Peer Support for Professional Learning: Rewards and Challenges

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A b s t r a c t

This paper addresses the quality of professional learning of student teachers in their teaching practicum. It begins with an identification of the problem for this Action Learning Project. Peer support is considered a promising human resource to enhance professional learning and to tackle the problem of facing the traditional culture of learning to teach. For this project, strategies to promote peer support were developed and implemented in action learning cycles over the student teachers' practicum period. During this time, the researcher also engaged in a parallel process of action learning, by organising student teachers' course work on campus and supervising them during the practicum. Over the two-year period of the project, a procedural manual was developed and revised in two cycles of Action Learning to guide peer support in the teaching practicum. The manual has been used by different cohorts of student teachers in both the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Institute of Education. This paper draws data from the University of Hong Kong for evaluation of peer support as a resource for enhancing the quality of professional learning. The discussion focuses on the rewards and the challenges for the process. The conclusion identifies implications from the insights of this project for higher education.

The Problem: Facing the Traditional Culture of Learning to Teach

The teaching practicum for student teachers is a critical period, during which the integration of theory and practice is expected to take place under the guidance of university supervisors and the school-site support of collaborating teachers. However, the effect of the conventional structure of the teaching practicum has been a concern amongst teacher educators (e.g. Stones, 1987; Calderhead, 1987; Alexander, Muir, & Chant, 1992). Guidance is mostly limited to occasional supervisory observation and post-lesson discussion. This limitation is of concern and raises the following challenging questions for both teachers and students:

- How do student teachers synthesise learning experiences from course work and field experience?

- What support do student teachers need in the process of professional learning?

- How do student teachers reach a stage that the challenges in teaching can be met with a sense of self-efficacy?

- How do student teachers strengthen themselves to move beyond survival and become educators?

One must question whether traditional classroom supervisory visits, which focus on evaluative observation, can address these questions adequately. The process of learning to teach during the teaching practicum can be neglected when evaluation must rely on infrequent observations of student teachers. Teaching is more complicated than a proficient demonstration of desirable

teaching skills, and learning to teach requires a process of experimentation and learning from mistakes rather than a narrow focus on an occasional good 'show' to the observers. Further concerns include what happens in between the infrequent observations and how student teachers can continually develop themselves.

In recent years, teacher education in Hong Kong has changed direction towards that of creating partnerships with schools, by developing a mentoring force in the teaching profession that provides closer and more frequent professional supervision of student teachers. However, the collaborating teachers, although experienced and expert in classroom teaching, may feel uneasy about how to offer the professional help which will enhance student teachers' development. While school-university partnership is being explored to increase support of student teachers, it must be acknowledged that student teachers are natural partners for each other. Research literature has indicated that collaboration in the form of peer coaching is effective in breaking teacher isolation (Little, 1982) and in helping teachers to apply new skills and strategies in their classroom (Joyce, & Showers, 1988). Literature also shows that peer coaching can promote collegiality and professionalism (Brandt, 1989; Neubert, & Binko, 1992). Although this can eventually necessitate curriculum reform and changes in resource distribution, the initial challenge will be in the setting up of a dialogue about professional concerns and narrowing the gap between the worlds of universities and schools.

To ensure continuity in the process of learning to teach throughout the practicum, it is worth considering how student teachers can provide valuable mutual support to one another. This dimension of support can be regarded as a strategic resource for the teaching practicum, in addition to the support from collaborating teachers and university teachers.

Creating a Framework for Professional Learning

Teacher education must aim at preparing a new generation of teachers who can work together productively. In order for the teaching practicum to move away from a judgmental culture as a process of professional learning, a learning community should be developed amongst university supervisors, collaborating teachers, and student teachers as peers for one another. A sharing culture is needed to break the isolation of teaching, and to open the classroom doors for joint enquiry. Through shared reflections it is possible to identify problems together as learning partners. Instead of asking for or providing judgmental feedback on the observed teacher's performance, members of the learning community focus on a different question:

What do we learn together about effective teaching?

This new culture and professional discourse can be summarised by utilising the acronym 'POND'.

- **P**roblem-based in the learning process.

- **O**pen sharing, the ground rule being mutual support.

- **N**on-judgemental approach to observation.

- **D**irection-oriented activities, recognising the differing rates of individual development.

The 'POND' culture was developed through the design of the practicum assignments which required the student teachers to engage in problem-based learning. It necessitated a commitment to mutual support. Workshops were conducted before the practicum to develop student teachers' observation and rapport-building skills. Referring to a framework for a direction-oriented process of professional learning, they practised engaging in open sharing to develop a non-judgemental approach to professional discourse.

The Significance of Problems in Professional Learning

The commitment to tackle problems should begin in student teachers' practicum, as the initial stage of professional learning. Confronting problems is a constructive part of professional development. Students should therefore be prepared to enter the practicum with open attitudes, and learn to:

- be ready to accept the complexity of teaching;

- be open to learn from both successful and less successful experiences;

- be ready to address problems, and accept them as essential to learning;

- be ready to explore puzzles when efforts are not congruent with outcomes;

- be open to accept peers, collaborating teachers and university supervisors as learning resources;

- be open to broaden the experience beyond the classroom (e.g. understand the school system and school culture);

- consider agendas for professional development and individually identify priorities.

Teaching and learning are demanding not just intellectually, but also affectively. Often, it seems difficult to accept the challenges of unexpected outcomes, especially the negative ones, when one has made considerable effort to act rationally with careful planning. Rewards may not come readily, and learning to cope with puzzles is part of the process of professional learning.

Rapport Building as a Basis for Open and Non-Judgemental Learning

As introduced in the 'POND' framework, open sharing for non-judgemental professional discourse is the essence of the learning culture advocated in this project. The findings from the first cycle demonstrated that rapport-building is a primary challenge in peer coaching.

The findings from the first cycle suggest that peer rapport can improve due to personal attitudes, the language used in discussion, the availability of time for peer coaching, and a joint focus on critical events. Peer rapport is present when both parties are responsive to one another, with each one hearing what the other person is trying to say, and both feeling comfortable when pursuing difficult questions together. Analysis of data from different dyads suggests that the language of discussion is a crucial factor affecting the extent to which peer coaching becomes a viable resource for learning. It requires skills to practise appropriate use of language leading to mutual understanding and a joint focus on problems in teaching and learning. Without this capacity, peer coaching can be confrontational and judgemental, and the intended learning goals cannot be achieved, even with clearly-set agreed procedures.

Guided by this understanding, workshops were designed for inclusion in the revised manual (Kwo, 1999, pp.16-25) to help student teachers develop an understanding of the peer coaching role, and a sensitive use of language during the process. Episodes of audio-recorded data were presented to student teachers to highlight multiple dimensions of effective communication, namely the tone of voice, effective conversation openings, presentation of observation notes, developing understanding, addressing problems, and closing the peer conference. Through review of audio-data, role-play and class discussion, student teachers explored ways to engage in communication for enhancement of mutual understanding and pursuit of problem-solving strategies.

The workshops concluded with an attempt to set realistic expectations for peer coaching. Possible mismatching of peers as partners in this learning process, because of personality differences, was a factor to be considered. Such differences have the potential to cause initial painful adjustments, and so differences were viewed positively giving emphasis to the potential for enriching and broadening each other's views. Critical incidents, such as breakdowns in communication, were challenging. Difficulties may have been due in part to stress in the process of trying out new ideas. An expression of frustration may be mistakenly interpreted as criticism, but is really an expression of confusion, and an indication that the speaker is in need of support. The workshops can help operationalise peer coaching, but should not restrict student teachers from exploring creative ways to overcome difficult moments and enforce mutual support. Their commitment to the developing rapport in the joint inquiry is much more significant than what documentary guidelines can induce.

Professional Learning as a Direction-Oriented Process

With various modules of course work on campus, student teachers have been exposed to the skills and techniques of teaching. However, in the reality of the classroom, they may find themselves facing multiple demands with little ability to apply theories. Questions may be raised about the relationship between theory and practice and the relevance of course work to practicum work. Student teachers should be provided with a structure for the practicum experience from which they can learn to bring together theory and practice, and to create a positive environment for professional learning.

Professional learning is a continual process with goals being re-defined, and student teachers being encouraged to question their practice and consider theoretical concerns. In this project, they were helped to build a vision for this direction-oriented process with a suggested framework *Moving Targets in Professional Learning* (Kwo, 1999, pp. 32-34). This was derived from a synthesis of models of learning to teach and professional development (Fuller, 1969; Berliner, 1988; and Kagan, 1992) and identified signs of students teachers' progress in practicum (Kwo, 1994, 1996;). The framework was presented in the form of clusters of questions which reiterated pedagogical concerns at various stages of development in professional learning. Such a structure was built to facilitate peer discussion of experiences, and at the same time encourage individuals to theorise about teaching in the light of practical experience. In contrast with an external set of criteria for assessing teaching performance, this framework was intended to help problem-based professional learning, and enhance an open and non-judgmental culture where student teachers collaboratively could raise further questions aiming at professional development. In essence, the framework underpins the assertion of the POND culture for steering the progress of professional learning.
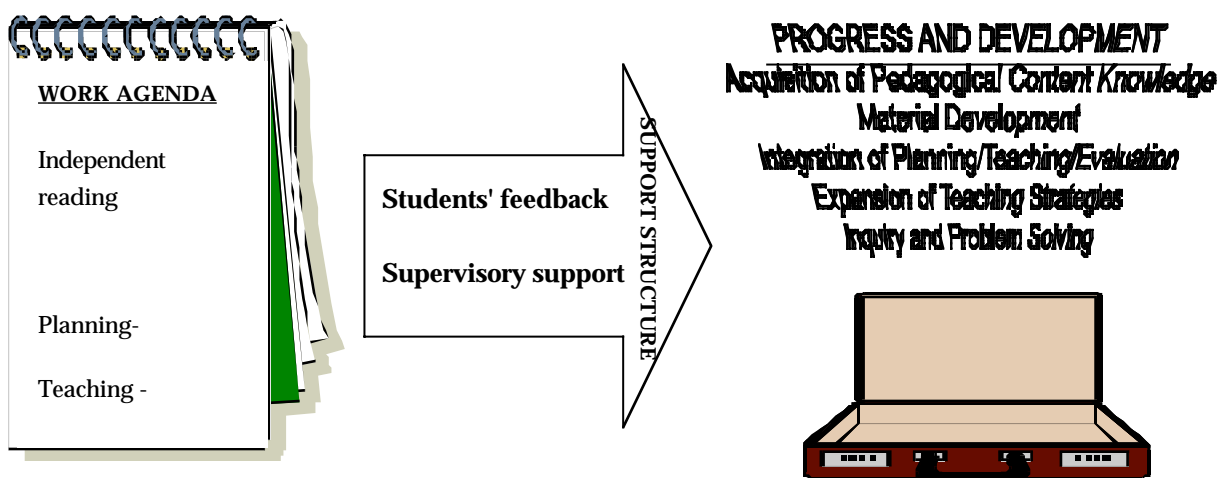
Though the questions were arranged sequentially and progressively, student teachers were free to decide how they intended to shape learning by revisiting some areas for as long as they wished, or missing some to focus on new ones. The teacher involved in the dynamics of professional learning could identify primarily the questions upon which to focus. In parallel, the peer coach (and where applicable, the collaborating teacher) could help to clarify the focus for various stages of the student teacher's professional learning. With practice, student teachers could become more involved in asking questions to guide continual development beyond the practicum.

Setting up the Work Agenda and the Support Structure for the Practicum

It is important for student teachers to develop a sense of progress by bringing together course work and practicum experience. In order to enhance the quality of learning, they need to organise the work agenda and develop a support structure for themselves. The suggested structure is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Illustration to demonstrate the challenges and rewards in professional learning

Challenges and Rewards in
Professional Learning

WORK AGENDA

Independent reading

Planning-

Teaching -

Students' feedback

Supervisory support

SUPPORT STRUCTURE

PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT
Acquisition of Pedagogical Content *Knowledge*
Material Development
Integration of Planning/Teaching/Evaluation
Expansion of Teaching Strategies
Inquiry and Problem Solving

Work Agenda

A lighter teaching load is allocated during the practicum to allow sufficient time for adequate preparation before the class. It is important that every lesson is planned with consideration of lesson objectives, purposes and links between activities, estimation of time distribution, as well as knowledge of learners from evaluation of former lessons. A well-planned lesson not only brings more spontaneity in teachers' interactions with students in classroom teaching, but also evaluates whether and how the objectives have been fulfilled. Cycles of planning-teaching-evaluation are processes of clarifying understanding of the material, and integrating and applying linguistic and pedagogical knowledge to facilitate learning. To enhance theory-practice integration, the curriculum files and background reading is an essential part of the work agenda. Time-management is always a critical challenge for a teacher, with consideration being given to the teaching schedule, various commitments to the school, and the assignment of classroom action research.

Support Structure

Students' responses provide a most valuable source for teaching improvement. Student teachers are encouraged to observe their achievements and problems, progress or lack of progress. They can also endeavour to solicit feedback formally or informally on different occasions during the practicum, and develop an understanding of their needs for further planning.

Support is available from university practicum supervisors, and in some cases, when student teachers have developed a trusting rapport with them, collaborating or mentoring teachers. Student teachers are encouraged, also, to seek such support for their action research by initiating issues of concern which emerge from their practice.

Professional sharing between peers whose practicum is taking place in different schools is a valuable strategy for broadening their thinking, and so they are encouraged to take advantage of the electronic and phone network to activate their problem-solving skills. The peer partner placed in the same school is the immediate support, but they have to learn to make peer coaching function as effective support.

Integrating Peer Support into Problem-Based Learning Cycles

During the practicum, student teachers can practice two kinds of peer support - informal and formal. Informal peer coaching can occur when chatting over a cup of tea, discussing problems that have arisen, or exchanging ideas about the next day's lesson plans; asking for friendly advice; casually going into the peer partner's classroom. This can develop into further talk over more cups of tea, or whatever is conducive to an atmosphere of friendly discussion and sharing. Formal peer-coaching requires a similar kind of peer rapport. However, the discussions and observation cycles of the action research project are formally built into the practicum schedule.

Over the two-year period of this project, experiences of two cohorts of student teachers have been organised and analysed in two action learning cycles within the course of teaching methods for English major students in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme of the University of Hong Kong. In the first cycle, data from the first cohort of student teachers suggested that peer support did not become part of the practice for all student teachers. Despite its powerful impact on those dyads who used it as a helpful device for professional learning, some were more accustomed to working in isolation, and did not seem to have developed their peer support as easily. As a result of the analysis, the revised manual for the second cohort of student teachers was formally organised for peer coaching to take place over the 6-week cycles. This schedule did not preclude student teachers from adhering to their individual plans that suited their practicum timetables, but nevertheless helped to operationalise the integration of peer support into problem-based learning.

The revised procedural manual on peer coaching was itself, therefore, a product of active evaluation of earlier strategies in breaking student teachers' isolation and promoting a collaborative mode for professional learning. The frame of learning cycles with peer support is shown in Figure 2 below. The second cohort of student teachers had specific guidelines to produce a set of data for reflection, on the basis of which peer support as a resource for enhancing the quality of professional learning could be further evaluated.

Rewards of Empowerment from Professional Rapport

Data in the first cycle of action learning revealed that the primary hurdle for activating peer support was located in a lack of professional rapport between student teachers. Being responsible for teaching different classes, they were not required to work together, and sharing of successes or failures seemed to have taken place only amongst those who were especially friendly with one another. In the second cycle, workshops on rapport building were conducted before the practicum.

Collegial rapport is present when co-workers are responsive to one another, and when each one sees what the other person is trying to say without fear that the words may be misunderstood or cause discomfort. Considering that such rapport was not naturally present for all student teacher

dyads in different schools during the practicum, the preparatory workshops aimed to sensitise their awareness to the tone of voice and the structure of peer conferencing sessions towards the development of rapport. To communicate effectively, student teachers were helped to be focused and non-judgemental in their attitude. In addition, they had to consider the situational constraints in order to set realistic expectations of peer support.

Figure 2: Illustration of cycles of action

Cycles	Action	Data for Reflection*
Week 1	Observe emerging problems	List problems from which to select some for learning cycle

Week 2	1. Pre-observation Discussion - 30 min.	Audio tape recording
Peer A:		
Cycle 1	2. Peer A finalises lesson plan (and handouts if enough time available)	Final lesson plan
	3. Observation by Peer B	Observation notes
	4. Observation Data Analysis by Peer B	Questions to bring up
	5. Post-observation Discussion - 30 min.	Audio tape recording + Personal reflections

Week 3	1. Pre-observation Discussion - 30 min.	Audio tape recording
Peer B:		
Cycle 1	2. Peer B finalises lesson plan (and handouts if enough time available)	Final lesson plan
Peer A:	3. Observation by Peer A	Observation notes
Try out	4. Observation Data Analysis by Peer A	Questions to bring up
Strategies	5. Post-observation Discussion - 30 min.	Audio tape recording + Personal reflections

Cycle in weeks 2 and 3 repeated in weeks 4 and 5

Week 6	1. Pre-observation Discussion - 30 min.	Audio tape recording
Peer A:		
Cycle 3	2. Peer A finalises lesson plan (and handouts if enough time available)	Final lesson plan
Peer B:	3. Observation by Peer B	Observation notes
Try out	4. Observation Data Analysis by Peer B	Questions to bring up
Strategies	5. Post-observation Discussion - 30 min.	Audio tape recording + Personal reflections

Data from student teachers' evaluation of peer support showed a diversity of experiences. With a general acceptance that 'two minds are better than one' for the proliferation of ideas, they acknowledged that richer resources were available for problem-solving than would be identified merely from individual reflections. There were also reports of heightened self-awareness and engagement in continual challenges. The more dynamic pairs revealed freedom to explore, relinquishing previously held beliefs in the light of their learning. This in turn led to a readiness to take risks, and a shared commitment to problem-solving, facilitating the development of a passion for teaching and learning. The following quotation illustrates the rewards of empowerment stemming from strong professional rapport.

> My peer partner saw things from a different point of view. She could point out my blind spots, and her comments were insightful ... We frequently observed each other's teaching and held post-lesson conferences. If we were too busy to observe each other, due to clash of time-table or urgent marking tasks, we invited each other to comment on the lesson plan. I dare say that each of my lessons involved contributions from my peer partner, and the implementation of the lessons was often the fruitful outcome of our peer collaboration.

A Glimpse of the POND Framework

As mentioned earlier, the POND framework for this project can be summarised as a process of learning that is *problem-based*, requiring *open sharing* based on mutual support, with discourse that is *non-judgementa*l and *direction oriented*.

The POND framework was implemented through the design of practicum tasks introduced in the revised manual. The assignment of action research was not new, as it had been given to previous cohorts of student teachers and provided rich data to extend understanding of professional learning (Kwo, 1994; 1996; 1998). While the project found evidence that the POND framework was useful to enforce professional learning for all student teachers, the variation in the extent to which individuals benefited from the practicum was apparent, as shown in their assignments and reflective journals.

The problem-based professional learning built into the action research assignment demanded that student teachers be alert to problems. In groping through uncertainty to reach for direction-oriented learning, peers' support amongst those who were willing to engage in open and non-judgmental sharing was found to be significant. High achievers, as indicated in the assignments, demonstrated acute awareness of new problems in their learning cycles with enriched understanding of reasons for the perceived problems. Their conceptual understanding about learning to teach developed through planning and evaluation of classroom practice during which appropriate references were made to course notes and other reading resources. Their insights were data-grounded, showing a development of conceptual understanding. Reports of the cycles of action and reflection showed student teachers' thinking to be progressively less descriptive and more critical, with improved sense of self-efficacy. Their experience of professional learning, at this initial stage, provided a basis for their future development.

Many student teachers, however, felt uncertain about the action research process, especially those who were not used to grappling with unknown demands. It does not mean that they cannot benefit from further available support. Student teachers' reflective journals vividly described their learning experiences, the tensions, and their appreciation of the support from their collaborating tutors and their peer partners. This all appeared to have brought 'some fresh air' to the judgmental cultural tradition where assessment was the focus and found, by many, to be threatening. Their learning experiences can be reflected from some well-articulated thoughts:

I believe that only teachers who are willing to be learners all the time can teach students to become learners. One can get into a self-complacent routine, and it takes an outsider to suggest other approaches to snap one out of that routine.

Seeing how my peer partner worked with little or no success brought me empathy. I was encouraged that we should keep trying with different means but never give up.

The articulation and collegial sharing during the practicum has helped me see and appreciate many facets of my peer partner and mentors. Perhaps the most valuable thing I learned is the habit of reflection, which actually enables me to see my own growth.

I found peer coaching most challenging, as I did not like it. In retrospect, I am glad to have gone through it and gained a lot from both the positive and negative aspects of the experience. I hope this new idea can continue to grow in the teaching profession.

Apart from peer help, some student teachers also benefited from the support of collaborating tutors in the school. A portrait of a nurturing collaborating tutor was described as:

The first support I received from her was that she assured me that she was available to respond to my questions in any free periods of hers. She was very generous in sharing teaching ideas with me and providing me with reference materials and useful website addresses, but she gave me all the freedom to explore. She also warned me about students' backgrounds so that I could take precautions to handle critical incidents. In observing my lessons, she was sensitive to notice my progress, which strengthened my confidence. When I was embarrassed with my mistakes, she assured me that, as long as I could identify the problems, I would be able to improve myself, and that is what practicum is all about. I was encouraged and looked forward to teaching improvement rather than allowing myself to be trapped in fear of criticisms.

It was apparent that a positive professional rapport was developed from mutual appreciation. Support did not simply come from good intentions, but from the power of understanding of the student teacher's needs. An encouraging underlying fact was that this collaborating tutor was a graduate from the first cohort of this Action Learning Project, who had herself gone through professional learning with peer coaching. Her own experience had given her the knowledge and skills to play a nurturing role.

In the searching spirit of action learning, this paper should go beyond consideration of the POND framework and address some paradoxical challenges.

Paradoxes about Innovations

Upon reflection, paradoxical situations in the process of innovation were identified resulting in the need to address some critical challenges. The following discussion results from these insights.

Understanding the University Tradition

Paradoxically, the project's aim of activating peer support amongst student teachers was not paralleled with the researcher's cultivation of peer support with her colleagues, a situation which demands further investigation.

Firstly, the project researcher was not conscious of the challenge of confronting the university tradition of teaching, which places emphasis on academics' expert knowledge rather than their willingness to collaborate with colleagues. With the publication of the revised manual from the project work, to which the co-tutors had given some collegial comments, the researcher tacitly

assumed that there was a general acceptance of developing a POND culture. Yet, division of labour seemed to be the predominant concern, and any communication about teaching and formative evaluation of student teachers' learning was not on the agenda. In order to learn more about what student teachers experienced in the first two modules taught by the other two tutors before the teaching of the third module, the project researcher attended some of their sessions, but this was an isolated practice and was not reciprocated. The coherence between modules was assumed rather than reviewed.

Secondly, the busy timetable of all tutors almost made it an imposition to call any extra meetings. The resolution of any common problems (e.g. student teachers' general lateness to the first class in the morning) was addressed individually. Solicitation of reflective journals was in previous years an important part of the curriculum, when the project researcher developed innovations and understanding about student teachers' processes of learning to teach (Kwo, 1996; 1998). However, such journals, even though proven to serve a powerful way of engaging students and tutors in mutual communication and understanding at six stages of the course, had subtly become an unpopular part of the curriculum to tutors and students in this cohort when the writing and comments were taken as tasks in the midst of more pressing deadlines for all.

Variations in Perceptions of Learning

Curriculum decisions become even more complex when student teachers' perceptions of their learning are taken into consideration. Students' formal evaluation at the end of the course, as part of the standard mechanism, provided another source of data for reviewing the project. The positive ones were consistent with those reported in their reflective journals, and are exemplified by the following quotation:

> I have learnt a lot from the course. I became aware of my strengths and weaknesses in teaching, learnt how to seek help from others, familiarised myself with different teaching theories, developed a variety of teaching skills, and was informed of resources for my future professional development.

It is of note that students appreciated being taught by different tutors, and valued exposure to a variety of teaching approaches. They also commented that the tutors were really "serious and thorough" and had high expectations of students in a supportive environment.

However, the most revealing responses were the negative ones. They are quoted here to illustrate their strong feelings:

> Why do the Department jam all those rubbish and irrelevant talks like Peer Coaching to us. The Peer Coaching and its related lectures on Rapport and Action Research are merely fillers to the overall time-table. We come here to become an effective TEFL teachers not an Administrator! We need high Quality TEFL techniques before going out on practicum.

> Drop the nonsense Peer Coaching! More lectures on TEFL!

> Action Research should be part of the common core as an assignment for all students. It is unfair that the English major students have a heavier work load.

One must question the extent to which these remarks should be attended, even though they were from a minority of students. It is apparent that some students had major difficulties seeing the purpose of peer learning and action research, and that there were issues concerning the overall curriculum for student teachers of other major subjects. It raises questions regarding the type of learning which students see as worthwhile and the extent to which they see themselves as responsible for shaping learning within the curriculum frame.

One must recognise and value students' comments as important in guiding teaching development. However, it is also vital to ask whether the constructive function of student evaluation can, on the other hand, be twisted by some as a justification for re-enforcing a judgemental culture. The design of the evaluation form which invites students to judge the effectiveness of identified individual tutors can be divisive, and also suggests simplistically and conclusively that individual tutors are the responsible agents for learning. Instead of facilitating the co-operation of tutors in designing and improving the curriculum, and ensuring that students and tutors work closely to achieve curriculum goals, the existing evaluation mechanism can have a negative impact on the development of rapport by giving weaker students legitimate power to express their negative attitudes which do not lead to improvement. A future concern is that the revelation of some students' negative attitudes to professional learning may have come too late at the end of the programme for anything to be done about their learning experiences. It is important to consider what new members to the teaching profession are being introduced through such evaluation device, when these are the teachers who are not willing to, and cannot work with peers, yet retain such a strong negative view about professional learning.

In Pursuit of Professionalism

As the project researcher had been informed of the positive learning signs from students' class-work and their written assignments, the negative sentiments expressed by some students came as a shock which provoked critical reflection. She became more alert to newly discovered challenges seeing afresh the essential meaning of action learning that comes from mistakes as much as from rewards.

If one is prepared to learn from mistakes, one has the power to do something to improve oneself. But the scenario may be too complex to jump to a quick conclusion of where the mistakes can be located. It may suggest a need for all project researchers to benefit from a specific conference that we can help one another to identify our mistakes, and accordingly draw lessons from each case of Action Learning. Meanwhile, this project has resulted in a recognition of a diversity of students' backgrounds and their attitudes towards the demands of professional learning. While there is a concern for benchmarking on teachers' language proficiency, there has not been adequate attention on how to assess attitudes in order to recruit teacher candidates professionally oriented to benefit from the qualifying programme. It was erroneous to assume that all candidates were sufficiently motivated, when a considerable number, who were used to a passive learning environment, were unable to accept the rigour of professional learning which was critically different from their former education experiences. The question to be addressed relates to how the professional qualifying training can change attitudes to learning and teaching.

In the pursuit of professionalism in teaching, the challenge is to persist in committing students of mixed backgrounds to strive for excellence in learning. An important consideration is how a system of student evaluation does not discourage innovations for higher goals which involves learning from mistakes. Student evaluation should be conducive to collegiality and collaboration between teachers and students. If the quest for professionalism were to sustain through the test of one's commitment to learning and education, the solution would seem to lie within the paradoxes described previously. Strategies for the future must be explored from a renewed consideration of collegiality and students' learning needs.

Reinforcement of Collegial Communication

Within the tradition of teachers working in isolation, whether at university or in schools, collegial collaboration seems to be vaguely desirable, but leaves much to be learnt. From previous experience, the project researcher found it easier to make innovations in courses where she was

the only curriculum decision-maker. A new problem emerged in this project: her former insights could not be directly applied to the curriculum which had to be jointly taught with other co-tutors. Without any claim to 'own' the curriculum, and with due respect to autonomy and the preferences of colleagues to teach in ways that matched their expertise and philosophy, she needed to explore ways for successful collaboration. Questions raised from this Action Learning Project cannot be resolved without collegial discussion, especially when others have not been formal participants in the project. To remain respectful of collegial preferences and to honour their time for, and contributions to, curriculum considerations, the project researcher also had to overcome the initial barrier of being seen as one who was forcing difficult issues about professional standards and co-ordination of efforts. Without any legitimate position, she could still initiate meetings at various points of the course with all co-tutors, and insist on some critical joint decision-making. The essence of action learning does not lie in the implementation of expert knowledge from outsiders, but from joint decision making about how to teach. This awareness about the importance of the 'meeting of the minds' of colleagues may help her to develop important insights into professionalism.

Sensitivity to a Diversity of Learning Needs

Another dimension of strategies can be developed through the enhancement of professional rapport between tutors and students. While it has always been the project researcher's principle that positive teacher-student relationships are a primary force in a learning community, and should be fostered during professional training, it was not until the end of the course that she became aware of the hostility and negative sentiments from some students. In part these were explicitly directed towards the innovations she was introducing through this project. She reflected on her earlier strategies of identifying and discussing with a random sample of students before the teaching of the module in order to finalise the schedule, and found such communication most informative for the improvement of her understanding of students' learning needs. However, assuming that all student teachers were motivated to make the most of their modules, she was unaware of the diversity of students' incentives in this student intake. The formal student evaluation raised her alertness to the lack of adequate attention to students' emotions and timely support to weaker students who were not willing to seek help. Instead of being responsive to the advocacy of open and non-judgemental sharing, such students responded to difficulties by becoming secretive and judgemental. One strategy which the project researcher might adopt is to provide an anonymous channel to seek students' feedback at different points of the course. In this way, issues can be raised for colleagues and students to address openly so that the curriculum can meet a diversity of learning needs in reaching professional standards. Inquiries into the image of a professional teacher can be facilitated by raising questions about what it may be like to be teachers with little sense of self-efficacy. Their experience in professional learning is crucial in their attitude and approach to problem-solving. Building collegiality and teamwork between teacher educators and student teachers is a critical strategy for future implementation.

Conclusion: The Significance of Promoting Peer Support in Higher Education

This Action Learning Project has addressed issues of cost-effectiveness in education in the context of limited staff time. It has highlighted the nature of teaching that involves relationships, which are often assumed rather than examined. Although the innovation discussed has taken place within the context of teacher education, the insights drawn from the experience on the nature of peer learning are worth considering by professional educators across other disciplines. This is illustrated in an e-mail message sent by a training colleague in Business Studies who, after having incidentally observed the project researcher's training of peer coaching, developed

three approaches to team teaching through which students reported learning about working together:

> As teachers, we expect to be involved in teaching our own students, and occasionally we teach our colleagues in a formal setting such as a conference. However, we forget, or don't acknowledge, the informal ways in which good ideas get disseminated. This is how your idea found its way, quite by chance, into the business studies classroom and made a positive impact on students you has never met. I thought that you would be pleased to know about it.

In preparing teachers as professionals, we have to see ourselves involved in a process of professional learning. Past successes do not guarantee successes in new circumstances. Action Learning demands taking every cohort of students as a new case for professional learning. With minimal communication amongst colleagues, we risk not having the opportunity to engage in strategies which will facilitate deeper learning. There are many challenges to educators, as discussed in this paper. Learning requires the ability to make sense of mistakes and move forward, but the critical question remains: how can 'mistakes' be defined from a professional perspective?

For both teachers and students, the psychological preparation for the tensions of professional learning should not be underestimated. Peer support is a commitment to professional relationships which cannot be established without due consideration of the counter-culture of the university tradition. If students have genuinely experienced benefits from peer learning in the course of their professional education, they will more likely emerge as professionals who can enjoy the freedom for continual learning with peers as resources, and contribute as new blood to a positive culture of collaboration in their future workplaces.

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