grounding arise from complexity thinking. We view learning as systemic rather than mechanical. Learning environments are in a constant state of change because all of the participants in that environment are interacting continually. This interconnectedness means that students, others in the system, and the environment itself are perpetually interacting, and are therefore adapting, evolving—and learning!

The practice of breaking elements of the system down to examine separately, interferes with these interactions. For example, current educational practice at both the university and schools involves separating knowledge into arbitrary subject areas. This creates boundaries instead of a free flow of communication across disparate disciplines. The greatest chasm is between the academy and the practice—university and schools.

Enacted learning

In terms of teaching and learning, complexity invites an enactive approach whereby knowledge remains interconnected as it is in its natural state. Learners interact with knowledge in the real world while all of the elements are still connected and in a dynamic process of "co-evolving" with each other.

The implication of this for teacher education is that new teachers should learn to teach by teaching in the real world of the school for which they are preparing themselves. Teacher education faculties are aware of this and that is why every student learning to teach has a practicum experience in schools.

We propose that all university coursework can become relevant if it is taken up in schools.

This is our long-term vision, but last January, we took the first tentative steps at Hamilton Elementary School.

Teacher education at Hamilton

We provided an intensive and challenging program that asked students to develop a project plan that focused on their students' needs and interests first, and then to attend to broad government curricular mandates. They observed classrooms to inquire about the systemic roots of social injustice. We built in time for planning in partnership with their instructors, teachers, and kids. They had time to debrief their school experiences and allowed a continual monitoring of their planning progress. This all culminated in a Project Plan Expo in which students displayed artifacts of their plans and articulated their purposes, strategies, and methods.

Outcomes

1. Universal endorsements

Not only did this project pass the scrutiny of all of the many stakeholders as we planned and organized, after its completion, we also received strong endorsements at every level. We received written recognition of the project's success from the Richmond's superintendent and Hamilton's principal. At the expo, district representatives, the head of personnel, other instructors, and UBC co-ordinators all encouraged us to continue to develop the program. At this writing, we are in Year Two of "The Hamilton Experience."

2. Engagement of students

Our students were certainly focussed on their demanding tasks and it was very challenging and intense. However, at the end, all who commented said it was worth it in terms of the depth of understanding of content and their ability to teach what they had planned. This depth was evident when they explained their displays and intentions to visitors at the expo. The key factor was relevance. Everything they did was real and was tested with actual children and inspired by advice from actual teachers.

3. Integration

Our worry from the start was that it would be difficult to meet the learning criteria for two separate courses without sacrificing a seamless integration within an authentic school setting. In fact, in this case, we cannot claim complete success but what did happen was surprising. Our students examined issues of social justice in the school and community, presented on topics in groups while at UBC, and created a fictional case study. With these experiences in mind as they wrote their project plans, it was impossible to not include those perspectives regardless

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of the main topic of their plans from K to 7. Context is such a powerful influence that when we undertake learning to teach in the real world, everything is already naturally integrated.

4. Context overwhelms the "big picture"

We discovered that our vision of a completely immersed teacher education program had a flaw. The strength of our vision was context. This turned out to also be our biggest obstacle when we asked students to observe issues of social justice in the context of the school. They reported back what they saw in front of their faces. Previously when they were at UBC, they missed the relevance of the missing context to make the theoretical concepts relevant. Now we had the opposite problem. Context obscured systemic thinking. The big picture was obscured. We addressed this by promoting a web-like interactive reporting strategy. We also took them away from the school for a day to work on a fictional case study where an issue of social justice occurred. They did finally get the big picture and it was enhanced by experience within the context of a school. But this will continue to be a difficult challenge for anyone undertaking a contextualized approach to teacher education.

A healthy approach to teaching and learning to teach is an interplay between theory, philosophy, practice, and passion. This requires an interplay between context and theoretical grounding within an enacted teaching and learning environment.

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