

Snapshots: Teacher educator professional learning shaping teacher educator practices

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The professional learning of teacher educators has become a topic of increasing interest in the past decade (Loughran, 2014). So much so that the professional learning of teacher educators is a current policy priority in the European Union (European Commission, Education and Training, 2013) who identify “competences in collaborating, communicating and making connections with other areas” (p.16) as an important aspect of professional learning. Furthermore, communication has been identified as a core competence in the literature on teacher education (e.g., Koster & Dengerink, 2001; 2008; Loughran, 2006).

Academic life as a teacher educator is complex, lonely, and personally demanding as faculty enjoy little time to engage in dialogue with colleagues about research and teaching practice (Berry, 2009; Hadar & Brody, 2010). Professional learning communities (PLCs) represent an increasingly utilized learning strategy with potential to give rise to praxis between practice-based learning and pedagogy (Watson, 2014) by addressing participant identified need, collaborative problem solving, continuity, and support (Parker, Patton, & Tannehill, 2012). They have proven successful in breaking personal and professional isolation through interdisciplinary collaboration, the encouragement of risk taking, and the promotion of mutual support (Hadar & Brody, 2010).

While the importance of these communities, as well as the relational and communication in teaching, are acknowledged, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of how these communities and the professional learning they foster are taken up by teacher educators in their teacher education practices.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional learning of individual teacher

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educators scaffolded within a developing PLC. The learning focus was related to the pedagogical area of communication. We were interested in how this professional learning might then influence our individual pedagogical practices with pre-service teachers. Insight on both the aspects of professional learning (what) that teacher educators implement in their teacher education practices and the influence of the professional learning process on individual approaches (how) can contribute to our understanding of features of effective professional learning for teacher educators. Understanding how we as teacher educators develop our practices to enhance student learning in physical education teacher education (PETE) can inform the design of future professional learning programmes for teacher educators.

Specific research questions were:

1. What are physical education teacher educator experiences of professional learning within a community focused on communication? and
2. How do physical education teacher educators perceive the influence of this professional learning on their pedagogical approaches with pre-service teachers?

Due to the communication demands on developing interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Priest & Gass, 1997) outdoor and adventure activities were chosen as the medium for the professional learning aspect of our project. To analyse communication during these activities we adopted a ‘debriefing’ framework of encouraging participants “to reflect on and communicate with other group members about their feelings, observations and experiences during an activity” (Dyson & Sutherland, 2015, p.235). Our intent was to help us sort and order information in a meaningful way to support learning.

Methods

We, the participants, are five physical education teacher educators in Ireland (three primary and two post-primary). Three of us, Maura, Déirdre, Ciaran, had between 10-15 years’ experience as teacher educators, Paul had four years’ experience, and Missy had been a teacher educator for over thirty years. Only Missy, who had become a teacher educator within the US system, had any formal teacher education training; reflecting the Irish context, the four others transitioned from school teacher to teacher educator roles with a great deal of content knowledge, but little formal support or professional development opportunities. All of us teach a range of content within our respective PETE programmes and have an interest in outdoor and adventure. Two of us are “lone” teacher educators in our programmes and only Missy was in a programme that included multiple teacher educators. Our teaching includes physical activity-based practical lectures, lecturing to large groups, and classroom-based seminar work in smaller groups. Maura, Missy, and Déirdre had collaborated previously on research projects, but had not met Paul or Ciaran before the start of this project. Therefore, getting to know each other and relationship building became a necessary part of our engagement in the shared professional learning activities. As Ciaran indicated, “*The OAA [adventure/outdoor] experience definitely created a safe space for trust to be built amongst us, enhancing the depth and validity of our reflections; as well as the communal analysis of these later on.*” Of the five, only Missy and Déirdre had previously engaged in S-STEP research.

Our self-designed professional learning experiences were scaffolded over a six month period. Initially, we engaged in a three-day professional learning camp focused on outdoor and adventure activities. Two months after the completion of the adventure camp experience and at the beginning of the academic semester, we each identified a specific problem of practice to be addressed during the teaching semester which we shared through online discussions. We then taught our regularly assigned PETE courses in our respective institutions. During this time we each identified critical incidents with respect to our self-identified problem of practice and kept a photo reflective diary. We were each also observed teaching a PETE class by a non-participant observer who then shared field notes and thoughts with us.

Collaborative self-study was selected as the methodological frame for the project as we were focused our professional learning as teacher educators. LaBoskey’s (2004) criteria for quality in

self-study were adopted: (a) self-initiated and -focused, (b) improvement aimed, (c) interactive, (d) multiple forms of qualitative data, and (e) validity based in trustworthiness. Photo elicitation visual strategies and techniques were used in the project to enhance reflection. Previously, photo elicitation visual methodologies (Harper, 2002) have been used with children and teachers (Patton & Parker, 2013; Parker, Patton, & Sinclair, 2015), but not with teacher educators. Photo elicitation provided a model for collaborative research where we could share our interpretations of our communication experiences through discussion of photographic images. Using photo elicitation provided an opportunity for us to show rather than ‘tell’ aspects of our identity that might have otherwise remained hidden (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008).

Data sources included photo dairies, focus group, and individual interviews, meaningful incidents, and classroom observations. First, during the three day professional learning experience we each used a camera to capture a visual record of significant and meaningful communication experiences and events each day throughout the outdoor and adventure activities. We then selected 5-6 photos that represented important experiences of the day related to communication and wrote to specific prompts focused on communication in a reflective photo diary entry. For example, Ciaran selected a photo of the whole group precariously balanced on a narrow plank leading across a pond to a small island. He entitled the photo ‘Water, water everywhere’ as the threat of us all getting very wet was quite real. Also, we were not allowed to speak. His reflection on this moment highlighted the range of different forms of communication the group used, including physical contact, eye and hand signals that resulted in us successfully completing the task and not getting wet.

Second, two focus group interviews were conducted. One focus group, using photo-elicitation, occurred at the end of the three day camp asked questions related to our learning experiences and how these might influence our teacher education practices. A second focus group was conducted at beginning of the new teaching semester framed by readings on communication (Rink, 1994) and teacher educator professional development (Loughran, 2014). Third, we wrote fortnightly critical incident reflective diary entries regarding our engagement with the communication problem of practice we had identified. These entries were uploaded to a shared portal. Fourth, field notes from non-participant observation of PETE classes. Fifth, we also completed an individual 30-45 minute photo elicitation interview using our photo diary entries with a critical friend. Questions focused on how we perceived our professional learning experiences – in the outdoor and adventure setting and through online discussions– and how these experiences influenced our teacher education practices. Finally, following completion of all teaching, a 2-hour face-to-face focus group with all of us captured our reflections on the professional learning experiences and perspectives on the influence of the professional learning on our pedagogical practices with pre-service teachers.

In total, data sources for analysis included five photo dairies, 21 fortnightly reflections, five individual interviews, and three focus groups. All data were analysed using a general inductive approach (Patton, 2005). Two of us (Déirdre and Missy) were involved in the initial data analysis. Each of us separately read and coded all data. Déirdre and Missy then met and reviewed our individual coding and, through discussion, reached agreement on the construction of themes that reflected the main messages. Trustworthiness of the findings and conclusions was addressed through triangulation of multiple data sources. Member checking was also adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the account presented thus strengthening the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). As form of member check the full set of coded data and draft findings were shared with the other three participants to confirm both the analysis process and the representativeness of the finalised themes.

Outcomes and discussion

Two distinct themes demonstrated how the professional learning experiences supported our learning and influenced our teacher education pedagogical practices: 1. Professional learning shaped technical pedagogies and allowed “taking stock” of practice and 2. Interaction with others, group members and the critical friend, shaped the direction and influence of learning experiences. In this chapter the findings of first theme are shared.

Shaping pedagogy

At a fundamental level the professional learning experiences within the project shaped our specific, or what some would term technical, pedagogical practices. The outdoor and adventure-based professional learning activities supported learning in relation to communication and reinforced the importance of clear task instructions and using feedback to scaffold the learning process. For Missy it served to reinforce *“the notion that communication can occur in a variety of ways”* (interview). After the adventure camp, we all identified a problem of practice related to communication to be addressed the following semester. Rink’s (1994) overview of task presentation in physical education helped to create a shared technical language on the topic of communication using such terms as task setting, feedback, reinforcement cues, and sharing details of expectations for individuals and groups within the learning process. Direct links were made between our experiences of effective communication within activities and how we communicated with pre-service teachers in identifying our personal problems of practice. The shared technical language of communication allowed for the identification of communication concepts through reflection on our experiences using photographs and written text. On return to our teacher education programmes we targeted changes to our pedagogical practices to address the identified problem. All of us focused on different aspects of communication, highlighting the value of a flexible approach that allowed for self-direction in how professional learning experiences are taken up by individuals. Ciaran’s data illustrate the process of implementation. At the outset he identified a learning goal of trying *“to get them [pre-service teachers] to think for themselves and communicate how they’re learning”* (interview). He explained how he had selected this focus through drawing on his experiences in the professional learning camp,

Once I started looking at this [communication] when we were in Carlingford I thought ‘I do need to be less sort of rambling in how I organise my thoughts when I’m speaking to them [pre-service teachers]. That’s why I’ve started using more and more structured periods during the sessions, with the timer, to get everybody organised, everybody sure this is what they’re doing. (interview)

The fortnightly reflections completed during the teaching semester provided evidence of our grappling with the pedagogical problem of practice identified, sometimes with success, sometimes less effectively. Missy openly acknowledged that,

Sometimes I think I expect students to pick up on more without some of my help; and with first years I know that they really need the help. So I keep trying to figure out strategies to be able to do that. (interview)

In a specific instance, Maura wrote about mixed success with her students learning about instructional cues. She reflected, *“I need to actually point out the cues I use – encourage students to become familiar with them. Sometimes I think they think they have to be very technical and there are no children involved”* (reflection 3). Overall, by the end of the semester, we were all confident we had addressed the personal problem of practice identified in ways that enhanced pre-service teacher learning and our teaching. Déirdre shared, *“Finding the image was really great in terms of forcing me or helping me focus and clearly articulate exactly the point I was trying to make as opposed to waffling around it”* (interview).

Of the group of five, three of us modified the learning goal we had identified during the professional learning experience once we returned to our teaching. For example, Paul shifted his focus from demonstrations to supporting students in the provision of constructive feedback to each other. These changes were motivated by the challenges he faced in his practice in real time, rather than the areas for attention he identified from a non-contextualised distance and space. The flexibility to modify individual learning goals was important, particularly given the range of experience within the group, as it provided for adaptation and application to context specific settings. Paul explains,

... my focus was going to be on gymnastics and demonstrations had changed... I think the fact that it changed is good in a way, you think you are adapting and tailoring your sessions to suit the needs of your students. (interview)

As well as identifying a specific communication focus to address, we all brought a new empathy

for student experiences as learners back to our teacher education programmes. Our uncomfortable experiences as learners within a variety of adventure-based tasks such as zip-lining, zorbing, and traversing a high-ropes course made clear the contribution of communication to creating a supportive learning environment. The value of establishing parameters and processes around group-based activities was identified as an important aspect of the learning experience in the outdoor and adventure setting which was then translated into an increased attention to supporting group processes as the teaching semester progressed. Missy explains,

How many times do we ask students in teacher education to do something that is absolutely this scary? It could be teaching kids for the first time. What kind of support structures do we supply for them? So that's kind of where it hit me. This put me in a situation that maybe a lot of our students go through as well. What we're trying to teach is not quite as physically scary as what we were doing but it may be the same. (interview)

The experience of flexible professional learning had a direct influence on our specific pedagogical practices through identification and attention to a specific problem of practice within our setting related to communication. The processes of the professional learning and S-STEP design of the research project also resulted in a wider impact, beyond communication.

Taking stock

At a second level the processes of photovoice reflection on experiences during the professional learning camp combined with structured reflection on teaching experiences during the teaching semester provided a frame that facilitated our moving beyond the specific identified problem of practice to “taking stock” of what was important in our teaching. The design of the professional learning as both experiential and shared was important. Déirdre explains,

By pushing me into new spaces (in the air on zip lines and in confined holes within metal containers) that triggered new thinking about my practice. This project is all about prioritising spaces for conversation and reflection that inevitably lead to new perspectives by looking at my work (the building in the photo) from new angles. (fortnightly reflection 3)

In addition, the direct links created between the professional learning experience in the outdoor and adventure centre and the application of this learning in practice helped to reinforce and extend our learning. We all emphasised how the project processes helped us focus more on ourselves and our teaching. Maura outlined how the reflection process impacted on her approach,

Just even to think for that little bit of time, 'hang on, we do need to consider practice and try not to get into the hamster wheel or whatever'. Every so often, just do give a think. And I think that's what I would do, I would think a little more, 'what do I want to get out of this?' (focus group)

Paul's story is particularly poignant. He explained how the project processes helped him: “... reflect on what actually happened, what took place; then made me aware of the importance of communication in the teaching context” (interview). For Paul, who was an early career teacher educator, a ‘forced’ attention to his teacher education practices was particularly worthwhile as “it definitely, from my perspective, has improved me as a teacher educator in such a short space of time” (interview). He elaborated in the focus group on the wider impact of the project on him, “It was impacting everything I did, and for me, from a professional development viewpoint, moving from a teacher to a teacher educator it has made a huge difference to the way I've practiced this term”.

For others the project processes were not as transformative, but did provide a structure that influenced their practice in more subtle ways, “It's more of an accountability mechanism in some senses, to pay attention to them [communication practices]. Not that I wouldn't anyway but especially it makes me think about, more than anything else, it makes me think about doing them” (Missy, interview). Missy further explained how this focused attention to an aspect of practice helped her to be true to her teaching philosophy,

It served that function that all of a sudden, 'oh, I remember these values are important. You've done this before; you've done this for longer than dirt's been around. You should be able to remember it', but you get lost...the real value was in finding myself again. (focus group)

Overall, the project processes increased each of our individual investment in our pedagogical

practices. This resulted in a marked difference in our overall approach where we were more reflective, more open to learning about our practice, and willing to try out new pedagogies to better support pre-service teacher learning.

Conclusion

The findings of our study provide new insights on teacher educator professional learning and how this influences teacher educator pedagogical approaches with pre-service teachers. Loughran (2014) indicates that “the notion of professional development of teacher educators has begun to emerge as a touchstone for not only what it means to become a teacher educator, but also to learn as a teacher educator” (p. 1). For us, engagement in collaborative inquiry and the shared nature of teaching and learning experiences in the outdoor and adventure camp supported a focused engagement on our teacher education practices in a space that was safe and broke the walls of our individual silos. This engagement was enhanced by the flexibility for individuals to then identify a context-specific focus for the problem of practice they would address. As such, ideas related to engaging with our own technical practice of teaching, in this case, communication, were translated into pedagogical practices through the scaffolding of implementation using project processes including structured reflection.

Teacher beliefs play a critical role in the development of students as teachers. Whether beliefs guide actions or actions inform beliefs, effective teacher educators, in whatever approach they take, act consistently in accordance with their beliefs. If not, learners receive confusing messages. In this project we found evidence of a deep influence on teacher educator approaches that resulted from a focused attention to self and self-in-practice that was normally lost in our busy lives. Noticing aspects of practice that might otherwise be missed resulted in a reinforcement of values related to each of our approaches and allowed a more coherent basis for practice.

We took our professional learning into our own hands and created a situation that allowed for not only about the learning of pedagogy, but the alignment of our teaching with this learning to influence our practices. These findings provide important direction in how teacher educators can take responsibility for their own professional learning in ways that allow learning about teaching while teaching about teaching (Loughran, 2014). As Ciaran pondered,

I believe we all undertook this journey knowing that we would be challenged in several ways by the processes as well as by the revealed truths; that is not usually an easy thing to do. It interests me then to think of other research groups; do they have such a connection? Is this necessary for meaningful reflection and true transformation in PETE professional practices?

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