

**Schools = learning, don't they? Exploring community based field experiences in a traditional teacher education model using reader's theatre**

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**Introduction: representing knowledge and knowledge as representation**

How knowledge is represented—that is its expressive mode—as well as how it represents what is known and by whom—is a matter of continued interest among contemporary scholars. As a result, many scholars are experimenting with how knowledge might be shared in ways that make it intelligible to many audiences, particularly in ways that includes those who have constructed and considered how that knowledge advances the field.

In this short paper, we use reader's theatre as our means of sharing knowledge that has been developed over the past year as we have sought to implement an alternative practicum placement at the University of Victoria in our elementary teacher education program. Donmoyer (1998) has made the case for using this form for the representation of knowledge in scholarly settings (such as AERA) publications, although he acknowledges that its use remains limited in scholarly publications given the hegemonic norms of what it means to be 'published' and 'publishable'. Representing 'data' in such a form blurs the boundaries of fiction and truth, and we believe, offers a way of bridging the boundaries between research and participants, creating a potentially more accessible and inclusive form of text. In this way the method of representation (reader's theatre) realizes one of the goals of this paper; it provides a means to examine our own practices as both educators and researchers while illustrating the collective ways in which knowledge is both constructed and understood. We hope that this script offers you, the reader, a useful window into examining how everyday practices and cultural contexts shape the issues of teacher education reform while simultaneously considering the persistence of some educational discourses.

**The story so far: Educational change 'unplugged'**

**Setting:** Dr. Kathy Sanford's office, University of Victoria. The successful WestCAST authors are all sitting in at a round table enjoying a coffee. It is 10:30 am.

**Catherine:** Well, WestCAST is only a month away, and we need to give some thought to how we'll share our story about the alternative practicum. We've set it up as a panel discussion, so it's me, Darlene, Kathy, Luanne, and our students Alexis and Ara. The title is "*Schools = learning, don't they? Exploring community based field experiences in a traditional teacher education model*". The description was written to emphasize the ways in which our alternative practicum would serve to disrupt industrial age assumptions about teaching among our students, and in particular emphasize the importance of learning more about social and cultural contexts for learners in schools. So that's the starting frame we have. The question is, who's to do what?

**Darlene:** I love the title. It suggests that education and learning happen beyond the classroom walls; in places many can never quite fathom; that there are teachable sites and teachable moments. I tire of being told that education only happens in schools or is equated with 'schooling'. Often members of faculties of Education look at me and I know what they're thinking: you are an adult educator. You don't belong in this place, why are you here? This place is about schools. In fact when we were discussing changing our programs once to attract new students my Chair made it clear that we should only be focusing on "education -- by which he meant schools. My comment was "Exactly, and education and learning happen at school, at home, in non-governmental and community organizations and higher education institutions in museums and art galleries so what a broad world we have to reach out to". As if schools and teachers in schools only enabled learning. It is unbelievable frankly. So for me, it is one of the things that has made working on this project so great... we're disrupting normative assumptions but I also feel, for the first time, that my 'alternative' ideas of education and learning have a place.

**Kathy:** It's funny that you say that; I was just thinking that while the presentation description Catherine just gave seems to argue for disrupting our students' perspectives, there are a lot of other perspectives that need disrupting too. Like right here in this faculty. The resistance we got when this came up at our teacher education program meeting... now that should be part of our presentation too.

**Catherine:** It was a bit scary for a while, wasn't it? I wasn't sure we were going to be able to do this, and I remember the feeling I had. It was like a rock dropping to the pit of my stomach. Why does it seem that everyone resists any change to existing practices? I mean, aren't we a research based institution? There is lots of scholarship to support what we are trying to do here, and we put all of that to work in designing our initial research project as well as in framing how we'd do this with our students. And the university actually funded some of this work... largely because of its fit with its own goals and the strategic plan.

**Luanne:** Yup, right in the March 2007 Vision Document: "As members of a diverse and dynamic learning community we challenge one another to become thoughtful, engaged citizens and leaders, prepared to contribute to the betterment of a rapidly changing global society". AND faculty and staff need to employ "our core strengths to benefit our external communities – locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally – and promoting civic engagement and global citizenship". That's what this project is about, and we needed people to get on board... the faculty and the students too. The stories I could tell... some students had lots of problems. And after we made a real effort to let students know what we would be doing, we had all of those meetings, remember?

**Kathy:** Yes... I don't know what it is, but before you can even get your story out there, someone starts talking about what they DON'T like, and how it is going to cause all this disruption in the program, and then suddenly, there is panic, of students and instructors! Stories are passed around, ones that aren't even close to true, and instead of trying to sort it out by coming to us and saying "OK, what's going on here?" instead, they just let the rumor mill work its ugly way through the group until it reaches the ridiculous! We made

a good effort to talk to students: we had a couple of meetings, we answered all of their questions, and still there were problems. And then I had conversations with instructors that went something like this:

**Setting: Faculty Meeting**

**Faculty Member One:** I prepare my students to teach in school classrooms; the assignments I give to them are intended to get them ready for their practicum.

**Kathy:** We have found that students are not ready to take on whole-class teaching assignments in their first year; the school teachers and administrators tell us that they are not ready. In a three week period, they don't really have time to get to know the students in a way that would help them to support their learning. They are still at the stage of focusing on themselves, worried about controlling a large group, rather than being able to focus on the needs of individual and groups of students.

**Faculty member Two:** Students come into our program wanting to be prepared to teach in schools, they aren't interested in working anywhere else.

**Kathy:** It is our job to prepare them for successful careers, not just for local school districts or for particular educational settings. They cannot predict where they might find a job, and we have a responsibility to enable them to be successful beginning teachers in a wide range of settings. That might mean working with disadvantaged populations, with children with disabilities, with individual students, with people of different ages, cultures, value systems, abilities. Understanding how to address diversity is the greatest problem, the greatest fear of our students. We need to scaffold them to be able to feel confident with people of a wide range of backgrounds, interests, abilities, needs, desires...

**Faculty Member Three:** Students need to learn how to use the curriculum documents, how to make lesson plans, how to create unit plans. It is our job to prepare them for planning, management, assessment. That is what schools expect.

**Kathy:** And we have given them these messages for years, but I think we need to reconceive of the use of lesson plans and curriculum guides. If our student teachers think that lesson plans are recipes to be followed directly, or that curriculum guides are to be addressed in a linear, uniform way, we are giving them inappropriate direction. They need to see lesson plans as guides, as multiple pathways to achievement of learning. Rather than being prescriptive, plans should be guidelines. Rather than being seen as uniform plans that address all students' needs, they need to include a variety of ideas, strategies, approaches, so that the teachers can consider their students as individuals, as well as members of learning communities.

**Faculty Member Four:** I have always supervised student teachers when they are on practicum, and I don't want to go to alternative sites. Students won't be prepared to teach effectively if they aren't in schools and supported by experienced mentors.

**LUANNE:** I've had lots of conversations with concerned students that went something like this:

**Setting: Meeting between the Field Experience manager and a student**

**Luanne:** So I see that you have made this appointment to discuss our new initiative to do Alternative/Community based practicum.

**Student:** I can't believe that this program is going to expect us to do volunteer work instead of a three week practicum. If we wanted to go and work in a senior's home, we can do that on our own time.

**Luanne:** That is not the intent. As you are very aware, we have a great teacher education program. We wouldn't sabotage our own program—we're trying to be better.

**Student:** Well I only applied to this program because I wanted to have three practicum experiences. I want to be a teacher in a school, not a volunteer in a recreation center.

**Luanne:** The alternative/community practicum is an attempt to have you understand the communities and families in which you want to teach. Learning and teaching can happen in many different places, not just in the four walls of a classroom.

**Student:** But all my life I have known that I wanted to teach. I would love to do my practicum with my old grade 2 teacher at Hazeldean School (a school bordering on the University). All I want to do is stay in my neighbourhood and be a teacher.

**Luanne:** Have you ever been in a community school? Do you have any interest in children with autism or other special needs? Do you know why some schools have breakfast and lunch programs while others don't?

**Student:** What does all of that have to do with being a good teacher?

**Luanne:** Education is changing and is in a different place than it was when you last attended. Many children, even in our city, are living below the poverty line and are coming to school as a safe haven. Others are coming to school with family pressures to be doctors and lawyers. Some are having issues with body image and confidence while others are feeling that they are being bullied and want to escape school.

**Student:** But if we are just volunteering, why do we have to pay for this course? Who gets this money? Is the university just getting rich off us?

**Luanne:** As with all of our practicum, whether in a traditional school setting or in

an alternative setting, a supervisor will be hired by the University to supervise your practicum.

**Student:** If I had known that one of our practicums was going to be taken away, I think I would have got my degree and then done the after degree program where there are only two practicums. At least then I would come out with two degrees.

**Luanne:** Change is very difficult and is not something that we adjust easily to. That doesn't mean we try to avoid it. Our program needs to adjust with the changing demographics of today's classrooms.

**Alexis:** OK, I understand from your examples that you were trying to bring about change that will help us. But you could have handled it better. I mean, what were we to think? Some of us have anticipated this practicum for much of our adult lives. Some of us have always wanted to be teachers, and we know the program here, we know what to expect... classes, lesson plans, and practica, the most important part! And then you tell us we're not going into a school? That's not fair, we needed more time and an opportunity to contribute to this decision BEFORE it was made. Because a lot of us have commitments to education beyond the school walls, and we weren't really given a chance to voice this before this all got started.

**Darlene:** That's a good point, Alexis. But there are a lot of us who work with people in Canada and other parts of the world who understand education and learning as something quite different – as ways to transform lives, communities, and society. They/we believe that education is about challenging inequity, injustice and oppression, strengthening agency and gaining power and voice against the 'market' utopia, re-shaping democracy, stimulating creativity and debate and helping people to make meaning of their own experiences through an expansion of consciousness that is more than just cognitive.

**Catherine:** Really, what we are trying to do is increase the ability of our pre-service teachers to engage in many types of learning, and to see that learning happens in many diverse locations, not just classrooms. Learning happens at home, in the playground, with friends, with parents, not just with teachers in school. If we can create situations where they think differently about learning before their expectations are reinforced in schools – places that they are very familiar with – and get them to experience places they are not as familiar with, perhaps we can get them to develop broader, richer understandings of education. We want them to appreciate the many literacies that are necessary for getting on in this world, and to acknowledge the social and cultural conditions that are making the job of teaching so much more complex than is represented in our current discourses about education and education for pre service teachers. Our language, our modeling as instructors, our traditions in teacher education programs —like the primacy of the school based practicum --- our unproblematized assumptions about the role of teachers in schools as transmitters of knowledge... these all really need to be shaken up if we are really going to bring about reforms that will make a difference for our students and the children they'll work with. We also want our pre-service teachers to appreciate that there are many different ways to learn, self-paced and self-directed learning, distributed learning, social engagement and individual problem-solving....

**Darlene:** We should perhaps introduce more adult education and transformative learning theories and practices into the curriculum. Transformation has to be accomplished by those who dream about the re-invention of society, the recreation or reconstruction of society – these are the critical adult educators. Then, those whose political dream is to reinvent society have to fill up the space of the schools, the institutional space in order to unveil the reality which is being hidden by the dominant ideology, the dominant curriculum.

**Ara:** So where did this model for an alternative practicum come from?

**Darlene:** For me, it came from a practicum I taught in women's studies at the University of Toronto. Perhaps the parallel is that the women who joined that class believed in the beginning that they would only learn about women's issues if they worked in women's or feminist organizations. In fact, the more we talked about it, the more they began to see that the best way to understand gender issues in society and the organizational world was to do a practicum in a setting such as a health care centres where the 'gendered hierarchy' was ingrained or in institutions that worked with the 'homeless' to see how they responded, or not, to male/female homelessness. The stories they came back with, were far richer than they ever suspected and the learning could not have been better.

**Kathy:** So we took that idea and said, how would that work best here given the ways in which we offer student practica?

**Luanne:** Yeah, there were some logistical limitations. Like, in a regular school based practicum, we don't really prescribe the number of hours, because of what we know about how schools typically operate. And this wouldn't necessarily be the case for a community group or organization that might operate on limited hours, or only offer programming that would be suitable for our students at particular times of year. So we had to consider all of these details as we set up when the practicum could take place, and how we would meet the requirements of the College of Teachers ... and the University's needs too.

**Kathy:** The logistics were really important, but I was also concerned with considering how we could be sure to give our students experiences that would allow them to see the ways in which their upbringing... their privileged, white, middle class background... shapes the way in which they understand education in classrooms. I mean for a lot of them, they just don't see the barriers that many kids experience, because these experiences aren't compatible with the great Canadian myth that education is the grand equalizer for all. There are gay and lesbian kids who are being bullied, and schools just don't work for them. There are at-risk adolescents who really don't fit into the mainstream and get their education in alternative settings. There are also indigenous families who are really disadvantaged by the assumptions that schools make about how they should fit into the mainstream, and whose experiences tell them schools aren't safe places and so they stay away.

This was a big concern to me; we need our students to see that not all students enjoy the privilege afforded to them as members of mainstream culture who have benefited from particular understandings of what education is.

**Catherine:** So we thought... what are the kinds of places that might help students see more about how families some of this social and cultural context? Places like... the native friendship centre. There are lots of really great support programs going on for kids and their families at the Native Friendship Centre in the Gorge near where I live. They have a community kitchen, a parent and toddler program, and there are support services for adults who are really struggling with addictions, abuse and neglect.

**Darlene:** I suggested Mosaic the City. This is a non-profit organization that uses the collective creation of mosaics – in community and in schools – as a mobilizing, learning and community development tool. Their aim is community-unity through art and dialogue. It is not about education, but rather learning to work together and create change. The mosaic is the catalyst and what gets people out of their homes or classrooms. A number of schools throughout Victoria have these mosaics on their walls.

**Alexis:** And in our seminar class, we have opportunities to experience alternative learning sites. I was just at the Burnside Community Centre. I was able to see educational programs for schools and for the general public. There are adult education programs, pre-school programs, as well as K-12 programs, programs for girls, programs for boys, early literacy programs, yoga; it shows so many types of learning. I came to realize how much I can learn about teaching from being part of these types of programs. I really started thinking about sustainability and environmental issues, as well as how important they are to my future teaching.

**Ara:** And when I was at the Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, I saw how informal learning settings encourage exploration and discovery amongst both children and adults. Its focus on young children and their families, on hands-on experiences... I don't think I appreciated how important this is to my teaching until I visited the site.

**Luanne:** We wanted our students to experience the richness that these types of places offer. And though we knew there were lots of sites, as “teacher” educators we weren't really familiar with them as we were with schools. So, we hired a grad student with the grant we got from the University for developing this project, and asked her to canvas all of the community organizations we could find that would fit our goals of offering an experience to our students that would have them problematize their conceptions of education.

**Darlene:** But in designing this alternative practicum, we also wanted to emphasize the notion of ‘reciprocity’, that is, there could be great benefits to having a student placed with you for three weeks: Community organizations are often stretched and they ‘need’ people to help them with certain kinds of things. The benefits needed to flow in both directions, just as community and participatory based research models emphasize. So part of the script our grad student used when canvassing these community based organizations

said, if you participate with us, we will give back in terms of sending someone fresh with ideas, energy, time and skills.

**Catherine:** So—the process wasn't perfect, but we're really excited about what we've actually developed and the support we're getting from all sorts of people, including our practicum supervisors, as well as the teachers and administrators who have heard about what we are proposing. We're bringing together a lot of stuff we've known for a long while: we've drawn on our experiences, research, readings, and our conversations with educators—because we know that the classroom can be an overwhelming place to begin learning about teaching, and we want our pre-service teachers to focus on more than managing and controlling. We know it can be very difficult to learn about the needs of a child with FASD, or autism, for example, if they are try to learn in a classroom filled with children – all needing some kind of special attention. Where do they begin? And how can we support them and their learning?

**Kathy:** One principal we work with said this was just what pre-service teachers' need to experience, and what they are lacking when they come into schools today. They struggle to connect with students from diverse backgrounds; they don't understand their needs or their interests, which are not the same as their own at all. This principal, who has supported our pre-service teachers for years, wants to see them come into schools with more experience working with different populations, connecting with students who are very different from them.

**Luanne:** We also needed to engage our university supervisors in different conversations, so they were ready to supervise not only in schools, but also in different learning environments – community centres, adult learning centres, classes for students with severe behavioural issues... They have been very enthusiastic about supervising pre-service teachers in different kinds of learning environments.

**Darlene:** And this is really just the beginning. In Leadership Studies we focus on the notion of leadership and the role of the leader in advocating for and on behalf of a more just, equitable and inclusive society. We explore community, international, institutional and school leadership. Our aim is for practicing educators to deepen their understanding of the interactions between schools, community and society, and we see this as another route through which mentor teachers might come to better understand how they too can support our pre service teachers who will be engaging in community based experiences.

**Catherine:** Yes, and we're also developing the theme of teacher leadership in our undergraduate teacher offerings; I've proposed a new undergraduate course that builds on the opportunities we've provided ours students in the alternative practicum, and develops the idea that teachers are leaders who also lead in developing social responsibility. This course proposes service learning and personal inquiries as methods for engaging in civic and social learning.

**Kathy:** We need to integrate these understandings across our program, and this means looking for ways of supporting faculty who are involved in these program changes, as

well as providing new resources that we can use to link theory to practice for our pre service teachers. For example, we've recently adopted *Engaging Minds* as a text for our practicum advisors and supervisors to use. It draws on complexity theory to explore issues of learning, teaching, and knowing. It uses examples of learning in alternative environments, and makes connections to theories from different disciplines. We are trying to stimulate greater intellectual engagement relating to learning to teach, and learning to learn.

**Alexis:** And we hope that what we've added to this conversation... and involving students in your planning is going to be a primary focus of your work too. Darlene talked about the principles of participatory research. We're participants in this program with you, and when we are involved in helping you think through these ideas, you can avoid mistakes and problems.

**Ara:** And it respects us as adult learners AND knowers... something that I know all of you repeat all the time in your own writings and research! So make sure to use it with us too!

#### References

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