Reconceptualizing Teacher Educator Knowledge as Tensions: Exploring the tension between valuing and reconstructing experience

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This paper reports my efforts as a teacher educator to improve our understanding of the process of learning to teach. It illustrates how the nature of the knowledge developed by teacher educators about their practice is often embedded in complexity and ambiguity. This knowledge is explored as a source of tensions that teacher educators can learn to recognize and manage within their work. By examining one of these tensions within my practice, that of valuing and reconstructing experience, I consider how conceptualizing knowledge as tensions can enhance teacher educators’ understandings of practice and contribute to the professional knowledge base of teacher education.

The preparation of teacher educators and the development of their knowledge of teaching about teaching is an area of research that has previously received scant attention (Grossman, 2005). Knowledge of teaching about teaching has not been regarded as a form of specialized expertise within academia when compared with familiar disciplinary fields such as science, mathematics or history, and this situation is linked to notions of teaching itself as an under-theorized field (Korthagen, 2001). Those who work within teacher education programs tend to have less experience as researchers and tend to carry heavier teaching loads that constrain their ability to conduct research into practice. This situation is beginning to shift as growing numbers of teacher educators recognize the value of self-study research that engages them in investigations of their own practice (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004). Ways to better understand and address some of the recurring

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dilemmas and problems encountered in practice are being published and are leading to significant changes.

In this paper, I share self-study research that aimed to explore, articulate and document my developing pedagogy as a biology teacher educator. I employ the notion of tensions encountered by teacher educators in their practice, developed through this self-study, as a conceptual frame for both doing and understanding this research. By examining closely the tension associated with valuing and reconstructing experience, conceptual shifts in my understanding and concrete shifts in practice become visible. From this, I propose possibilities for considering how a pedagogy of teacher education might be developed, researched and shared amongst the teacher education community.

**Background**

Like others, my transition into the role of teacher educator occurred abruptly and without formal preparation (Dinkelman, Margolis & Sikkenga, 2006). From my work as a successful high school biology teacher, I moved into teacher education with great enthusiasm for preparing new biology teachers who might inspire and engage their students in the meaningful learning of biology. Despite my enthusiasm, I had little understanding of what I needed to know as a teacher of teachers. I could not conceive of anything beyond “showing and telling” (Myers, 2002) what I knew about teaching and biology that these new teachers might learn and reproduce in their teaching. After several years of this pedagogy-of-presentation approach, I began to recognize that the model of learning I was using was ineffective. I was not able simply to transfer my ideas and experiences into the minds of prospective teachers and expect them to enact my approach in their own practice. I began to recognize not only that this was not possible, but also that it was not desirable as a strategy for preparing new teachers. It was not consistent with the view of learning that I was presenting in teacher education, that high school students needed opportunities to construct their knowledge of biology through engaging in the process of meaning making for themselves. Hence the impetus for my self-study; generated through the dissonance created between what I sought to do in my teacher education practice and the means taken to achieve my goal. How could I draw from my experiences as a successful teacher in order to inform, but not mandate or restrict the learning of these new teachers?

**Data Collection and Research Approach**

Formal data collection for this study occurred in the 2001–2002 academic year with 28 preservice teachers in my biology methods class at Monash University. Because this study of my practice investigates my teacher and learner self, additional data were inevitably drawn from experiences before the research formally began. A comprehensive array of data sources was used as a means for me to closely examine and enhance critical reflection of my practice. I was able to stand both inside and
outside myself (Brookfield, 1995), viewing my practice from a range of different perspectives. These data sources included:

- A written autobiographical account of my experiences as a teacher and learner
- Videotape of each biology methods class (36 hours over two semesters)
- My journal
- My field notes
- Colleague observation of my methods classes
- Student assignments
- Interviews conducted twice during the year with eight of the preservice teachers
- Email correspondence with one preservice teacher over the year (Berry, 2005).

As a form of practitioner research, self-study draws on data sources that are appropriate to examining the issues, problems or dilemmas that are of concern to the teacher educator within the practice context. Self-study thus serves as a powerful tool for uncovering important facets of the knowledge of practice (Loughran, 2005). Furthermore, self-study is a unique form of research that is responsive to the demands of the practice context. Insights are derived from teaching which lead to shifts in the research focus and, in turn, give rise to other insights. New possibilities and actions over time are constantly changing in response to the changing context (Loughran, 1999). This meant that insights derived from the research process could immediately impact on my learning and teaching about teaching in biology methods classes and in a continuing way.

The Emergence of Tensions as a Conceptual Frame and Analytic Tool

My initial approach to data analysis was framed around the identification of that which I experienced as problematic in my practice. Through analysis of my autobiographical narrative (Bullough, 1997), I identified and analyzed critical incidents (Measor, 1985) and explored assumptions (Brookfield, 1995) that I held about teaching and learning. Analysis of the data developed alongside a review of the research published by other teacher educators also motivated to study their practice (see Berry, 2004). I recognized similarities between my own experiences and what these teacher educators reported from their practice. I also saw a broader framework that connected these elements of teacher educators’ practice. It was apparent that teacher educators regularly experienced particular tensions as they attempted to manage complex and conflicting pedagogical and personal demands within their work as teachers of prospective teachers. The notion of tensions offered a useful way of describing teacher educators’ experiences of their practice (including my own). It captured well the feelings of internal turmoil experienced by teacher educators as they found themselves pulled in different directions by competing pedagogical demands in their work and the difficulties they experienced as they learnt to recognize and manage these demands. Tensions have, for the most part, grown out of teacher educators’ attempts to match goals for prospective teachers’ learning with the needs and
concerns expressed by prospective teachers for their own learning. They include those that teacher educators have recognized and named in their work as well as those that I have named from my reading of their work.

Illustrations of Tensions

Tensions focus on the following areas and are expressed in terms of binaries in order to capture the sense of conflicting purpose and ambiguity held within each (see Berry, 2005, for further details). Although presented as a list, they do not represent a hierarchy.

1. Telling and growth.
This tension is embedded in teacher educators’ learning how to balance their desire to tell prospective teachers about teaching and providing opportunities for prospective teachers to learn about teaching for themselves.

2. Confidence and uncertainty.
This is a tension experienced by teacher educators as they move away from the confidence of established approaches to teaching to explore new, more uncertain approaches to teacher education.

3. Action and intent.
This tension arises from discrepancies between goals that teacher educators set out to achieve in their teaching and the ways in which these goals can be inadvertently undermined by the actions chosen to attain them.

This tension comes from teacher educators engaging students in forms of pedagogy intended to challenge and confront thinking about teaching and learning, and pushing students beyond the climate of safety necessary for learning to take place.

5. Valuing and reconstructing experience.
This tension is embedded in the teacher educator’s role of helping prospective teachers recognize the value of personal experience in learning to teach, yet at the same time, helping them to see that there is more to teaching than simply acquiring experience.

6. Planning and being responsive.
This tension emerges from difficulties associated with implementing a predetermined curriculum and responding to learning opportunities that arise within the context of practice.

While separated here for the purposes of description, these tensions do not exist in isolation from each other. They interact in practice in ways that produce a whole greater than the sum of its parts. As interconnections between tensions become apparent, new knowledge of practice is brought to light. The notion of tensions therefore offers a helpful frame for interpreting and organizing teacher educators’ accounts of their experience and in “building a working identity that is constructively ambiguous” (Lampert, 1985, p. 178). Reconceptualizing and reframing (Schön, 1987) practice as tensions to be managed acknowledges the ambiguities and
complexities inherent in teacher educators’ work and affirms their importance as elements of teacher educators’ professional knowledge. Tensions also offer potential as an analytic tool for studying practice. In the remainder of this paper I report findings from the exploration of one tension; that of *valuing and reconstructing experience*, within the context of my biology methods class. In so doing, I illustrate how tensions may used as a means of analyzing experience for the development of knowledge of teaching and learning about teaching.

**Exploring the Tension of Valuing and Reconstructing Experience**

Prospective teachers’ prior experiences serve as powerful templates for the ways in which they think and act as teachers (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Korthagen, 2001). These extensive prior experiences strongly influence prospective teachers’ expectations of their preservice programs, reinforced by popular stereotypes about teachers’ work (Britzman, 1991). The tension between *valuing and reconstructing* experience emerged from my teacher educator role in helping prospective teachers recognize the value of personal experience in learning to teach (including those experiences they bring and those they have in their teacher preparation), and helping them to see that there is more to teaching than simply accumulating experience. When the ideas and experiences that prospective teachers bring to, and gain through, their teacher education are explicitly acknowledged and valued, they can serve as a basis for developing new understandings of practice. The pedagogical challenge embedded in this situation, and hence the source of tension, lies in working with prospective teachers in ways that move them beyond simply (re)confirming their existing beliefs about teaching and learning.

This tension played out in two main ways in the biology methods class. The first was through the deliberate pedagogical structures that I employed to support prospective teachers’ knowledge building through experience. The second emerged from an unplanned activity of sharing experiences of teaching with Lisa, a student in the class.

**Building on Experience through Deliberate Pedagogical Structures**

I introduced a variety of tools to the prospective biology teachers to help them begin to focus on the nature of their learning-to-teach experiences and to draw meaning about teaching and learning from these experiences that they may not have previously considered. These tools included: a Personal Learning Review (PLR) completed early in the year to elicit students’ experiences as learners of biology, a web-based journal in which I posted my goals for each method session together with a post-class reflection that students were invited to respond to, and a drawing task in which prospective teachers were asked to draw and interpret a picture of themselves teaching a typical biology class from their practicum experiences. Additionally, a portion of the biology methods curriculum was allocated to peer microteaching so that prospective teachers could learn to unpack and examine their different experiences and perspectives as learners and teachers.
My decision to include these tools was based on my belief that students needed to know about themselves as learners in order to understand more about how they were likely to operate as teachers. As Brookfield (1995, p. 49) points out, “our manner of teaching is, to a great extent a direct response to how we were taught ... We attempt to replicate the things our own teachers did that affirmed or inspired us as learners.” I hoped that through accessing prospective teachers’ past experiences as learners that I might become more sensitive to their views and use the insights that I gained to inform curriculum experiences in biology methods. My view of learning biology as a process of conceptual change (Posner, Strike, Hewson, & Gertzog, 1982) also meant that I recognized the difficulties of shifting individuals’ prior views of learning and teaching. Nevertheless, examining, discussing and challenging views are important in the process of stimulating new understandings of, and new approaches to, teaching and learning in biology.

**Personal Learning Review (PLR)**

The PLR task (see Table 1) was intended to help prospective teachers build a picture of their assumptions about biology, teaching and learning through reviewing what had influenced and motivated them as learners. Building self-knowledge as a learner assists in knowing how one might act as a teacher, since teachers tend to teach in ways consistent with their preferred learning styles. However, eliciting memories can be a double-edged sword, since surfacing learning memories may simply reconfirm individuals’ views about what works, and reinforce similar approaches to teaching (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Personal Learning Review</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the process of learning about teaching, it is often helpful to reconsider ourselves as learners. How we learnt and what mattered to us as learners can have a strong influence on the way we go about teaching. Answer the questions below and bring your completed PLR to your next biology method class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Did you study biology at secondary school? To what level? What other science subjects did you study?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Why did you study biology at secondary school (if you did)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How would you describe a typical biology (or science) lesson at secondary school? What would the teacher be doing? What would the students be doing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What did you like best about biology (or science) lessons at school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What did you like least about these lessons?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Why did you decide to continue (or start) your study of biology at tertiary level?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How would you describe the typical activities of your biology teachers at university?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What were the typical learning activities that comprised tertiary biology study?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How would you rate your enjoyment of tertiary biology study? (Give some reasons.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Describe yourself as a learner. (Would your teachers have described you differently to the way in which you describe yourself?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Why did you decide to enrol in this subject? (Do you really want to become a biology teacher?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The PLR task was revisited twice during the year, as prospective teachers were encouraged to reconsider their responses in the light of their experiences of the program. I had anticipated that ongoing examination of experience might lead them to rethink, or “reframe” (Schön, 1987) their ideas about learning and begin to recognize differences between themselves as learners and the students they were teaching. However, this goal was difficult to achieve. It seemed that in the pressure of learning to teach, well entrenched memories of successful approaches to learning combined with the expectations of school-based supervising teachers and school students about how teachers should act, restricted the capacity of these new teachers to question (let alone shift) their views. This situation whereby I sought to explicitly value prospective teachers’ prior experiences and beliefs, yet at the same time aimed to challenge them to question the meaning of these experiences to consider alternative meanings and implications for their teaching, highlights one way in which I experienced the tension of valuing and building on experience.

Drawing Task

The drawing task was introduced following the first practicum experience. Prospective teachers were asked to draw a picture of themselves teaching a typical biology class from the teaching round and to include some of the things they typically said, and thought, while they were teaching. The purpose of this task was to provide an opportunity for students to revisit and reinterpret their practicum experiences using a novel approach that I hoped might highlight particular issues, concerns or insights from their teaching and to help them begin to articulate their developing knowledge about teaching.

I knew that some form of debriefing activity was a common post-practicum task across all subjects in the teacher education program. I suspected that as a consequence, debriefing could simply be seen as a routine that carried reduced meaning for students the more it was encountered, even though they generally enjoyed sharing stories of practice with each other. The challenge for me was to engage students in some form of meaningful analysis of their experiences, at the same time acknowledging and valuing their experiences. I anticipated that the unusual nature of the task (drawing) might open up some otherwise subconscious assumptions about teaching and help students probe the nature of their experiences more deeply – similar to Richards’ (1998) work with prospective teachers’ self-portraits. At the same time I was modeling a teaching procedure (“draw your thinking about a topic,” White & Gunstone, 1992) that I hoped my students might consider using in their classes.

Students completed the drawing task individually then shared their drawings in small groups, with the instruction to identify issues, look for similarities and differences amongst the group’s drawings and to ask questions for clarification of one another about their drawings. They wrote a short reflective summary underneath their pictures to record any insights about themselves and their teaching that they gained...
through the activity, as well as general statements about teaching arising from the shared experiences of the group.

It was not difficult for students to find shared concerns from their pictures. For instance dealing with classroom management issues; fear of not knowing the required content; apathy from students; and lack of support from supervisors, all readily emerged. In this way, one purpose of the task was realized—the group was able to identify common concerns. In fact, it was difficult to shift some individuals beyond sharing stories or offering each other advice about dealing with various issues (despite regular encouragement from me to go a little further and say what they had learnt about teaching biology from their discussions). Others, though, were able to draw insights and construct general statements about their teaching from what they drew and discussed. One group progressed to the point of developing several generalizations:

- Structure in lessons is highly valuable.
- Believing in students is effective.
- The teacher cannot assume in advance the students’ level of knowledge.
- Requesting that students respect each other is helpful for effective lessons
  (Field notes for Week 12).

As a collection of statements about teaching these seem perhaps simplistic and obvious. However, what matters is that the students articulated these ideas from their own experiences rather than me, their teacher educator, supplying my interpretations of their experiences (or telling them about my experiences of teaching). These prospective teachers were able to identify collective concerns then build on them in a way that extended beyond their individual contexts and experiences, and to build new meaning that had real applications for their practice. Loughran (2002, p. 38) similarly noted the value of student ownership of knowledge production in learning about teaching:

> If the focus is genuinely on the student teacher as learner, then it is their ability to analyze and make meaning from experience that matters most—as opposed to when the teacher educator filters, develops, and share the knowledge with the student teachers… The knowledge developed may well be the same, but the process in developing the knowledge is very different. Who is doing the learning really matters.

Developing ways of productively building meaning from personal experience underpins the essence of managing the tension between valuing and reconstructing experience. It is seductive to underestimate the impact of what prospective teachers can learn from experience for themselves and to overestimate the role of the teacher educator as one who can offer vicarious experience as substitute knowledge of practice, ready made for prospective teachers. Knowledge of practice developed and understood through experience, while generally slower to develop, is considerably more powerful in its effect.
Peer Microteaching

The PLR and drawing task were designed primarily as ways of raising prospective teachers’ self-awareness of how they functioned as learners and teachers. The peer microteaching was intended not only to raise, but also to challenge the way in which prospective teachers thought and acted as biology teachers and learners and to help them consider new possibilities for their practice that were consistent with ideas of learning as a meaningful process (Novak & Gowan, 1984). Microteaching was organized so that pairs of prospective teachers taught the methods class about a particular biology concept for a 30 minute session. The class then debriefed their experiences together.

An important goal for the peer microteaching was to create contexts from which prospective teachers could collaboratively build their understandings of teaching. My role was to support and encourage them in their processes of meaning making and to look for opportunities to challenge them to interpret situations from different perspectives and to stimulate new understandings of practice. However, I soon found that these two aspects of my role did not fit together neatly. It was a difficult task to support effectively and challenge my students. If I supported particular teaching approaches then I could be seen as reinforcing ways of working that I considered inappropriate and ineffective. If I pushed too hard, they might feel threatened and vulnerable and reject the alternative ideas and approaches that I wanted them to consider (highlighting the related tension between safety and challenge). Although I espoused an approach of challenging prospective teachers’ views rather than telling them what to think about teaching, a regular problem I encountered during debriefing was in attempting to impose my views on their experiences. This was particularly so in situations that I considered problematic but that were perceived by the peer teachers as successful. This is illustrated through the following vignette, which is a reconstruction of a biology methods peer microteaching experience. The vignette depicts interactions between Gemma (the peer teacher), the biology methods students and me. It is constructed from data drawn from a range of sources, including video recordings, field notes, student interview transcripts and my journal entries. As such, the vignette is a creative representation of the research data that richly brings to life the complex set of interactions that comprise the experience (Brearley, 2000). In this instance, it illustrates the tension between valuing prospective teachers’ chosen approaches to teaching and reconstructing experiences of teaching. All names are pseudonyms.

Vignette: Why can’t Gemma see what I want her to see?

Gemma was teaching the group about genetics. For the most part, her session consisted of giving definitions of a series of genetics terms. Her manner was lively, but it did not move beyond a transmission approach. As I watched, I grew increasingly concerned.

“C’mon Gemma, give it up!” I thought. “Maybe we know some of this already? You need to find out what sense we are making of these terms.”
The students listened politely. I was unsure about whether to intervene with a question or wait until she had finished. Knowing Gemma though, my intervention may well have led to longer and more fine-grained telling. So, I decided to wait. When the teaching session concluded, I asked her:

“What could you pick up about our learning?”

She responded confidently, “I looked around and I could see that everyone got it pretty well.”

Initially, her response stunned me. How could she possibly think that? Did she really believe that she had accurately monitored our learning? Perhaps though, she felt put on-the-spot by my question and her manner of responding was a way of saving face.

I wanted to persist with my questioning because I wanted her to see that there was a problem here. She had made some assumptions about our learning. Yet, at the same time, I did not want to publicly embarrass her. I paused and looked around the room. Maybe one or two of the students might be prepared to pick this up for discussion? As though on cue, Dan muttered quietly, “I didn’t.” I capitalized on the opening he offered.

“Sorry Dan, what was that?”

“Yeah, I didn’t get it. I knew I was supposed to know what these definitions meant, but I didn’t. It’s been a long time since I’ve studied this, and I’ve forgotten most of it.”

Gemma turned to me with a cynical look. Her expression seemed to suggest that Dan was simply playing devil’s advocate on my behalf. I tried to open up the conversation and encourage Dan to talk with Gemma so that she might start to consider more about our perspectives and needs as learners.

“Maybe there’s something you might like to ask Gemma now? To explore a little more?” I suggested to Dan.

“Umm, I’m not sure about base pairing and how that is different in RNA and DNA.”

“It’s on the note sheet that I handed out. See, on page four,” replied Gemma.

“Yeah, but I don’t get it,” he intoned.

“I think that it is difficult to explain everything in one short session. This is perhaps something you need to go and look up for yourself,” she responded firmly, closing down any further conversation between them.

Later, I discussed this experience with a colleague. I puzzled over my need for Gemma to see her teaching from my perspective. I wanted Gemma to understand that good teaching is not simply a matter of giving out information, no matter how lively the delivery. Through discussion, I began to realize my assumption that simply raising this issue with Gemma did not mean that she would recognize the problem, nor that she would be willing to explore alternative perspectives of her experience in the moment of teaching. She needed to experience “a personal need for learning” (Korthagen, 2001, p. 15) and feel safe to pursue this need, thus highlighting the related tension of safety and challenge.

The central issue of both the vignette and the tension described here is my struggle between wanting students to make their own meanings from their experiences and my
concern to steer them in the direction of particular kinds of understandings of experience that were important to me. Because Gemma did not recognize or value my meaning, I tried to exert pressure on her to come around to my point of view. Yet as Korthagen (2001) observed, “the best way to stop change in a person is to try to impose it on him or her” (Korthagen, 2001, p. 70). Korthagen proposes that the discrepancy between the perspectives of the teacher educator and the prospective teacher inhibits the prospective teacher’s growth. Similarly, Schön (1987, p. 116) identifies the importance of teacher and student working towards “achieving a convergence of meaning,” and making opportunities available for the student to feel what it is like to be in a particular situation, and in feeling, and reflecting on these feelings, generating “meanings... not previously suspected” (Schön, 1987, p. 117). Hence for teacher educators to have an influence in developing prospective teachers’ knowledge through experience, it is first important to help students recognize that dilemmas exist, so that they might feel more confident to explore implications for themselves and, in the process, build more personally meaningful knowledge about teaching.

New Approaches to Reconstructing Experience

The tension between valuing and reconstructing experience played out differently in my email conversations shared with Lisa, a student in the biology methods class. Our email relationship evolved spontaneously, early in the year, after Lisa wrote to me about her initial experiences of the teacher education program. We continued to exchange emails on a semi-regular basis throughout the year. Although unplanned and with no clear purpose beyond exploring ideas and experiences of teaching and learning together, this arrangement offered a useful pedagogical sounding board for each of us. It became a powerful tool for understanding practice through revisiting and reconsidering experiences from another’s perspective.

Identifying, Exploring and Revisiting Issues

Lisa wrote about issues resulting from her experiences at university and in schools during practica. In her writing she worked through her thinking, although not necessarily to resolution. An example of this was her puzzling over the issue of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in learning. She linked a discussion from the biology methods class, in which students were discussing their use of lollies (candies) as incentives for improving their students’ motivation for learning, with her experiences of a science tutorial in which the lecturer stimulated Lisa’s motivation for learning through the teaching procedure itself, rather than using an external bribe. She knew intuitively that intrinsic motivation must be a better form of learning, although at that point, she was not yet able to clearly articulate the reasons underpinning her thinking.

Subject: How Can Learning be the Reward for Learning?
Date: Sat, March 3, 2001
From: Lisa
Amanda.ber

Lisa's explorations of her experiences led, on occasion, to insights that she shared with me. Sometimes these insights came as an epiphany, while at other times they formed slowly, crystallizing over several exchanges. Through her reflections, Lisa came to recognize and articulate the frames of reference she was using to think about teaching and learning. As a consequence, she began to reconsider and restructure, or “reframe” (Schön, 1987) her views. For example, in her email of August 7 (following), Lisa realized that her existing frame for thinking about teaching and learning was narrower than she had imagined. Then, on August 12, she described a shift in her thinking as she reframed her perceptions of teacher as leader.

Date: Tues, Aug 7, 2001
From: Lisa
To: Amanda.berry@education.monash.edu.au
You know, I think I have just had one of those moments, when you see things. I have spent most of this year thinking about teaching and learning in a very rigid and uncompromising way and I have only just realized that this second.

Date: Sun, Aug 12, 2001
From: Lisa
To: Amanda.berry@education.monash.edu.au
I am slowly starting to realise why I am the teacher!… This might be really obvious to most people, but it is going to take a long time to sink in that I “know best” to some degree… It hadn’t dawned on me until that moment that being a teacher meant being a leader, and I’m not really comfortable being a leader… But if I want to be a good teacher, I must be a good leader.

These emails indicate that Lisa was playing an active part in her own learning, reflecting on and interpreting her experiences as they became important for her. This process, Barnes (1998) argues, is critical for prospective teachers in shaping their classroom practice. It is far more likely to influence how new teachers will act compared with the well meaning but mistaken practice of teacher educators trying to impose new ways of thinking about experience on their students, or telling them what they should have seen or learnt in a given situation.
Reconceptualising Teacher Educator Knowledge as Tensions

For beginning teachers, book learning is almost useless. It is no use to offer them the thoughts of an experienced teacher, for these will merely be reinterpreted in the light of their preconceptions. Reframing by the student teachers themselves is crucial. (Barnes, 1998, p. xiii, emphasis in original)

In light of Barnes’ comments, I find it particularly interesting how little I explicitly imposed my ideas and beliefs on Lisa or tried to interpret what she was thinking or feeling. Much of the time, I was simply by her side as she examined her experiences. My way of being with Lisa contrasted strongly with my approach to teaching the biology methods classes. I frequently felt the need to push the direction of the learning toward meanings that I wanted students to achieve, rather than trusting students to make their own meanings, as Lisa so capably did.

Insights into my Teaching

Lisa’s emails also offered valuable insights into my teaching. Her accounts of the biology methods classes, including her observations of my behaviors, helped me better understand the experience of these sessions from a learner’s perspective and, in the process, build my knowledge of practice. One instance of seeing my practice through Lisa’s eyes occurred when she observed my tendency to withhold judgment in responding to student comments in class. She described my behavior as “a bit aloof” and wondered whether students felt less encouraged to participate as a result. Lisa’s observation is significant because it illustrates how difficult it was for me to act in ways that were congruent with my espoused beliefs about teaching. Even though my approach was intended to shift responsibility for meaning making from me to the students by not judging their responses, this was not necessarily how my actions were viewed in practice. Reflecting on Lisa’s experience of my teaching helped me to recognize problematic aspects of my approach. However, at the time, I was unable to move beyond this recognition, to act differently. Just as my students needed time to re-examine and restructure their understandings of experience, so too did I. “Living” the tension as I did, and recognizing that dilemmas existed in my own practice gave me greater insight into the challenge inherent in the meaning of this tension for prospective teachers.

Summary of my Learning from Examining this Tension within my Practice

Few teacher educators would deny the power of experience in learning to teach. However, opportunities to learn from experience can be unintentionally hampered by those in positions of authority (for instance, school and university based teacher educators) (Britzman, 1991) who impose their well rehearsed interpretations of experience on situations rather than supporting and challenging prospective teachers to find meaning for themselves. “I know because I have been there and you should listen” (Munby & Russell, 1994, p. 93) is the message regularly conveyed either explicitly or implicitly to prospective teachers about the nature of learning to teach.
This means that the impetus for prospective teachers to take an active part in their own development is taken away, even though this message may be inadvertent.

Developing my awareness of different aspects of the tension between valuing and reconstructing experience made me more sensitive about how I worked with prospective teachers. But, even though I became more aware of how the tension played out in the practice of others, this did not mean that I was able to recognize all of the ways in which the tension was operating within my own practice. Often I believed I was successfully working towards this goal without realizing that my actions crafted a different picture. Furthermore, recognizing the tension at work within my practice did not make change easy or straightforward. Korthagen (2001, p. 22) summarizes the essence of the tension between valuing and reconstructing experience well: “What to us seems directly applicable in practice, appears too abstract, too theoretical and too far off for someone else … Apparently there is an unbridgeable gap between our words and the students’ experiences.”

The approach that I have taken to learning about teaching is one that places at its centre the opportunity for prospective teachers to utilize their experiences to inform learning. In this way, the nature of the knowledge developed is more personally meaningful and directly applicable within their practice. Experience, then, provides the basis for the development of meaningful learning about teaching and the opportunity to “reframe” (Schön, 1987) practice so that purposes and actions can become more closely aligned. The development of my professional self-understanding has come about through reframing knowledge of practice as tensions, illustrated here using the tension of valuing and reconstructing experience.

**Episteme, Phronesis and the Tensions of Practice**

The development of knowledge of practice is important for teacher educators in order to improve the quality of teaching about teaching (and prospective teachers’ learning about teaching). Tensions offer a useful way of conceptualizing and communicating practice and of reframing traditional notions of knowledge development, constructing knowledge of teaching through ongoing analysis of personal experience. In this way, practice informs theory.

Korthagen & Kessels (1999) proposed that knowledge of practice developed and understood from and through experience “is more perceptual than conceptual” in its nature (p. 7), encompassing attitudes, feelings, values, thoughts, needs, conceptions, etc. They draw on the Aristotelian notion of phronesis to describe this form of knowledge (ibid, p. 7). Knowledge as phronesis contrasts with traditional conceptions of knowledge as episteme, expert knowledge on a particular problem connected to a scientific understanding of that problem. Episteme is propositional (i.e., consists of a set of assertions that apply generally to many different situations) and is frequently formulated in abstract terms. Phronesis, on the other hand, is situation-specific, focuses on strengthening one’s awareness of the characteristics of that situation and finding a helpful course of action through it. Hence, the self-study reported in this paper, which conceptualizes the complexities associated with the development of my
teacher educator pedagogy through the notion of tensions, could be considered an example of phronesis.

Conceptualizing tensions and using them as a sign-post for learning to understand and articulate approaches to teaching and learning about teaching helps to highlight the relationship between episteme and phronesis. For example, the tension between valuing and reconstructing experience was evident as I sought to help prospective teachers recognize the value of personal experience in learning to teach, yet, at the same time, bring about a recognition in them that there is more to teaching than acquiring experience. The tension hinges on a common teacher educator behavior of offering expert interpretations of experience (usually in the form of episteme; as theoretical knowledge) from the teacher educator to the student, and although this transfer of information might occur, it does not carry sufficient meaning to the receiver to be personally useful (i.e., knowledge as phronesis was needed). In other words, the delivery of propositional (epistemic) knowledge is not necessarily helpful because knowing something conceptually is not the same as doing it practically.

Considering the tension elaborated in this paper in this way highlights an important issue pertaining to experience. The development of knowledge as phronesis is rooted in experience, because it is systematic and disciplined analysis of real situations, with all their accompanying thoughts, feelings, needs, and concepts, that enables an individual to begin to build greater self-awareness and articulate new frames for practice. For prospective teachers and teacher educators alike, this presents a complex and difficult task because lack of experience in the teaching role makes it difficult to know how to act, yet it is only through personally involving oneself in teaching-learning situations that the development of informed action is possible.

The development of learning through experience suggests that phronesis becomes more elaborated as an individual systematically reflects on the features of a situation. As a consequence, knowledge as phronesis becomes more available both to the practitioner herself for further refinement and, when abstracted (as episteme), to others. Korthagen and Kessels (1999) propose that, with respect to this knowledge relationship, phronesis is to be considered of higher quality if it is fed by episteme and episteme that is not connected to existing phronesis will not lead to much change in the practitioner.

The self-study reported in this paper illustrates this knowledge relationship in two ways: (1) the development of personal perceptions while trying to act to improve one’s own teacher education practices; and (2) the results of personal efforts to take research-based findings and enact them in personal practice. The first point relates to the development of phronesis and the second involves episteme informing phronesis. In pursuing (1) and (2), practice is improved through reframing—drawing insights from, reconceptualizing and enacting one’s ideas about what it means to be a teacher educator. As a consequence, actions and intent become more closely aligned. A further point relates to the communication of this knowledge beyond the individual, that is, (3) the development of personal perceptions (phronesis) extending and
informing research-based findings (episteme). This highlights the complementary
nature of episteme and phronesis and the importance of both in knowledge
production and dissemination of teacher education practices. In self-study research
this point is vital.

The efforts of those engaged in self-study research must inform both the individual
and the community of teacher educators by demonstrating a “commitment to provide
insights for others of how the understandings of the authors become part of their
actual day-to-day practice” (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 242). Making knowledge
available to others as phronesis is an important element of establishing and building a
professional knowledge base of a pedagogy of teacher education. Both episteme and
phronesis are forms of knowledge that need to be developed and made available
within the practice of individual teacher educators and their prospective teachers and
across the community of teacher educators. Traditional approaches to knowledge
production suggest that we who work within the academy already know how to
capture and share episteme. The challenge that confronts teacher educators involves
finding ways of capturing, portraying and sharing phronesis. For teacher educators
engaged in self-study research, a further challenge lies in finding ways of
communicating these insights and understandings in ways that are meaningful and
useful to other teacher educators. Knowledge of practice as phronesis offers one way
of communicating the holistic nature of experience.

Conclusion

Researching one’s personal practice as a teacher educator is an important means of
better understanding and improving the relationship between teaching and learning
about teaching. As a practitioner-researcher, I have been able to reframe my
knowledge of practice as tensions to be managed. This act assists in formalizing the
teacher educator experience and, in the process, provides a language for articulating
and sharing more fine-grained understandings of the problematic nature of teacher
education practices. As the study of my practice has progressed, I have come to
recognize important differences between conceptual shifts in understanding practice
as a teacher educator and concrete shifts in enacting these changed understandings.
Taking changed thinking into practice does not automatically change how one acts.
Throughout the process of acquiring and examining experiences of teaching about
teaching, I was developing new levels of understanding about my practice and
learning to articulate my knowledge in new ways. As part of this process I needed time
to understand my practice, to recognize the need for change, and then whether or not
to alter my behavior. Uncovering differences between my actions in practice and my
intentions for practice has been a slow and complex process because habits of practice
are so deeply ingrained (Mason, 2002).

The perspective of tensions and the specific tensions I have identified offer insight
into the work of teacher educators as they seek to facilitate the development of
prospective teachers. Tensions serve both as a language for describing practice and as
a frame for studying practice. Thus they may be considered a way forward in
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Developing a pedagogy of teacher education that can be shared within the community of teacher educators. Conceptualizing practice as tensions to be managed may also assist teacher educators to deal constructively with the ambiguities associated with their work and to reconsider what counts as expertise in teacher education. Thus the ability to identify tensions within one’s work, to articulate approaches to teaching and learning about teaching that demonstrate readiness to tolerate tensions or to step out of one’s comfort zone to explore how tensions impact practice, might be considered to be a new form of teacher educator expertise. In communicating to others the knowledge developed, the relationship between episteme and phronesis is made more tangible.

The development of knowledge of practice is important for teacher educators in order to improve the quality of teaching about teaching (and their students’ subsequent teaching). The tensions themselves are not necessary per se, but they offer a useful way of conceptualizing and communicating practice. A series of tensions is not rich or comprehensive enough to provide guidance in all situations, nor would it be expected to. In this case, tensions offer a way of reframing traditional notions of knowledge development in teacher education and so create new and different possibilities for understanding and improving practice. What is helpful about the set of tensions is that it captures and holds on to “ambivalence and contradiction, rather than reducing or resolving it” (Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark, & Warne, 2002, p. 121).

References


