

Editorial: Professional identity and change: The role of pre-service education

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One of the strands in the 2003 IFTE conference held in July in Melbourne, Australia, focused on Professional Identity and Change. Within the PIC strand there were many interesting and exciting papers presented on the role of pre-service education. This issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* has attempted to capture the flavour some of those papers. It also enters into dialogue with Volume 1, Number 1, which provided a number of personal views on challenges facing English as a subject across a range of educational settings.

The issue has been edited by Sue Brindley (University of Cambridge UK) and Jan Turbill (University of Wollongong, Australia). We have both spent many years teaching pre-service teachers and both have published in this area, with Sue focusing on secondary and Jan on primary English education.

Jan is course director of the Primary Program in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Australia and co-ordinator for the postgraduate program in Language and Literacy. Her current research interests include early literacy and technology, online learning and pre-service education. Sue is course director for the secondary English PGCE program at the University of Cambridge, UK, and chair of a new MEd course at the University designed for Early Career Teachers. Her current research interests include professionalism and teachers as researchers.

We have attempted to represent in this issue the full range of those involved with pre-service English teaching from primary (Kindergarten – Grade 6) through to secondary and beyond. Some articles offer a research-based account of the experiences of pre-service education; some are teacher narratives, which offer a personalised account of events but with a commentary on the implications of particular experiences for wider issues in English education. All articles, in one way or another, explore the concept of professional identity in teaching, and how this identity can be nurtured, developed and changed during pre-service education and beyond in the years of beginning teaching.

In a time when countries such as the UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand have an aging teaching force, it is imperative that those of us in pre-service education develop in our newly graduate teachers a strong professional identity. We need these beginning teachers to "hit the ground running" and to have commitment and passion for their chosen profession. We want them to be flexible and be able to cope with the constant changes in the profession. If we can begin this process in their pre-service education, then it is our hope that we will have young teachers who view their chosen profession as a constant learning enterprise and that they will not give up on teaching as so many do right now. We cannot afford to lose so many young, wonderful teachers in the first two to three years of their teaching.

We thought that it might be interesting for each of us to share with our readers our reflections of the beginnings of our own professional identity and how this has changed over the years. Our "narratives", we hope, will stimulate our readers to consider their own "professional identity" and how it has changed over time and what enabled and enhanced that change. Since each of us has been in the "teaching business" for some years, our narratives have much to say....

JAN'S STORY

Reflecting on the "beginnings" of my professional identity

Recently I returned to my old "stomping grounds" – Wagga Wagga Teachers' College in NSW, Australia. I had spent two years of my younger life there some 40 years before training to be a teacher. I had fond memories of the place – the buildings, the rose gardens, the lectures and most importantly, the sense of community that existed amongst us.

As I walked around the grounds showing my cousin who was travelling with me where "things were" and sharing all sorts of stories with her, I realised that from the day I began at Wagga Wagga Teachers' College, I perceived myself to be *a teacher* – albeit a trainee teacher. We were treated as teachers from Day 1, we were expected to dress as teachers, and behave in a "professional manner at all times". (Oh, how often I was reminded of those words!)

As we drove away, I reflected on what I remembered about my pre-service education – what "stuck", what was important to me. The key things I recalled were:

1. *Passion and a sound understanding of the topic area.* The passion that many of my lecturers had for their discipline area was contagious and I took away not only content, but a strong sense of the importance of teaching such content to my students. I learned that craft, music, art, PE were all as important as the "three R's". I was being trained to be a "do-er" or practitioner of the "blue bible" – the 4cm thick syllabus of the time. While I don't think I ever really understood why I should teach certain things or in certain ways, I graduated believing that such content (as detailed in the syllabus) was important for me to teach my students.
2. *A sense of community.* There was a strong sense of community – I was a member of a section that stayed together for all our classes. I was a member of a sport team. I was a member of a boarding house. I was a member of a year, and of the Wagga Wagga Teacher Training College. We had a College emblem, a College blazer, and weekly assemblies. We had musicals and plays. Everyone got involved.
3. *Belonging to the teaching profession.* I developed a growing sense that I was a teacher – my regular visits to the demonstration school and my practicums all made me feel part of the profession of teachers. I was paid – a meagre amount – but it was a "salary" and I knew that I had a job at the end. I was going to teach somewhere in the state of NSW.

My professional identify and change

When I graduated from Wagga Wagga Teachers' College, I believe I already had a strong sense of professional identity.

- I was a practitioner who taught given knowledge, using given teaching practices guided by a given syllabus
- I had joined the largest community of teachers in NSW
- I had a life-long job with secure super
- I was a teacher!

I began my teaching with apprehension, but also knowing that I had the support of my fellow teachers, the executive and my College lecturers. On several occasions I called my lecturers to ask for ideas and resources. They always were willing to help. My colleagues in the school helped me over the lessons that were disastrous and were always willing to offer ideas. One colleague, on hearing my attempts to play the piano, took over my singing lessons and I took her class for PE – a fair swap, I thought. This sense of support and community was very strong and played a major role in my developing a professional identity.

Another strong driver was the need to "do a better job". This led to my joining professional associations. Since I had become interested in how I could improve my teaching of reading, joining the Australian Reading Association (as it was when it began) was my first choice. I have been a member ever since. But it is not the only professional association to which I belonged. The journals and books that came from my membership still fill my bookshelves; many are now used by my own pre-service students. Continuing my learning led to me doing further degrees, and so I went back to "school".

Over the years, my students, my studies, my interactions at conferences and courses have all that meant my professional identity has changed, as my beliefs about teaching and learning have changed.

As I continue in my long career in teaching, my professional identity demands that:

- I am a "thinker" *and* a "do-er"
- I understand that knowledge is socially constructed
- I understand the links between teaching, learning and assessment theory and practices
- I accept that I must take responsibility for my own learning
- I recognise that my professional learning is ongoing and that I will never know it all
- I recognise that often the best teachers are my own students who challenge me and my teaching with questions such as "why are we doing this?"
- I am a member of an even larger national and international community of professionals
- I am a teacher

As I reflect upon my career and consider the changes in my professional identity, there are certain factors that stand out, namely the sense of community, of belonging,

of networking with like-minded teachers. Journal publications, national conferences and local workshops have also played a role in my developing professional identity.

The challenge facing educators of the profession today is hooking teachers into wanting to belong to such a community and to continue to develop their professional identity.

SUE'S STORY

Quite often, when I ask at PGCE interviews, "Why do you want to be an English teacher?" the answer is "I've always wanted to teach." I can't say that I would have been able to answer in the same way. I hadn't thought about teaching as a career and, if invited to, probably would have rejected the idea of spending my adult life in a place which, to my mind, was about ensuring pupils obeyed some fairly petty rules and regulations.

Trouble was, however, that I hadn't thought about anything else I wanted to do, either. It had to be connected to English, where I felt I "belonged". Journalism? I tried that for a short while and was bored to death with writing about local court events. Professional writer? No, I wasn't going to get away with three years of no income (as if I ever would get anything published anyway). Deep sea diver, postman, test pilot? In the end, I decided that if some government organisation was fool enough to set up a job which allowed me to read and discuss books all day every day – and to pay me to do it – I'd better take up the offer before anyone spotted what a scam it was. So I went into teaching. What a surprise I had coming!

But the surprise was that I loved it; the whole thing – planning classroom lessons which allowed me to introduce texts in ways I had never before encountered (You make them talk in class and rewrite classics in different genres?); engage with lively and energetic adolescents (That was the biggest of surprises – that they had so much to say about themselves and the world which was refreshingly lively and interesting); be part of a department which argued passionately about English and gave me some of the best life-long friends I have; and perhaps most surprising, since I'd never considered this "career" dimension, I found it important to be in a place which cared, not about making profits, but about developing individual and social consciences – dealing with values and beliefs in ways which encouraged individual responsibility for the wider world.

During my teaching career, from being an NQT to a deputy head in a London comprehensive, through now to teaching in pre and in-service education in a University, all of these things have held true for me: finding ways of introducing the pleasures of English to learners; working with adolescents – and now, adults, who are interested in the world and have a lot to say about it; the strengths to be drawn from good colleagues; and the knowledge that, despite the present drive to turn education into a business, the concern with values is still at the heart of education. How could it not be so if, as educators, one of our prime function is to develop thinking individuals – critically literate, rather than unthinkingly compliant? It is the inescapable condition of being an English teacher – we've read many of the futures and know *Animal Farm*

is one to avoid! But how do my experiences fit in with frameworks that have been described in the educational research literature?

Huberman (1989) described the career pathways of teachers in terms of phases, starting with two rough categories: easy or painful beginnings. "...Easy beginnings involve positive relationship with pupils, manageable pupils, the sense of pedagogical mastery, and enthusiasm...". On the other hand, painful beginnings are characterised by troublesome encounters with awkward pupils and a lack of confidence in the classroom. The themes of this period are "survival: learning to cope" and "discovery: learning to explore" (p. 42).

In Huberman's terms, I'd have to confess to an "easy beginning", but that was largely due to the good fortune of having been trained in schools which had very good English departments. However, Huberman's polarities don't allow for what I'd really describe my first few years in teaching as – an easy beginning with difficult interludes. We've all got stories to tell about the pupil who made lives a misery, or the professional demands made by Heads who don't stop to realise that their "simple task" is an NQT's nightmare.

I remember in particular being asked to address a hall full of parents about the English Department's approaches to language teaching – then known as Language Across the Curriculum. My recent training, it was felt, would allow me to talk about new approaches and ideas. No amount of protestation could get me out of it. With an encouraging and smiling Head of Department sitting in front of me, I very nervously stood up and opened my mouth to hear a voice like Minnie Mouse on helium emerge. During my carefully planned explanation (which seemed to me, and no doubt others, to go on for ever) not once did my voice drop below that pitch, so high it was barely audible to the human ear. The only difference was that half way through, it also began to quaver. I could see the bemused looks of the parents and the, by now, rictus smile and mechanically nodding head of the Head of Department as she still sought to encourage me. I'm not sure whether, in Huberman's terms, that experience was discovery or survival. But it was certainly "difficult". I've dredged this event out of my memory and it's still painful to recall. No doubt you've got your own stories and I'd be glad to hear them, if only so I know I'm not alone in needing a repressed memory section in my brain to accommodate some early teaching experiences....

Ryan (1986), drawing on and extending the work of Fuller and Brown (1975), describes the development of teaching in a different way. He proposed a four-stage process for the life cycle of a teacher: a "fantasy" stage, a "survival" stage, a "mastery" stage and an "impact" stage. Fantasy (pre any teaching experience) is the time when we have the sure and certain knowledge we will be like the best teachers we ever knew; survival is when we begin to see that it might be a tad harder than we thought; mastery is when we hit our stride and can call upon a range of effective classroom strategies; and impact is what we all aim for: a level where we can call up the "buzz factor" almost at will, where our teaching is always effective and where students both enjoy and are successful in their work. Thinking about the trainee teachers I've worked with, some of whom are represented in this journal, I know that I've met with many who will hit and sustain the "impact" level. It's a source of pleasure to me to know that there are generations of students in schools who are going to benefit from some outstanding teaching, who will come to love English – and

learning – because of these teachers, and who will realise a satisfaction in their lives which they would not have had without encountering those teachers. Quite an achievement on their part and a real privilege for me to have worked with them! So maybe turning down journalism, rejecting deep sea diving and taking up teaching was not such a bad decision after all...

Jan and I hope that you will enjoy reading the articles we have selected for this special edition, focusing on early career teachers and key issues they will encounter in their teaching. We enjoyed selecting and working with the authors, and would like to express our thanks to them. Our thanks, too, to Terry Locke, Coordinating Editor of this Journal, for inviting us to act as guest editors and for being unfailingly supportive, even as we attempted on occasions not to hear what Douglas Adams described as the "pleasant whoosh" of deadlines as they sped past us....

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