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KEEPING ABREAST OF CONTINUOUS CHANGE AND CONTRADICTORY DISCOURSES

Abstract

In the light of new developments for the teaching profession, teacher education requires constant adjustments. In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility and varies across the country, and with national specialists associations also dictating guidelines, we have to satisfy competing expectations. This presents a number of challenges.

The Ministry of Education of Ontario advocates ‘success for all learners’ with the overall functions of education aiming at supporting individuals, society and cultures, all in a tight weave with newcomer communities involved in schools. This agenda is dictated by our immigration culture and the need to be inclusive of diverse learners. There is also a national think-tank deciding on future directions for the country and they recently recommended a move from an emphasis on inter-personal intelligence, i.e. getting along in groups, to placing more emphasis on intra-personal intelligence with the objective of having all persons develop their own independent strengths. After a look at contextual issues we present a number of aspects that surfaced in a teacher education course. We account for the different agendas in our suggestions for improved outcomes.

Introduction

In my roles as researcher, consultant for the Ministry in program development and teacher educator, I am interested in developing students’ maximum potential and prepare them, not merely for coping by giving them skills and strategies for day to day lesson delivery, but more importantly to broaden their views so they can enhance their teaching in the future. I am often confronted to contradictory discourses and behaviors at odds with what people believe they are doing. In the province of Ontario in Canada a combination of regularly changing official documents determine the mandatory curriculum. As well nationally, there is a think-tank, the Conference Board of Canada that looks at current situations and announces needs. Immigration policies also impact education. Add new technologies to the mix, and we are experiencing an upheaval.

Satisfactory results in practicum placements in schools are also a program component. Through these, students can try out new roles, self-reflect on how they manage with feedback from their classroom associate teacher.

The most crucial phase in this development is relative to how well they integrate and internalize all the different facets of the expected transformation to becoming a professional. Because of concerns, the Ministries of Education and Training, Colleges and Universities’ Consultations on Ontario’s Enhanced Teacher Education Program delineated a Mandatory Core Program Content after several consultation sessions (Ministry of Education, 2012). The first of such components is ‘*current Ontario curriculum guidelines - content and application*’ referring to the Ontario curriculum including pedagogy, instruction and content. There are indeed a number

of curriculum guidelines teachers are to familiarize themselves with. In addition, they are responsible for being aware of '*emerging trends in education*'. This includes understanding people's mental health issues; preparing for transitions, including from school to university or into apprenticeships or the workforce; making use of technology as a teaching tool, including environmental education, media and financial literacies. Another set of competences is connected to '*current teaching knowledge, skills and strategies*' and students are expected to be well versed in these. In relation to such aspects, it appears that more skills that are usually to be expected from graduate students are listed: for instance, skills for research and data analysis for increased reflectivity; ability to carry out inquiry-based research, data collection and assessment in order to be better able to meet student needs; ability to articulate standards of practice for teaching; experience to transpose the knowledge gained about theories of learning and teaching methods into action. As well '*student engagement and learning-human development and learning*' is included in the recommendations. Future teachers need skills in classroom management and organization, plus child and human development.

Theoretical context

Given this situation in which these future teachers find themselves, the ability to judge takes on major importance in meaning-making processes (Kant, 1892). In teaching contexts, empathy is key according to Petrovic et al. (2008). Apprehending knowledge in given ways is important in terms of influencing the outcome depending on people's approaches to learning. Social class works to create characteristic 'kinds of people' in characteristic 'worlds' (Gee, 2002). The problem is to make people cross-functional and somewhat spontaneously re-align around new communities of practice (Olson, 2003; Barton & Tusting, 2005). Apprehending knowledge this way is important during group work in terms of influencing the outcome depending on the perspective taken. From system's theory we gleaned important notions around communication, especially about its operation through the selection of a limited amount of information for the purpose of reducing complexity (Luhmann, 1984).

We have to favor subject matter associations with people from very different backgrounds trying to connect their knowledge bases. All these notions provide an understanding of the elements at work. Solutions will have to come about through re-aligning. Like in the business world we need to thoroughly understand and play out representations in an attempt at understanding the different markets, their demands and their multi-faceted possibilities, in our case applied to people (Senge, 1994). However, keeping in mind Luhmann's research on social systems, we felt assured that new systems can be created if need be, without anything being lost, just through reorganization. We also kept in mind that each class in our study functioned like a system with a distinctive identity that was constantly reproduced in its communication and depended on what was considered meaningful or not.

Along the same lines of thinking, a system can emerge from an overly-complex environment, then use and rely on resources from that environment (Senge). In our case, students in a given class came from various subject specialties (their environment) and they used in the new group, resources they were familiar with from that environment. For the sake of economy of means, control of internal energy

is required, if one is to expect observable results according to Senge. A widening of vision requires getting rid of mind-sets and old habits of mind. In addition, one person's view can no longer be accepted as dominant, as for a class to fully subscribe to change, everyone present necessarily has to feel that his or her views are also represented (Senge, 1994). This entails making dialogue transformational and yet enabling all the members of the group to be included, aware of individual positioning as well as of possibilities for re-alignment, keeping in mind the global perspective of all the facets, facing new truths and possibilities. With the fast increase in interaction systems (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc.) in our globalizing world, we have to plan socio-culturally appropriate responses to situations. The latest research findings on emotional intelligence, which according to Grafman (2009) and Petrovic et al. (2008), have (indicate that it has) both experiential and strategic characteristics, add further interest to the question of representation. As these aspects come into play in a multifaceted way, I needed to keep focused during course delivery and this was made possible by adopting a stance in line with from "situated cognition" theory (Barton & Tusting, 2005).

Background to the discussion

The Ontario Ministry of Education advocates 'success for all learners', relying on scaffolding, multiple integrations and differentiated learning. Education has to provide support to individuals, society and cultures. This agenda is dictated by our immigration culture and the need to be inclusive.

Program overview

These future teachers, experienced in diverse practices that do not necessarily subscribe to what I try to achieve in the education course, need to develop their ability to judge in establishing a weighting scheme in their professional practice. As a basis we can take into account Cranton's (2006) suggestions for checking on reflexivity. The author proposes to look at reflective questions respectively in a psychological, sociolinguistic, epistemic, moral-ethical, philosophical and aesthetic context. Cranton asks the following questions related to psychological aspects: What do I believe about myself? How have I come to have this perception of myself? Why should I question this premise? As concerns sociolinguistic views he proposes to examine respectively aspects having to do with social norms, how these have been influential in the specific case and why they are important to the person concerned. He questions knowledge as regards its quantity, its source and its usefulness. His questions about moral-ethical aspects center round the identification of one's values, finding their origin and their importance. As regards philosophical thinking he suggests to question worldview, how it came about and why it was maintained. Aesthetic judgment is examined along the lines of what a person finds beautiful, how views of beauty might change and the reason for appreciating beauty.

Practical aspects

Two major components of the teacher education program include the ability to use and teach the second/foreign language and behavior consistent with that of an autonomous professional. Since my students will be second-language teachers, they

also need to have advanced communication skills. They will need to convey ideas, issues and new knowledge in a variety of ways to their students. They have to convey their thinking accurately and with confidence. They will also have to summarize. This entails mobilization of knowledge in the second language in which they have expertise. In the context of professionalization one would expect to observe a respect of professional standards, integrity and a strong sense of responsibility. In completing their education program the future teachers should show their knowledge and willingness to abide by the recommended guidelines. One would expect a developing professional to display abilities in critical thinking and independent inquiry. Also, taking into account recommendations from the Conference Board of Canada, in order to engage in lifelong learning, people need independent thinking. A sense of initiative is required for being academically and professionally current. Moreover, besides intellectual curiosity these developing teachers need to become responsible professionals, which require transferable skills that they can use when faced with complex problems.

Proposed pathways

So how can we get people to put on new lenses and accommodate in their mind's eye, wiping away some false assumptions and adjusting to the latest requirements? In the past, there was a tendency to rely on group-think to find solutions and implement change but now the Conference Board of Canada the national think-tank in charge of giving future directions for the country, identified a strong need to develop independent thinking and on the spot problem solving skills. This also applies in the case of the professionals in this study. They recommended a move from an emphasis on inter-personal intelligence, getting along in groups, to more emphasis on intra-personal intelligence with each person developing independent strengths. Often, in intercultural settings, researchers identified a sense of disorientation and in turn a person had to learn to cope alone, not uncommon in Canada. However, as this takes time and can be debilitating, I advocate another possible approach, encouraging self-examination, a solution that is also proposed by other researchers. Contrasting internalized assumptions with new aspects of expected behaviors is often very productive in effecting change. For instance these future teachers have been students in language classes and often also have observed traditional teaching during their practicum placements. This in itself causes problems because of the habituation that has set in, and I have the uneasy task to get them out of their comfort zone.

A look at new approaches to learning, points to major changes taking place today at an ever-increasing pace (Ministry of Education, 2012; Myers, 2002; Olson, 2003). A global knowledge mobilization is taking precedence. Major questions have to be posed relative to the positioning of the different constituencies within this web of networks being created and constantly re-adjusted (Archibugi & Lundvall, 2001). The main question is how to become cross-functional and willing to transfer across academic cultures. Sub-questions are, can the shape of people's dialogic awareness be changed by setting up a new logic, and can a spontaneous alignment around new communities of practice help provide the answers we are searching for? The domain of change allows a deep learning cycle. The changes that emerge can be found at the level of aptitudes and capacities, connected to new awareness-raising, to increased

sensitivity and should bring about new attitudes and beliefs. With all this in mind in this study, collaborative work was introduced in the course in an attempt to uncover what the learning organization framework could bring to students with a specialized background in many different disciplines. In addition, for the sake of increasing the information-sharing network, students were told they could do this through Facebook.

We looked at these different aspects through an observation study in two teacher education courses. Notes were made in daily journaling throughout the course during the current academic year.

Results

All in all, I observed knowledge representations stemming from various levels of awareness, various backgrounds and prior knowledge, various perceptual perspectives and different abilities to negotiate difficulty having to do with preparation and as well as their comfort levels in French L2 use or in language use in general.

One group (G2) stood out as representative of group members who see and do things differently. This group clearly looks at knowledge from a more open perspective if we refer to their mention of collaboration between speakers, yet it also appears that they have a dominating narrow perspective as regards language teaching, a representation that could be due in part because they were faced with low achievers during their practical school placements or that they have experience with and relate mostly to learners at a lower beginning level and perhaps concentrated in their dialogues on how to cater to such learners' needs. In the last instance, this question could indicate a pessimistic attitude on the part of the members of this group as regards the ability of schools to promote success in second language learning. Another group (G1) appeared not to share the views of other groups, which was problematic. The deviations noted in G1 seem to stem from a lack of engagement and only surface learning took place or perhaps they did not read the assigned readings and could therefore only discuss topics in general terms and rather vaguely, although we found that their use of French was fluent. Did this language ability make them overconfident to the point of not engaging into deep learning during their discussion of theoretical contents? Another group (G3) displayed different attitudes towards knowledge. They reported disbelief regarding knowledge gain from sources outside the class readings and they do not trust the integration of language skills for learning but rather imply that each language skill has to be practiced separately. Is this indicative of their personal learning styles, their attitude towards learning and maybe limitations in their negotiating of difficulties, or perhaps a gap in prior knowledge and insufficient preparation? Maybe a more traditional attitude towards language teaching is reflected here due to various cultural influences. Therefore we could also consider that openness of mind or lack thereof is another cause for deviations in representations.

Robinson's (1998) views explain this latter concern as he describes culture as a "system of symbols and meanings" and explains that "past experience influences meaning which, in turn affects future experience, which in turn affects subsequent meaning, and so on" (p. 11). The same applies to knowledge.

Conclusion

In this article I report on the results following an attempt to be all encompassing during course delivery, while at the same time taking into account differentiation. This is a tall order in a class with so many different student backgrounds, motivation levels, irregular attendance and diverse needs.

Will new technologies provide sufficient variety in access to information and enough variation and variability as to allow tweaking teaching contents to enable students with vastly diverse approaches from the 'main group' to gain from instruction and fill all the gaps? We also have to ask ourselves if students can be made responsible enough to account for their own individual work, by using technology, after listening to lectures and participating in discussions, thus bootstrapping crystallization of thought, and not merely reporting group discussion results, although the debate was possibly held only within a group? With no imposed final exam, only time will tell after they find employment and where staying on the job becomes the selection criterion.

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