
La Trobe University—Faculty of Education

The ATEA conference theme was “Making Teaching Public – Reforms in Teacher Education”. The most persistent and predominant message to permeate the conference was the urgent need for radical change in teacher education. It was stressed many times that piecemeal gradualism involving tinkering and tampering with existing courses will not do.

Professor Bill Loudon from the University of Western Australia, who was the opening keynote speaker, made some powerful points about the kind of evidence and data we collect about our work and what this results in for the profession. He highlighted the context of teacher education where we have high staff to student ratios, minimal resources, two-thirds of the funding we had ten years ago, while in the United Kingdom for example, there is considerably more funding available for teacher education than ten years ago. We know what has to be done but have an adverse environment in which to do it.

One major point Loudon made was the thin evidence from which we operate, and he attributed this largely to the kind of research in which we as teacher educators engage. He claimed that the predominantly quantitative and often case study approach to data gathering does not, when it is all brought together, count for much. He claims we need to gather “hard” evidence, not case studies because they “don’t add up in a way that wins arguments”. We produce people who do case studies but policy is formed using a different methodology. Robust, large scale studies are needed he claims. He termed this disjunction a “methodological collision” which there is on the demand side an evidence based turn, whilst on the supply side there is a qualitative orthodoxy characterised by over-reliance on case studies. Thus Loudon sensed that as a profession we are potentially allowing data to be collected outside the profession by others who make the policy.

Some of the most radical and far-reaching change in teacher education is occurring in Scotland under the “Scottish Teachers for a New Era” project which has national funding in excess of £2.5 million and involves all of Scotland’s teacher education programs. Professor Kay Livingston is Director of the project and presented an overview of the project. She began by showing how radical, not piecemeal change is needed and quoted Henry Ford who claimed “If I asked my customers what they wanted, they would say a faster horse”. In Scotland a multi-layer approach to change is occurring so that structure, content and individual teacher educators are undergoing simultaneous change. In the first year of the four year pre-service course, student teachers are to observe learning rather than teaching. They firstly observe how they learn and then how others learn.

When teacher educators see students on field experience at this stage, it is about learning not teaching that they are concerned. This has involved some major training for supervising teachers in schools who are used to student teachers being evaluated on their teaching, not what they know about learning. In the first year, students take only two units from education, with all other study being in other Faculties eg. psychology, sociology, mathematics etc. This has major consequences for change. In terms of funding, it has to be seen as University wide funding not just teacher education funding. Also, the teaching and learning that occurs in other Faculties is under close scrutiny and is closely evaluated, hence there are impacts right across the University. Although the actual course is four years, the program of teacher training is seen as six years as it extends into the first two years of initial teaching.

- Years 1 and 2 involve development of deeper and broader conceptual knowledge and understanding – learning how to learn and how others learn.

- Years 3 and 4 involve a pedagogical focus which links coherently with the induction year (year 5).
- Year 5 and 6 are the induction years (year 5) and an extended year of mentoring (year 6).

During years 5 and 6 all beginning teachers have a 0.7 teaching load and a 0.3 release with a mentor. Students are guaranteed a position in years 5 and 6.

Assessment is also radically changed not only in teacher education but across the wider University. Teacher education students do not take kindly for example, to doing a multiple choice test in psychology when they are learning about how people learn best and should be assessed. Of course this model has huge implications for funding but the Scottish government has risen to this challenge. One wonders how far to our knees teacher education in Australia has to be brought before we, like the United Kingdom, will begin to have some money thrown at us to fix ourselves.

I intend to invite Professor Livingston to La Trobe next year and have her work with us across the Faculty as I perceive she has much to offer us. The Scottish study website is www.teachersforanewera.org.

Speakers from the United States also stressed the fact that we have an “evidence gap” in teacher education because of the major shift in the 70s and 80s to qualitative studies which leave us with evidence which does not add up to much (Yinger from Ohio University). In Ohio as a means to address this, 50 institutions have formed a research consortium and are undertaking longitudinal studies of graduates. This involves following a cohort of new teachers for three years and applying structural equation modelling / Path Model study approaches. There is also a case study component within this where novice teachers are asked to observe “what teachers do to add value”. Teachers with between 8 and 20 years of experience are also involved in this component. Politicians in Ohio support this study because it reveals teacher educators

being prepared to rigorously study their profession and to take risks in terms of the outcomes. This study is discussed on www.teacherpolicyresearch.org.

Professor Alan Tom from the University of South Carolina stressed the fact that there is not much point in our carrying out rigorous studies of mediocre programs in teacher education which do not address the needs of a new era. He claims that we need more “powerful models”. He also claims that in teacher education we have had a culture of “gradualisation” of teacher education training, whereas it is more effective to “rapidly develop knowledge of teacher education students, thus the program is transformational, not gradual”. Tom states that we need “compressed, intense, demanding programs as longer programs risk wasting resources”. He also advocates “vertical staffing” which involves staff teaching across a variety of program areas rather than only in their specialised area. We need a more powerful program which integrates theory and practice rather than slow subject by subject development. We should aspire to transformational outcomes not poorly designed gradual programs. Tom claims that high degrees of specialisation are “the root evil of teacher education and lead to narrow professional identities and unwillingness to see the whole program”.

At La Trobe, we are at a stage of redesigning teacher education programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is clear where the world wide trend is going and that band-aiding or tinkering with courses will not do. We need to think boldly and radically about our program design and about the needs and characteristics of the students who undertake these courses now and into the future. The old ideas which worked one or two decades ago need replacing as rapidly and completely as we can do it. This poses some exciting challenges and our creativity and flexibility in addressing them is crucial.

The next conference is at Wollongong, July 3-6, 2007.

Cheers,



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