

Principles of practice in teacher education and performance standards

Introduction

Work in progress.

In a previous opinion piece (The Professional Educator, May 2013) I explained why professional practice cannot be broken down to sets of competencies as in trades' training, which is why we speak of teacher education rather than training: I suggested that the number of variables and context means we can never be sure of the effectiveness or outcomes of any strategy; but this does not mean that it is not possible to identify and teach sets of strategies that teachers can apply according to their professional judgement of what will work best in any given instance.

What is surprising, however, is that teacher professional knowledge has never been systematically researched and packaged for teacher education courses and performance assessment, in spite of much having been developed, recognised and explained here and there in the literature over the years. This is a brief account of how teacher professional knowledge can be captured as principles of practice, and ends with two major implications of this for the profession.

Constructing principles of practice

Something I've learned from both my own teaching of beginning teachers, and watching experienced teachers mentoring them, is that we mainly talk and think about teaching practice in terms of what are generally referred to as 'tips for teachers'. Here are some strategies given as 'tips' for curriculum and classroom management that I've used with student teachers:

- Break instructions down into manageable chunks.
- Start new learning from what the students already know and can do.
- Avoid escalating minor incidents into major power struggles.
- Get the student's account of what happened, and their understanding of your response to it.
- Be clear about your expectations and their responsibilities (but stop thinking that means Rules, Rules, Rules).

For some time I've been looking for ways to develop such diverse 'tips for teachers' into a more coherent framework for teaching them in teacher education courses. I already knew from my mentoring experience that in any given situation, several different strategies could achieve the same desired outcome, and that it was a matter of judgement which was the best to use in any given situation, so I began to try to find ways of grouping the strategies so that when a beginning teacher knew what they were trying to achieve they could call up a list of possible ways to achieve it.

In doing this I realised that such tips are in fact suggestions for strategies, and that strategies seldom had just one functions, and that they implemented theories and educational values. I could see, for example, that the tip to 'be consistent' involves:

- A *strategy* to use to be consistent (eg. '3-strikes': warn, warn, consequence).
- A *function* of consistency is to establish 'normality' through routines.
- Psychological *theory* validates consistency by explaining the need for routines and how reinforcement works, and how an emotionally safe learning environment assists learning.
- Some *educational values* in being consistent are that it is efficient, socially just, and helps to reduce stress which all contribute to a safe learning environment.

When tips for teachers have been developed in such a way, I refer to them as ‘principles of practice’ because they are principled guides to action; that is, they are general recommendations for action, and they are also ‘principled’ in the sense that they are validated by experience, theory and educational values.

I found that the term *principles of practice* worked well as categories of strategies; specific strategies can be grouped under a principle of practice, and specific strategies derived from them. It is the strategies of a principle of practice that implement the purpose, function, theory and values included in the specification of a principle of practice.

Analysis of critical incidents in classroom interaction shows that a teacher may be following several principles of practice in a single exchange. For example, in one incident I observed, the teacher was using a ‘3-strikes’ strategy with a child who was annoying her neighbour. After two warnings the teacher told her to move, but the child pleaded, saying, *I won’t do it again*, and the teacher responded:

It’s too late for that now, Jill. I did tell you twice, didn’t I? So you can either move to the other end of the table for the rest of this lesson; or if you don’t want to do that, you can leave the classroom now and finish your work after school tomorrow. It’s your choice.

This is not just an example of consistency in discipline; whether the teacher consciously knows it or not, it also shows the implementation of several other strategies:

- Listen to the child’s view
- Show you’ve heard
- Explain your decisions
- Give children some autonomy
- Demonstrate desirable behaviour

These are the components of a teacher’s professional practical knowledge, and all such strategies can be analysed to become principles of practice in the same way as ‘be consistent’. Taking the first two as further examples:

Principle of practice	Implementation strategy	Function	Validating theory	Educational value
Avoid power struggles	Listen to the child	Get the child’s view	Evidence informed decision making (Reflective practice)	Justice
		Treats child as a worthwhile person	Child development (self-regard)	Maintain safe learning environment
	Respond to content of utterance	Shows the child she’s been heard		Socialisation
				Mutual respect

One can see there the components of two principles of practice, and how the functions theories and values of different strategies can overlap. Also note that the strategy *Listen to the child’s view* is just one strategy for implementing the general principle: *Get the child’s view*.

The overlap is also to be expected, because it is a complex and rapidly developing situation, with many variables and several closely related principles of practice, being implemented by a teacher with a coherent system of values, to achieve a single coherent outcome. So it would be surprising if there were not considerable overlap of function, theory and value.

That analysis of the incident shows how easily teachers' professional-practical knowledge can be expressed as principles of practice, and also that these do not so much link theory and practice as incorporate them in a single superordinate entity. Principles of practice treat teachers' professional knowledge as a combination of facts, explanations and skills, or 'knowing that', 'knowing why' and 'knowing how'. For example, this case shows that the teacher knew that it's important to avoid power struggles, why it's important, and how to avoid this one.

What is not clear is how she knew why it's important to avoid power struggles, though it is almost certainly tacitly held (ie. she doesn't like power struggles). Perhaps she could also explain why, and if she could, then that is another way in which principles of practice integrate two key elements of professional judgement which are widely treated as oppositional forms of motivation: emotion and rationality.

Implications for teacher standards

The Federal Government's *Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership* (AITSL) has been charged with improving teacher education, and part of its approach has been to produce 'illustrations' of the National Teaching Standards, annotating these with *Features of Practice*. For example, a feature of practice identified in an illustration of a teacher selecting content for a Year 9 Mathematics program, is that the teacher is seeking to, *Organise content in an extended teaching program in which all parts are related and coherent*, and one can see how it could be re-worded as a general principle of practice: *The different parts of the content of a teaching program should be coherently related*. This principle is derived from learning theory: psychological concepts such as 'big picture', chunking and sequence in learning, and the value is to make it easier to understand.

Two *principles of practice* were not identified as *features of practice* by AITSL in that illustration. One is to: *Work from the known to the unknown*, which is implicit in the teacher's strategy for the children to, *Describe known shapes*, and that's informed by Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development. The other is to, *Consolidate learning through immediate application*, which is implicit in the teacher's strategy for the children to, *Use the learning to solve problems*, and informed by theory about learning from experience.

Clearly those are all principles of learning that can be taught so that teachers know and use them in lesson planning, thus producing more illustrations of those principles being put into practice.

In 2011 I pointed out to AITSL, their features of practice were close to my principles of practice, though the two are constructed differently: the features are descriptions of good practice, whereas principles are validated prescriptions for good practice, which I thought might be more useful annotations in regard to the teaching standards.

Although AITSL's overall approach has much to recommend it, I believe it needs to flesh out its current standards with relevant principles of practice. For instance, at the Graduate level, Focus 1.5, states that teachers should be able to: "*Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of strategies for differentiating teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students ...*". Exactly what that means could well be best expressed as a set of principles of practice under the general

principle: *Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students*. The advantage of that is that those principles would combine the 'knowing that', 'knowing why', and 'knowing how' of that standard into single sentences for easy categorisation, communication, teaching and performance assessment. And as I have demonstrated here, it is also very easy to show how they work in practice by annotating AITSL's illustrations of their teaching standards with them.

Implications for teacher education and professional development

The recent Education Workforce Schools Report (2012) had little positive to say about teacher education. It found that teachers' do not feel well prepared in a number of essential practical skill areas such as classroom management; they find theory and practice links weak, and some theoretical components simply irrelevant (p. 123). To make good professional judgements, teachers need the theories and values that inform effective strategies; but theory's relevance to, and presence in practice, is missed or seen as irrelevant when it's not taught as informing teaching and learning strategies and professional reflection on practical experiences.

Everything we know about professional learning indicates that teacher educators need to be able to work with students' observational and trial teaching experiences throughout their course, but the universities have put this into the too hard basket for too long. They have yet to come to terms with the fact that teachers' learn their profession more through school mentors and reflection on experience than they do from largely theoretical courses in the psychology, sociology or philosophy of education; yet they continue to prepare students to teach principally through such courses.

Universities teach the importance of situating academic learning in the context of use, but for mainly financial reasons they continue to separate the two contexts by having entirely different teachers, dealing with entirely different learning, in entirely different situations, and most dysfunctional, also separated by long intervals. Furthermore, because neither set of teachers is familiar with the other set's content, aims or processes, it is left up to the student teachers to try to transform all they are expected to learn into a coherent body of professional knowledge. It has never worked, and the result is the notorious theory/practice divide experienced by student teachers.

Neither the universities nor the State Departments of Education have ever made any consistent efforts to change this ridiculous situation, and the occasional attempts that have been made over the years have largely been scuttled by lack of funding.

First, the current demand on students to learn the theory at university then apply it to practice in a school sometime, must be reversed so that they experience applying a strategy in school while they are learning rationales for it at university. They can then use the theory to inform judgements about when, where and how to use a strategy.

Second, that process requires in-school placements of at least one day per week throughout the initial training course. It's then very easy to tell students in a lecture to look for an example of a strategy or principle of practice, and have them do so and report back very soon. This focuses their classroom observation, analysis and reflection of their school experiences. Melbourne University's Master of Teaching has such a pattern of continuous in-school experience, but the other side of the process also needs to change: universities should analyse their students' school experiences to produce principles of practice and thus develop an entirely relevant and well documented body of professional knowledge in Education.

Third, it also requires a complete repackaging of undergraduate teacher education courses. This must involve shifting the context of teaching the 'why' of teaching practices that's currently taught in separate courses in academic disciplines such as the sociology, psychology, history and philosophy of education, to courses in the principles of practice in curriculum, classroom management, treating students with respect, catering for cultural and individual differences, diagnosis of learning difficulties, group learning, collegiality, professional development, school-community liaison, literacy and numeracy throughout the curriculum, and so on.

The real difficulty for teacher education will be to shift academics' content knowledge, practical experience, and research interests from the application of one of the '... of Education' disciplines to the principles of practice in teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Working mostly with the outline standards and illustrations that AITSL has already generated, it should be possible to produce comprehensive sets of principles of practice that can be used as standards for career progression in all areas of teaching. These would also serve as the content of a new and more relevant teacher education curriculum.

Notes

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This version is downloadable from <prinsofprac.com>, which is a website for classroom teachers, school leaders and university academics to document and implement principles of practice in teaching.

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Tripp, D.H. (1993) *Critical incidents in teaching: developing professional judgement*. London and New York: Routledge (The 2011 edition has a new preface on reflection and action research and is now published in the Routledge Classics of Education series).