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Transformative curriculum: “I felt like an artist”

Abstract: Contemporary early childhood teacher education is situated in a knowledge and policy environment where on the one hand pre-service educators have the opportunity to connect with unlimited knowledge sources and, on the other, are expected to conform to standardized outcomes. This situation is compounded by increasingly inequitable learning outcomes for children in many countries. In this paper, we argue that this context demands different ways of teaching and learning in early childhood teacher education and that in order to address increasing inequity, pre-service educators must experience a transformative university curriculum. This paper uses the example of an arts topic, with a particular focus on music, to examine ways of positioning pre-service educators that open up, rather than restrict opportunities to re-conceptualize early childhood curriculum. The authors examine data from curriculum documents and student reflections in order to discuss the intended (planned), enacted (implemented) and experienced university curriculum.

Keywords: art, curriculum, pre-service teachers, early childhood teacher education

Word Count: 4,923

Introduction

In many countries, early childhood teacher education is situated in a competitive, market-oriented environment focused on producing competent graduates able to teach across a birth-8 year continuum (Lloyd, 2014). One of the expected outcomes of all early childhood teacher education programs is that graduates must be able to make complex curriculum decisions regarding the types of programs and learning experiences they offer young children. The risk associated with the contemporary environment in which all teacher education (including early childhood teacher education) is working is that a focus on the “technical” aspects of teaching that address issues of the *what* and *how* of teaching and learning in become the focus at the expense of asking the bigger question of *why* (Clarke, Trigg & Nelson, 2014, p.175). In this paper we argue that an exclusionary focus on the “practical” aspects of learning and teaching runs the risk of replicating the status quo and that the arts in teacher education becomes a “tips and tricks” approach with little opportunity to examine the long-term outcomes or purposes of an arts curriculum for young children. The university curriculum discussed in this paper is an attempt to blend both the *why* questions

about teaching and learning in the arts with young children with the practical aspects, in ways that “open up” rather than close down the possibilities for transformative and deep learning.

At the outset of the paper, it is important to acknowledge that many pre-service early childhood teachers enter university with a deficit view of their own artistic capabilities and an ambivalence regarding the need to teach the arts (Battersby & Cave, 2007; McArdle, 2012). The teacher education curriculum presented in this paper is premised on the principle that ‘Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about art education appear to exhibit more influence than any other personal characteristic’ (Oreck, 2004 in Hudson, 2014, p.4).

The paper also begins with the recognition that ‘Teacher effectiveness in arts education is bound by the scope and quality of the curriculum unit(s) offered in teacher education’ (Miller, Nicholas and Lambeth, 2008, p. 354). Ascertaining the quality of the university arts curriculum is underpinned by consideration of *why* an arts program in early childhood is important. This consideration leads to questions about curriculum intent: is curriculum (both at university and in early childhood classrooms) intended to merely reflect and replicate the world in all its facets or does the curriculum offer opportunities to critique, challenge and change any aspect of the learner’s world? Are the arts experiences that are offered to young children (and university students) a means of exploring, expressing and responding to their worlds or do they offer pre-service teachers and young children the opportunity to resist the inequalities and injustice in their worlds and therefore play a transformational part?

The teacher education curriculum: replicating or transforming?

The concept of the university curriculum is a complex and under-researched feature of contemporary universities (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). However, drawing from the research that has been done in schools, curriculum theorists often refer to different phases and name these as the intended (what is planned), enacted (what happens), and experienced (how what happens influences individuals) (Marsh & Willis, 2003, p.xiii). These terms provide a language with which to think and talk about the university curriculum. The terms “intended, enacted and experienced” are useful ways of thinking about curriculum but it must be acknowledged that it is difficult to separate any part of the curriculum process without considering other aspects of teaching and learning. Viewing curriculum as a social construction (Goodson, 1994) opens up the possibilities for considering how the different dimensions of the curriculum in a teacher education course interact and connect. With these principles in mind, this paper begins by introducing the theoretical base for the concept of transformative curriculum and then focuses specifically on one arts topic available to early childhood pre-service teachers in a four year Bachelor degree. Beginning with a consideration of the intended/planned curriculum, the authors then proceed to discuss how this intent is translated to the enacted curriculum before analyzing student responses about how they experienced the curriculum.

In order for teacher education to play its part in addressing inequitable educational outcomes, teacher educators must engage in sustained and systematic research into the university curriculum. As teacher educators, we see this research as imperative for we share Collins' (2004) position that:

We are trying to construct something new in a post-modern moment when it is no longer tenable to believe in a science of teaching, nor to affirm as simple truth any one Grand Theory – of who children are, how they learn, what one must teach or how one must teach it...what we do know is that we need to find an intellectually honest way to introduce student teachers to the highest quality theories and debates, the best food for thought, about the elements and complexities of good professional practice (p. 238).

This requires that teacher educators pursue conversations and dialogues that revisit ideas of what it means to teach tertiary students in this post-modern world. The perspective taken in this paper builds on Mezirow's (2003) concept of transformative learning in that it is an account of a curriculum that is intended to 'transform problematic frames of reference-sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning, perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change' (p. 58).

The academic team involved in developing the early childhood Bachelor degree from which this paper is drawn believes that transformative teacher education involves "turning-around" many traditional ideas about knowledge and the teacher/learner relationship. The term "turn-around" pedagogies was first used by researchers investigating the possibilities of cross-generational learning about literacy teaching and learning (Comber & Kamler, 2005). "Turn-around" refers to pedagogies that challenge deficit views of learners and positions them as able to co-construct knowledge in powerful ways alongside more experienced experts. This repositioning is empowering and therefore designed to lead to more socially-just outcomes for the students, teachers and the wider communities in which they are situated. In this paper, we examine the possibilities of "turn-around" pedagogies in an arts topic titled "The Expressive Arts in Early Childhood". The authors argue that pursuing a transformative teacher education curriculum is particularly important in the contemporary context of early childhood education.

The intended curriculum

As teacher educators we believe that a transformative arts program begins with the opportunity to experience being an artist. The intent of this early childhood arts topic is that pre-service educators firstly discover (or re-discover) the artist-within. This is not an easy process. Often there is a personal need to protect what has been learned prior to entering the university and a sense of discomfort is experienced as the pre-service educator over-rides some of their original beliefs and experiences. A transformative university curriculum is often met with resistance. As Kumashiro (2002) argues, students often seem to 'resist uncomfortable changes in what it means for them to learn' (p. 3). Much of the work that we do in teacher education involves unlearning, undoing and shifting pre-service educators' attitudes towards and experiences of learning areas such as the arts. As McArdle (2012) states, many students enter university

with ideas that 'art is a question of talent (which however they have missed out on), or choice, or as being of little or no importance, an optional 'luxury' for the few, the elite, as unavailable, or as a mystery' (p.94). Somehow, the university experience needs to address and alter these ideas.

This topic is based on the philosophy that immersing pre-service educators in a different experience is an effective way to shift thinking. Whether the pre-service educator can let go of the original learning or not will depend on their ability to appreciate what she/he knows from a different perspective. The intent of the arts topic is to support pre-service educators to see the arts in a new light. This process begins with the first (and only) lecture with the complete cohort of students enrolled in the Expressive Arts topic (at the time of the research presented in this paper, the topic cohort was 25 students but has now expanded to 100 enrolments). This lecture introduces the work of Dewey (1960) and his concepts of "spectator" and "player" knowledge. Students are asked to listen to a piece of contemporary music and identify anything they know about the music. The contributions are shared and as suggestions are offered these are classified into *spectator* knowledge (such as the name of the musician, the name of the album, song title etc.) alongside responses regarding the *player* knowledge of music composition such as the rhythmic patterns, the instruments used, the tonal qualities of the singer's voice, and so on. Lecture participants are then asked to consider which type of knowledge enables change, transformation and creation rather than replication. This example introduces the idea that knowledge can be transformative.

Following this lecture, students then move into specialist groups of drama, visual arts, digital media, dance and music where they work intensively with artists for the next six weeks of the course. The specialist workshops are designed to build pre-service educator confidence and expertise in art theory and practice using an artist in residence model. Students enroll in one specialist area (drama, visual arts, digital media, dance or music) and are encouraged to select a specialization with which they are least familiar. The question we explore in this paper is to what extent the intent described above is achieved through the enacted curriculum.

The enacted curriculum: The Specialist workshops

The enacted curriculum using an artist-in-residence model seeks to redress the marginalisation of the arts in curricula and society more broadly (artsQueensland, 2011; Dehouske, 2006; Haynes, 2004; McDowall et al., 2012). An artist-in-residence model embeds artists from the community as pedagogues so as to add artistic integrity to learning processes, supporting a more authentic, learner-centered approach whilst enhancing the professional learning of the other generalist educators involved. We build upon this model in the arts topic by positioning the artists "in residence" in the teacher education topic.

As stated previously, the first six weeks of the topic involve pre-service educators working alongside local practicing Adelaide artists. The artists include an actor, a visual artist, a digital artist, a dancer and a composer. In these workshops pre-service educators experience the expressive arts as creators, communicators, connoisseurs and critics. The expert artists design and implement the specialist curriculum for these six weeks. The workshop processes are intended to stimulate student thinking about teaching and learning in ways which will ultimately enhance young children's engagement with the arts. Rather than

constructing the topic from a technician approach with a focus on “how to” teach the arts to young children, the intent is that pre-service educators are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge as they explore how art forms intersect, overlap and borrow from each other.

The artists are crucial players in the curriculum “drama” (Grumet, 1978) described above. It is recognized that an artist-in-residence model is one of the most effective ways to engage and inspire pre-service educators (artsQueensland, 2011; Dehouske, 2006; Haynes, 2004; McDowall et al., 2012). However, what is problematic with many artist-in-residence programs is that the artists are funded through short-term, one-off research and/or teaching and learning grants. This means that the sustainability of such a model becomes an issue. What differentiates the curriculum described in this paper from others is that the artists are part of the teaching team, paid as tutors and assessors. Their funding is part of the budget for this topic and is therefore not dependent on a year-to-year funding arrangement, thus enabling the topic to retain the benefit of the artist-in-residence approach whilst ensuring sustainability.

Assessing and connecting the specialist and generalist strands

There are two parts to the assessment of the specialist strand. First, pre-service educators keep an “Artist Log”, making weekly entries that document their on-going learning from set readings, workshops, theory, arts practices and involvement in community events. Second, pre-service educators develop a performance or exhibition piece individually or in groups, exploring and experimenting with their chosen art form, working alongside their artist expert. In so doing pre-service educators are supported to develop a *range of methodologies and skills* relevant to their arts specialization.

The performances and exhibitions of the students’ work over the six weeks are shared with the whole group on what is known as “Gala Day”. This is an important culmination of the “specialist” work students have done, providing further opportunities for students to respond and critique art in all its forms as they view their peers perform, dance, play and exhibit their work.

The connection between the learning done in the specialist strands and the generalist workshops is an important aspect of the topic. The second-half of the semester consists of “generalist” workshops, where pre-service educators work in mixed groups (students drawn from the drama, visual arts, digital media, dance and music specializations) to synthesize and explore how their experience with their artist will influence their work with young children. These sessions begin with a review and reflection regarding Gala Day in terms of what was presented, (the ideas the artists were expressing and exploring) and then considering the “Big Ideas” that were explored through the different art forms. This approach draws from the work of Beane (1997) who states that ‘many educators and activists committed to social reform...have called for a curriculum organized around personal and social issues’ (p.6). Thus, in this reflection on the art works exhibited, performed or played on Gala Day, the pre-service educators are engaged in a process of identifying the personal and social issues explored by the artists. A sample of the results of this reflection from one of the workshops is summarized in table form below:

Table 1: REFLECTING ON THE SPECIALIST ARTS WORKSHOPS

Art Form	What was it about?	What was it REALLY about: The big idea
Drama (small groups of students developed performances based on 8 point narratives)	e.g. The Giraffe: a giraffe found herself on the 'outer' as a newcomer to the zoo.	Inclusiveness/Belonging
Visual Arts	Foam person (sculpture) A foam 3 D construction depicting a skull	Life/Death
Digital Media (animated productions)	Rabbit visual: a stop-go movie depicting a rabbit forming and re-forming into new dimensions	Time/Change
	Romance: animated film depicting search for romance	Trust/Honesty/Forgiveness
Dance (whole group composition)	Dance performance depicted a small child running through large crowd of people, weaving, interweaving without colliding, bumping	Awareness and trust
Music (group performance)	Hello song: each member of the class introduced to the whole group via song	Inclusivity

The pre-service educators' reflections on the experience of the specialist strands identify the ways they used their art form to explore "big ideas". Pre-service teachers then considered whether the "big ideas" they had explored in their art specialization would be appropriate and relevant for young children. The groups agreed that the list (see Table 1) represented concepts and ideas that could form the heart of curriculum investigations for young children. Then, turning to the Australian key curriculum documents, the Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009) intended for guiding curriculum decisions across the birth-5 years and the Australian Curriculum: The Arts (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2013), the curriculum intended for children 5-8 school years, pre-service teachers considered how a rigorous and inclusive arts curriculum might contribute to children's explorations and critique of their worlds. Over the remaining 8 weeks of the topic, pre-service teachers worked in collaborative groups to develop 'Anticipatory Webs' as a form of planning that included examples of possible arts activities for children across the birth-8 age range related to one of the 'Big Ideas'.

The final assessment for the generalist component of the topic is deliberately open-ended and formative, modelling effective early childhood pedagogy. The assessment for the generalist strand was framed in the following way (see Figure 1):

Using examples, evidence and writing from your engagement in this topic, "Demonstrate how you understand an inclusive, integrated approach to teaching the Expressive Arts in Early Childhood".

Figure 1: GENERALIST ASSIGNMENT FRAMEWORK

In order to meet the requirements of this assessment, pre-service educators made their own decisions about which aspects of this framework they addressed in their assignment. They were not expected to address all of the above diagram elements and this freedom enabled them to go into further depth in one aspect of the ideas in this framework. However, the principles of inclusivity (in terms of gender, culture, disability and class) and integration underpinned the assignment.

This assessment demonstrates the academic team's understanding of the teaching and learning process. Specifically, the team drew from Samuelowicz and Bain's (1992) study of academic teachers' conceptions of teaching which found that when academics viewed teaching and learning in "quantitative" terms (i.e. the student will know "more"), assessment focused on recall and memorization. However, when effective teaching is considered to involve supporting the learner to 'change conceptions and understanding of the world' (p.98), assessment will involve using the learner's experience in order to provide opportunity to develop and demonstrate different conceptual understandings that are constructed through engagement with different knowledge. The academic team involved in the topic development wanted the assessments for this topic to reflect the latter position in line with a transformative approach to teacher education.

The previous sections of this paper have provided an overview of the intended and enacted phases of the curriculum for the arts topic. In the subsequent sections of the paper we focus attention on the music strand as an example of the experienced curriculum.

The experienced curriculum: The music specialization

The music specialization was constructed and taught by a contemporary composer. The intent of the strand was that students would understand and experience music as ‘humanly organized sound whose patterns are related to the social and cognitive processes of a particular society and culture’ (Blacking, 1995, in Barrett, 2012, p. 59). In order to achieve this understanding, the composer offered many opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience music-making as a process of “playing with and organizing sound”. This approach opened up possibilities for pre-service teachers to experiment, create, improvise, record (notate) and share compositions, rather than replicate the music of others. The reactions to this approach were varied and at this point we turn to the students’ reflective journals to consider some of these reactions. The comments are drawn from the reflective journals of a small group of 10 students who participated in the music workshops and also provided consent for participation in this research. Ethics approval was sought from the University Ethics committee in order to publish the student reflections presented in this section of the paper.

The framework developed by Bain et al. (2002) and used by Barton and Ryan (2014) is useful for our analysis of our students’ reflections (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: 4RS MODEL OF REFLECTIVE THINKING (Barton & Ryan, 2014; Ryan & Ryan, 2012)

This framework differentiates between ‘reporting and responding; relating; reasoning; and reconstructing’ (Barton & Ryan, 2014, p. 411). Given the “transformative” intent of this topic, we wanted students to move beyond description and personal response to their experience of the art form and to use theory and experience to ‘explain, interrogate and ultimately transform their practice’ (Barton & Ryan, 2014, p. 411). The extent to which the music strand achieved this transformation is evidenced in these student reflections.

Transformation as learners and artists

The analysis presented here uses the four models of reflective thinking identified above. In order to make explicit links to the data, points are made in the text boxes rather than in the body of the text. Analyses of pre-service educators’ reflections on their own learning experiences suggested that the artists brought authenticity to students’ co-constructions of knowledge and meaning-making in this art form.

Figure 3: STUDENT 1

Pre-service educators described how they were able to explore their creativity (as players) and face their adult inhibitions, helping them to attend to the world of sound around them in their daily lives (moving from being mere spectators).

Figure 4: STUDENT 4

Further, the learning experiences led by an artist gave students learning opportunities which enhanced their awareness of the scope of specific art forms like music, making them more conscious of their own feelings about music and how they could unleash their own creativity.

Figure 5: STUDENT 3

Pre-service educators indicated that this learning enriched their own lives through a growing appreciation of the arts beyond the university context, leading them to begin making some profound links to their subsequent thinking about their work with young children in the arts (and more broadly).

Transformation as Early Childhood pedagogues

'Early childhood teachers are responsible for the delivery of integrated arts education as part of the core curriculum in the early years' (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011, p.2). This responsibility is taken up in the pre-service teachers' comments. Throughout their reflective journals as pre-service educators talked about their experience of learning in the university context, they take up their positions as teachers and as they put the "I" into their discussions, they are building teacher identities. Many of the student comments reflect a shifting understanding of themselves as pedagogues and artists – a significant identity change. One of the assumptions underpinning the construction of the arts topic is that identity work is never finished for it involves ongoing processes of "sorting out" where we belong in the social contexts in which we find ourselves. In this ongoing process of developing professional identities people draw from, and are influenced by many different discourses and the process can be seen as 'a struggle for voice and thought amidst voices and thoughts that are not our own' (Britzman, 1994, p. 62). The student comments indicate that this process is "self-conscious" but is also "liberating".

Importantly, pre-service educators' reflections on their experiences of this enacted curriculum suggest that they were beginning to think about how their own attitudes and beliefs about music might shape or color their learners' feelings about the arts. For example, the performance assessment task for Gala Day undertaken in groups helped one learner to enact a conceptual change in their understanding of how to create space/time to unleash creativity and make the arts accessible, inclusive, authentic and expressive for others via their own lived experiences.

Figure 6: STUDENT 7

Such reflections show how these immersion experiences enabled pre-service educators to begin reconstructing their thinking about their early childhood teaching practice in the arts. For example, in the following comment, the pre-service teacher re-constructs her thinking about music in many ways.

Figure 7: STUDENT 2

This pre-service teacher's final comment resonates with that of the famous quote by Gustav Mahler that 'If a composer could say what he (sic) had to say in words he would not bother trying to say it in music'. The pre-service teacher's comment indicates a profound understanding of music as an expressive medium.

In summary, whilst the number of student comments is presented and analyzed above is small, we posit that the pre-service educators' reflections on the enacted curriculum they had experienced provide evidence that the arts topic appears to have achieved its curriculum intent. Many of the comments indicate that students had moved beyond a technician approach to teaching the arts. For example one student wrote that 'these workshops have given us a sense of the unlimited possibilities there are for us as educators and the children we will work with in the future to enjoy and be a part of.'

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the dynamic society in which early childhood educators (including teacher educators) are working not only presents a challenge but also offers the opportunity to develop innovative, inclusive and rigorous curricula that supports quality learning outcomes for all children. The example of reflective practice presented in this paper provides evidence of curriculum innovation within a contemporary Australian university. The paper rests on the premise that the university curriculum can provide the impetus for social change that leads to more socially just educational outcomes. In order for the curriculum (both at the university and in early childhood settings) to effect social change, a quality curriculum must engage the hearts, minds and spirits of children (and pre-service educators) along with the teacher educators who work with them. The student reflections provide evidence that The Expressive Arts topic achieved this engagement.

However, in order to enact an innovative university curriculum our ideas about pedagogy needed to "turn-around" (Comber & Kamler, 2005). Pre-service teachers needed to be –re-positioned as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients. The study illustrates how contemporary early childhood teacher education can support pre-service teachers to understand how they (and the children they will teach) are being positioned within the contemporary knowledge environment. The curriculum innovation described in this paper illustrates that the identity positions on offer to student teachers are either constrained or liberated by the assumptions and practices of teacher educators.

The small number of pre-service teachers involved in this research does not enable generalizable findings but their comments provide insight into some of the possibilities of transformative university curriculum. Many of the pre-service teacher comments describe an experience that illustrates Mezirow's (2003) concept of transformative learning. The comments provide examples of shifts in-'sets of fixed assumptions and expectations' that in turn 'made them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change (p. 58).

We posit that the shift from shy "self-admitted uncreative individuals into uninhibited performers" as described above by student 7 is not achieved by learning "about" the arts but by *experiencing* the arts. Working alongside expert artists these pre-service educators believe that they have contributed to and experienced a transformative university curriculum and in this process also developed an awareness of transformative possibilities of the arts for young children.

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