

# "Going Native":

## The changing nature of the organisation of learning in teacher education programs

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**IN THE LAST** issue of *Professional Voice*, Sue Willis (2007) wrote on the challenges ahead for teacher education and the increasing stress the sector is facing. She discussed some of the pressures on teacher education programs from bad press, the "practicum crisis", accreditation processes and the serious under-funding of teacher education, and noted that: "Teacher education is supposed to produce teachers who can do and be everything and who can do so from their very first day of teaching" (p45).

I take Willis's statement as my starting point for discussing the changing nature of how learning is organised in teacher education programs — including both the physical organisation and the pedagogical organisation — as universities go about the task of producing "teachers who can do and be everything ... from their very first day of teaching".

But what are the characteristics of our current students, and what are the implications of this for how they learn and how universities organise their learning?

**LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS OF FUTURE TEACHERS**

Current teacher education students — who tend to fall into the categories of Gen X and Gen Y — have different orientations to work and life. Faber (2001) identifies six characteristic values of Gen X (the generation born between 1965 and 1980):

- An orientation towards individual rather than group identification
- Little loyalty to organisations or institutions
- A preference for leisure over work
- Negative attitudes towards authority and hierarchy
- Pessimistic views towards both individual and societal financial prospects for the future
- More tolerance for social differences than older generations.

Preston (2007) investigated Gen Y (born since 1980) and found that they have similar characteristics to Gen X — and some special ones of their own, particularly their familiarity with information and communication technologies (ICTs). This group has:

- Poor spelling and grammar
- A failure to understand what constitutes appropriate corporate behaviour
- Poor communication skills.

But they do have great technological skills and they respond to electronic communication much more readily than to print. According to Preston, "it is important to constantly communicate with, train and 'indulge' Gen-Y staff to build relationships and get them enthused about being at work" — or university!

Another way of thinking of these future teachers is as "digital immigrants" (Gen X) and "digital natives" (Gen Y). Kennedy (2007) argues that digital natives are characterised by their familiarity with and reliance on ICTs, and that this has implications for their learning preferences. They:

- Prefer multi-tasking and quick, non-linear access to information
- Are adept at processing information rapidly
- Have a low tolerance for lectures
- Prefer active rather than passive learning
- Rely heavily on communications technologies to access information and to carry out social and professional interactions.

Given that current teacher education students include both digital immigrants and natives, that their lecturers and supervising teachers on practicum are most likely digital immigrants and that they will generally be teaching digital natives, what does this mean for the organisation of learning at universities?

**PHYSICAL ORGANISATION OF LEARNING**

University students today do not hang around campuses like they used to. Most students now work and they try to fit their university classes into the minimum number of days so they can hold down part-time jobs to support themselves through their university studies. Although this is not ideal, it is the reality, and timetables are now often organised so that students in particular year levels can have their classes over only two or three days rather than five.

Universities are also increasingly providing other flexible ways of delivering

coursework. For example, some subjects are offered through one-week intensive mode in semester breaks or over several weekends instead of weekly classes. In some universities, subjects are offered totally online so that students can complete them at any time during a semester.

Even when not fully online, it is common practice in universities for all subjects to have "a minimum online presence" — and this usually means that students are able to interact with the lecturer and each other in an online space. These interactions can involve being able to download podcasts of lectures, PowerPoint presentations or notes from lectures or readings for tutorials, or there can be activities and assessment tasks that require students to interact online to respond to a particular question or issue, or maintain an online journal or blog. These ways of organising learning are designed to encourage communication and engagement with their university studies, consistent with the characteristics of Gen Y learners outlined by Preston and Kennedy.

Of course, although e-learning is now commonplace, the next challenge for schools and universities is m-learning, "the provision of education and training on PDAs/palmtops/handhelds, smartphones and mobile phones" (Keegan, 2004, p3).

Other strategies are being adopted by universities to better engage students in their learning and better prepare them to hit the ground running on their first day in their own classrooms.

One example of this is the teaching of key subjects such as literacy, numeracy and science in primary schools and providing the future teachers with the opportunity to actually work with and teach school children as part of their own learning about teaching. Such experiences not only build the future teacher's confidence and competence in teaching subjects which are sometimes (often) seen as difficult, they also provide active learning experiences where the future teachers learn in a scaffolded environment before going out on their own in practicum experiences.

Practicum experiences are also changing. The Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) requirement for accredited teacher education programs is that four-year programs include at least 80 days of supervised teaching practice, two-year programs need at least 60 days, and one-year programs need at least 45 days; whereas the Commonwealth Government is increasing the requirement to 120 days for four-year programs and 60 days for one- and two-year programs. Universities are already struggling to place students: "Even with considerable good will, schools will struggle to meet the additional demands upon them, and universities risk being unable to deliver the dramatically increased number of placement days" (Willis, 2007, p48), losing quality in pursuit of quantity.

Universities and schools are already implementing a variety of delivery modes for the practicum days. These include single days over a semester followed by a short block, negotiated days over a period of a few weeks, mass placement of large numbers of future teachers in fewer schools, as well as traditional three- or four-week block placements.

What is considered as constituting a practicum experience is also changing. The recent Commonwealth *Administrative Guidelines Improving the Practical Component*

of *Teacher Education Programme 2008-2011* (DEST, 2007, pp4-5) included “Teaching and education-based experiences in settings other than the classroom”. This includes but is not limited to:

- Participating in an educational role in a non-school organisation, such as Questacon, the CSIRO, or galleries and museums
- Tutoring, including literacy and numeracy (through an agency)
- Supervising after-school homework centres
- Working as a school’s assistant in a classroom role, eg. with students with special needs
- Developing skills to prepare for positive teacher-parent relationships
- Camp or excursion supervision
- Participating in micro-teaching or a virtual classroom exercise.

### **PEDAGOGICAL ORGANISATION**

The pedagogical organisation of the intellectual content of teacher education programs is also changing.

Firstly, there are the VIT requirements that applicants to undergraduate teacher education programs have a study score of at least 30 and have satisfactorily completed a minimum of Units 1 and 2 of VCE mathematics (not foundation mathematics or its equivalent). In addition there is the requirement for all teacher education programs to include experiences which lead to practices within the “three broad themes and eight standards that together describe the essential elements of teaching” (VIT, 2007, pp16-17).

Secondly, the curriculum and standards framework in Victoria has changed significantly from that in effect from 1995-2005, with the phased introduction of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) between 2006 and 2008. As Victorian teachers will be well aware, instead of the previous eight key learning areas, VELS comprises the following standards:

- Physical, personal and social learning
  - Health and physical education
  - Interpersonal development
  - Personal learning
  - Civics and citizenship
- Discipline-based learning
  - The arts
  - English
  - The humanities — economics
  - The humanities — geography
  - The humanities — history
  - Languages other than English
  - Mathematics
  - Science
- Interdisciplinary learning
  - Communication

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- Design, creativity and technology
- Information and communications technology (ICT)
- Thinking processes

Some elements of VELS are already well-embedded in teacher education programs — such as discipline-based learning — but other elements, such as developing design, creativity and technology, or civics and citizenship may require significant changes to program organisation.

Thirdly, there are the changes associated with the initiatives related to the *Blueprint for Government Schools* (Minister for Education and Training, 2003), particularly those related to student learning: assessment, curriculum and pedagogy. These changes include three major initiatives that have been implemented in the past two-to-three years:

- Interpreting an assessment definition and purposes of assessment including: assessment for, as and of learning
- Curriculum planning guidelines
- Principles of learning and teaching.

As teacher education programs are accredited by VIT for a period of five years on each occasion, the organisation of learning in the programs needs to be modified to meet these changes progressively.

Although teacher education institutions support the need for regular program renewal, just as in primary and junior secondary schools, significant changes such as the three above can have a considerable impact on staffing needs and subject design and implementation to best address these requirements.

There are also increasing requirements for future teachers to be able to interpret statistics, to understand the legal and ethical dimensions of teaching, to be able to manage students with behaviour problems and learning disabilities (up to one in six in a regular classroom) and other classroom management issues, and to handle a whole range of other social and academic issues in their teaching. The VIT characteristics of teaching that accompany the eight standards of teaching (covering professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement) provide a guide for teacher education programs to follow as they frame the organisation of learning in the subjects that comprise the programs. Together these standards and characteristics provide future teachers with the essentials for entering the teaching profession. The organisation of learning required for future teachers to acquire these characteristics requires partnerships between universities, schools and experiences in other educational settings through practicum and other collaborations.

Teacher education students are the learning leaders of the future, but they need to learn how to organise their learning and the learning of their future students by implementing strategies that take account of their own learning characteristics and those of their students. How students learn best is changing, and teacher education programs are evolving to accommodate the different characteristics of teacher education students — with the goal of producing “teachers who can do and be everything ... from their very first day of teaching”, recognising that they need to “go native”.

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