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Developing professional knowledge within a community of practice: questions for Scottish Teachers for a New Era

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Developing professional knowledge within a community of practice: Questions for Scottish Teachers for a New Era

Tony Luby

Synopsis

The purpose of this paper is to consider the claim of the Scottish Teachers for a New Era project that it is providing a 'unique opportunity to renew the profession'. This claim cannot merely be seen within the context of initial teacher education (ITE), but rather it has to be viewed within the context of the wider community of Scottish education. The Scottish Teachers for a New Era project envisages the development of communities of practice as a tool for the development of student teachers within ITE, but this paper highlights three other areas that the project should consider. First of all, there is an opportunity to overcome the dichotomy between educational research and practice, not only for student teachers but also for the wider community. Secondly, the fashioning of communities of practice by this project presents a chance to tackle the ongoing problem of re-inventing the wheel with regard to curricular reform. Thirdly, this project can provide a means by which practising teachers can develop their own counter-narratives that will generate new knowledge that will be of value to both teachers and academics.

Introduction

We need to be much more creative in envisioning future models of teacher education, which encourage imagination and innovation in new teachers, instead of the compliant conformity which is often demanded. (Humes, 2005b, p.17)

Within an education system that is alleged to be 'awfully conservative' (Buie, 2005b) and in response to claims that initial teacher education (ITE) in Scotland requires 'radical change' (Weir, 2005), the project Scottish Teachers for a New Era (STNE) makes the bold claim that it is providing a 'unique opportunity... to renew the profession' (STNE, 2006, p.4) by developing and testing a new model for ITE. The aim of this paper is to question our practice of ITE within Scotland (Kwiatkowski & Menter, 2005) by analysing the circumstances within which student teachers and others involved with the STNE project may become enabled to develop their professional knowledge. As Haigh and Ward (2004, p.134) inform us:

Schools at the start of the 21st century are complex environments. Increasing diversity in school communities, and constantly changing curriculum, assessment and accountability mandates all contribute to the 'complexities, challenges, uncertainties and ambiguities inherent in teaching'.

What kind of model of ITE will best prepare student teachers for this kind of environment? According to the STNE project background report (STNE, 2006, p.1) the re-structuring that is being undertaken by the USA Teachers for a New Era (TNE) initiative provides a way forward:

- Engaging with the wider institution (to allow education students to gain a broader and deeper curriculum knowledge);
- Developing teaching as a 'clinical' practice profession (continually investigating learning whilst also developing a deep knowledge-base and learning through apprenticeship); and
- Providing research-based evidence for proposed changes.

This concern with relating to a wider community and the concept of apprenticeship are both synonymous with models of education based on the social cognition of learning and, in particular, the pioneering work of Lave and Wenger (1991) with regard to '*legitimate peripheral participation*'. Such models are now gaining widespread recognition within the literature (e.g., MacDonald & Isaacs, 2001) although not without their critics (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Unwin, 2005).

Literature review

The complexity of teaching and learning is widely accepted and the challenge for ITE is to prepare student teachers for such an environment. There is an increasing acceptance amongst teacher educators that our understanding of teaching and ITE is enhanced by 'critical, alternative' approaches to the study of education (e.g.) Florio-Ruane, 2002; McLaren, 1995). An example of such a critical,

alternative approach is that of '*situated learning*' which '...advocates that teacher education programs create learning communities...' (Collatos & Morrell, 2002). Such learning communities should aim to improve practice and professional development (Wesley & Buysse, 2001) with regard to ITE; McCormick and Murphy (2000, p.209) envisage this as:

A novice starting on the outside of the community and, as understanding increases, moves towards a more central participation in that community of practice, eventually taking part in its transformation; what Lave and Wenger (1991) rather inelegantly termed a movement from 'legitimate peripheral participation' to central participation.

This language of novice and community resonates with the TNE aims above that have been adopted by the STNE project. However, in practice, how might this move from peripheral to central participation be accomplished? What challenges would face the participants in such an ITE community of practice? Capper (2000, pp.194-5) draws our attention to four such challenges:

- 1 The programme of ITE needs to more closely resemble the actual work that teachers undertake and be '...more powerfully linked to authentic experience in schools' and so there must be closer collaboration between experienced and novice teachers;
- 2 ITE will require to adopt action research methodologies at its heart;
- 3 Both of the above will require that the higher education (HE) institutions work collaboratively with partner schools; and
- 4 Subject knowledge will remain important but will have to be fashioned within the pedagogic context, e.g., a greater emphasis on cross-disciplinary work and the management of information.

This emphasis on collaboration between experienced and novice is affirmed, from an international perspective, by Cortazzi (1998); and its importance for the development of the novice teacher's professional identity is outlined by Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn (2000) who also support the advocacy for action research at the heart of ITE. The concern that HE institutions and partner schools collaborate more closely finds support in the writings of Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, and Fry (2004) and others such as Buysse, Sparkman, and Wesley (2003) who contend that such

collaboration should be based on a long-term relationship. Within its literature (Livingston *et al.*, 2006) the STNE project addresses the challenges outlined by Capper but it is the last of these four that I wish to touch on. Why? Because my own recent classroom experiences inform me that this challenge highlights an area that will prove to be the most problematic.

Reflection on practice

This refashioning of subject knowledge necessarily entails much change for experienced teachers in schools and for academics in HE institutions. The old-fashioned and misplaced understanding of the master/expert handing down knowledge to the novice/student will no longer suffice. It is old-fashioned because the subject knowledge acquired by an experienced teacher may, relatively quickly, reach its 'sell-by date'. For example, with my own subject of religious studies in the early 1980s the topic of 'Incarnation' was delivered by the 'expert lecturer' in a religious studies seminar at which I took notes. Then in the 'professional studies' class various educational theories were discussed and analysed and, as a student teacher, I had to marry the subject content with the theoretical knowledge prior to teaching on school placement. I was assisted in my deliberations by the format of the lesson plan advised by the college of education, and I could ask for practical tips from the 'expert teacher' at the school. This, I would suggest, was not an unusual experience.

Although sufficient for its time this was no longer the case by the late 1990s. Secondary school pupils were now more demanding with their expectations. The topic of the Incarnation was now presented within a study of the cult film, *The Matrix* (see www.relessononline.com). The video technology for doing this was relatively new whilst I was a student but is now much better understood (Hartley & Wang, 2003). But, more importantly, this vision of re-presenting Jesus the Saviour as 'Neo the Saviour' in a sci-fi thriller had never been contemplated. Thus, my 'expert lecturer' was really a novice with regard to the technology and his subject knowledge (as did mine) would have required to have been thoroughly refashioned within the pedagogic context. That said, this refashioning of subject knowledge within a pedagogic context proved to be a demanding but rewarding experience (Luby, 2006).

Subject and action professional knowledge

This pace of change that necessitates both academics and teachers having to refashion their subject knowledge also highlights another need, the development of professional knowledge. The work

of Eraut (1994) addresses a perennial problem identified by Buysse *et al.* (2003), namely 'the disconnect that exists between educational research and practice (which) stems, in part, from the fact that researchers and practitioners operate in vastly different worlds'. Unfortunately, this 'disconnect' is well attested by the educational literature, e.g., Coles (2004), Duffy (2005), Furlong and Oancea (2005), and Hancock (2001). Eraut asserts that the differences in *professional knowledge* between academics and teachers are partly the cause for this 'disconnect'. Whilst the former are concerned with the development of *academic* professional knowledge, the latter's development focuses on *action* professional knowledge: a fruit of an academic's professional knowledge may be the publication of a paper whilst a fruit of a teacher's professional knowledge may be the pacification of pupils! Although there are areas of overlap between academics and teachers, such as school placement of ITE students, both academics and teachers do tend to prize different forms of professional knowledge.

However, novice/student teachers require to develop both forms of professional knowledge and so, in order to promote the development of professional knowledge of novice/student teachers, it is imperative that they collaborate with teachers, academics and each other within a community of practice. For, according to Sachs (2001) and Buysse *et al.* (2003, p.263) in such a community:

The potential for practitioners and researchers to co-construct knowledge exists in this model because communities of practice represent an ongoing enterprise that invites both groups to share, build upon, and transform what they know about effective practices. Because the focus is not a single research study or professional development program, but rather the development of a professional community, fundamental changes in how researchers and practitioners establish mutual trust and sustain long-term relationships can be expected.

So, if the STNE project is to provide a 'unique opportunity... to renew the profession' within Scotland, then it should strive to develop a community of practice in which academics and teachers collaborate to mutually develop both academic and action professional knowledge. Not only will the novice/student teachers be the beneficiaries but also the wider national educational community. For, if HE institutions accept the challenge of Eraut (1994, p.57) that 'higher education (be) prepared to extend its role to that of *enhancing the knowledge creation capacities* of individuals and professional communities', then the 'disconnect'

between educational research and practice may dissolve.

Furthermore, HE institutions will be able to deflect criticisms that they are far removed from the realities of teachers' lives (Luby, 2005) and, collaborating within such a community of practice, academics may be able to apply their academic professional knowledge as they address another perennial problem, namely, that an unfortunate consequence of action professional knowledge is that:

... communication between practitioners is such that only a small proportion of newly created knowledge gets diffused or disseminated. Thus there is no cumulative development of knowledge over time: the wheel is reinvented many times over. (Eraut, 1994, p.56)

This resonates with my own experience and this 're-invention of the wheel' is a common event for many teachers (Luby, 2004). So a community of practice in which all of the participants (academics, teachers and novice/student teachers) recognise the need to refashion both their academic and action professional knowledge will have the potential to address two of the main weaknesses of current educational thinking and practice, namely:

- The failure of the proponents of academic professional knowledge to fully overcome the dichotomy between educational research and practice; and
- The failure of exponents of action professional knowledge to prevent the re-invention of the wheel with regard to classroom practices.

But what, may you ask, is the role of ITE in addressing these two serious issues?

ITE and communities of practice

ITE offers a means by which to begin to realise the communities of practice spoken of by Buysse *et al.* (2003) above, namely, communities of practice in which 'practitioners and researchers co-construct knowledge by sharing, building upon, and transforming what they know about effective practices'. Crucially, though, 'the focus is *not* a single research study or professional development program': that is, ITE is a *means* of helping to establish a community of practice. The community of practice is not created merely to further the professional development of one single group – be they student teachers, academics or teachers. It is not created only to enable student teachers to become beginning teachers; nor to update the action

professional knowledge of lecturers by affording them current classroom experience and insights; nor, indeed, to enhance the academic professional knowledge of teachers through collaboration with academic colleagues.

Rather, ITE is used as a means of creating the community of practice so that academics and teachers can 'establish mutual trust and sustain long-term relationships' (Buysse *et al.*, 2003). Only when academics and teachers have established trust and sustained long-term relationships can we expect there to be real communities of practice that can address the two serious issues of (a) dichotomy between research and practice, and (b) re-invention of the wheel with regard to classroom practices. Within a Scottish context Brisard, Menter, and Smith (2005, p.23) have considered the second issue of establishing a clear link between ITE and 'school reform'. And, hopefully, the deliberations and practices of these communities of practice would also remedy the first issue: dissolution of the barriers between research and practice. So, what role then can the STNE project play in the creation of such communities of practice?

STNE and the Parable of the Sower

Curiously and pleasingly for a teacher of religious education, guidance is to be found within Scripture and Matthew, Chapter 13, verse 3, offers a good starting point:

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: 'A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear'.

STNE wants to sow the seed of the 'good news' that ITE is to be refashioned into communities of practice that will help to rear teachers able to thrive within complex and diverse environments. Moreover, these communities of practice may not only lighten the burden of school reforms by preventing re-invention of the wheel but also dissolve barriers between educational research and practice. This is good news indeed. However, like the good news of the gospel there are those on the 'path' who do not even hear this. Who? Cynics and escapees I would suggest. For

the staffroom cynics there is 'nothing new under the sun' and the idea of creating a community of practice would, literally, fall on deaf ears. The escapees are the academic staff for whom the classroom is the last place that they want to be (Adams, 2005a). They only return, reluctantly, to 'crit' student teachers and exchange platitudes with wearied teaching staff. Can the cynics and the escapees be avoided by the STNE project - and, indeed, should they be avoided?

At some point in the formative stage of their careers student teachers will be exposed to both. On the one hand, a staffroom cynic can easily undermine the often fragile confidence of a beginning teacher. On the other hand, an academic escapee can burden the beginning teacher with unrealistic expectations. One need only read the *TES* website discussion boards for confirmation of this. If STNE is to create a community of practice, the views of all should be considered and all should be welcomed and encouraged to join the community. Furthermore, as beginning teachers move from peripheral participation to central participation within a community of practice they will need to encounter and consider the views of the escapees and the cynics. If they are to become well-rounded and mature teachers they will need to engage with both.

The problem for STNE is how to accommodate this. The first reaction of the project members may be to avoid those on the 'path': leave them alone and look for more fertile soil. This is understandable but it is not an option if one wishes to build a community of practice. A community of practice that seeks to leave groups of colleagues isolated and does not wish to engage with their views is a community of practice that does not deserve to succeed. The real problem for STNE is how it can bring on board those who are critical, or worse, indifferent to the 'good news' that it proclaims. Does STNE wish to avoid the problem and work only with like-minded individuals or does it wish to confront and try to solve the problem? I would contend that if STNE is to 'renew the profession' then it will opt for the latter.

Looking through a glass darkly

At the time of writing it has to be conceded that the omens do not look propitious for STNE to renew the profession; and there are several reasons for this gloomy prognosis. Recently, there has been brouhaha within the educational press concerning student placements (Adams, 2005b; Henderson, 2005; HMIE, 2005; MacIver, 2005). But more than just the technical difficulty of placing students within schools there appears to be a genuine misunderstanding of the role of teachers and lecturers in the upbringing of student teachers.

As argued above, the concept of 'expert teacher' or 'expert lecturer' is out-of-date. The pace of change is too quick for a teacher to cope with in isolation or for an academic who is removed from the classroom, and what may have been expertise in the past soon reaches its sell-by-date (Pearson & Robson, 2005). The pace of change is such that collaboration is now a necessity. But, still, there are stereotypical views prevailing within education. For example, an 'expert teacher'. Adams (2005a, p.23) bemoans that:

... without rigorously supervised spells in schools, student teachers will be nothing more than clones of those who teach them – all theory and no practice. Schools should demonstrate best practice in the classroom and sift the wheat from the chaff with regard to what the training institutions have fed the students.

Unfortunately, implicit within this complaint is an expectation that theory is provided by the 'expert lecturer' and practice by the 'expert teacher'. With this approach there is a division of expertise and a subsequent division of roles to be performed. An inherent danger here is that akin to the 'plants growing in rocky soil': when confronted with difficulty, the interest of both teachers and lecturers may 'wither and die'. Teachers may shrug their shoulders, assert their expertise (action professional knowledge) and exclaim that 'No-one is saying that the lecturers aren't nice people, but how can you teach others to teach school pupils if you have not taught for some time?' (Adams, 2005a). Academics may wag their fingers, assert their expertise (academic professional knowledge) and retort, 'Teachers are anti-intellectual and don't actually read anything about education' (personal communication). The fault lines are evident and stressful situations will cause participants to run for cover back to their own areas of expertise.

More hopefully, though, there are shards of light as Buie (2005a) records with regard to STNE that 'class teachers will become 'mentor and co-investigator' with the student during the BEd programme and in the two years beyond'. Here is an example of the 'good soil' that may 'produce a crop' as we see the beginnings of a long-term relationship that may lead to the development of mutual trust and co-construction of knowledge so desired by Buysse *et al.* (2003).

Caterpillar tracks

So, by establishing links between student teachers and practitioners on a long-term basis, the STNE project can take the first steps in creating a

community of practice. But, as discussed above, what of all the other experienced practitioners - how can they be attracted such that the project may develop into a community of practice?

I would venture to suggest that there are tracks which STNE can follow - caterpillar tracks. A particularly enlightening article is that by Ardichvili, Page, and Wentling (2003) in which they discuss the Caterpillar Company's experience of developing a community of practice. The authors assert that:

Among the chief reasons why communities of practice are efficient tools for knowledge generation and sharing is the fact that most of a firm's competitive advantage is embedded in the intangible, tacit knowledge of its people, and...one of the ways to help people share and internalize tacit knowledge is to allow [these people] to talk about their experiences, and to exchange their knowledge while working on specific problems. (p.65)

This 'intangible, tacit knowledge' appears to be a good soil producing a good crop. Also, intangible, tacit knowledge is a good description of what experienced teachers have and use for classroom practices and so a community of practice should aim to nurture such knowledge in order to:

- Address the issue of re-invention of the wheel;
- Dissolve the barriers between educational research and practice; and
- Enable novice/student teachers to move from peripheral to central participation.

The nurturing of such intangible, tacit knowledge should be the lifeblood of a community of practice and the experiences of the Caterpillar Company are worthy of closer examination. For, as this company gained a competitive advantage by 'helping people share and internalize tacit knowledge' so too can communities of practice develop as they help experienced teachers and academics share and internalize their tacit knowledge. Likewise, as this company thrived by 'allowing them to talk about their experiences and to exchange their knowledge while working on specific problems' then communities of practice can grow as experienced teachers and academics talk about their experiences and exchange their knowledge while working on the specific problem of ITE.

In my estimation the work of Ardichvili *et al.* (2003) offers the STNE project rich seams for exploration concerning communities of practice, especially that of developing counter-narratives.

Counter-narratives

Ardichvili *et al.* (2003) refer to employees at Caterpillar '... shying away from contributing knowledge ... out of fear of criticism ...' and this is very reminiscent of recent articles by Humes (2005a) and Reilly (2005). The latter complains of 'the might of the disciplinary system' landing on those teachers who dare to be 'mildly critical'; and the former asks teachers to develop 'counter-narratives' but recognises 'that will require courage, because the techniques of marginalising dissent are well developed in Scottish education'. A community of practice would appear to offer an opportunity for teachers to develop their own counter-narratives. These counter-narratives would not be glossy propaganda, but they would be real and true.

Furthermore, and putting it bluntly - too many educational reforms have adopted a 'sticking plaster' approach. For a time the 'wound' is dressed as money, resources and people are poured into the problem but years later the 'wound' reopens and we are confronted with the same problem. I can recollect the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) of the late 1980s in which money and resources were poured into education in order to 'heal the wound' of outdated classroom practices - and it worked - but only for a while (Luby, 1995, 2004). This 'sticking plaster' approach to curriculum reform means that the next generation has to 're-dress the wound'. Thus, this generation of teachers would be well-served by the STNE project establishing a community of practice whereby teachers become enabled to develop their own counter-narratives. These counter-narratives would also inoculate student teachers against staffroom cynicism and assist them with their social cognition of learning as they move from 'peripheral to central participation' within their communities.

Another illuminating finding from the investigation by Ardichvili *et al.* (2003) is that 'the research results indicate that participants view their communities as providing spaces for joint generation of new knowledge, not just for exchanging the existing knowledge' (p.75). So the potential is there for teachers working with academics to construct counter-narratives that generate new knowledge. If the STNE project can begin to bring about such a development then what an exciting prospect for both teachers and academics!

Questions for STNE

Following the tracks set down by the Caterpillar Company, then, could prove a fruitful journey for both STNE and the wider community of Scottish education. But while the STNE project is taking its

first steps on the journey, I should like it to consider the following questions:

- (1) *Are you truly providing a 'unique opportunity... to renew the profession'? If so, are you prepared for the consequences that this will entail for the wider community of Scottish education?*
- (2) *Do you envisage the development of communities of practice as not only a tool for the development of student teachers within ITE but also as a means of enabling practising teachers to develop their own counter-narratives? If so, how do you intend to achieve this?*
- (3) *Are you aware of the opportunity that you can create to overcome the dichotomy between educational research and practice? If so, how will you attract the experienced teachers who have little time or inclination to become involved with educational research?*
- (4) *Are you aware of the opportunity presented by communities of practice to tackle the perennial problem of re-inventing the wheel with regard to curricular reform? If so, what partners do you have for bringing about the birth of such communities?*

Undoubtedly, these are all major questions and cannot be addressed easily. But it is possible for STNE to make a beginning:

- (1) You have many friends within the community of Scottish education who would welcome a bold and radical approach to ITE.
- (2) Many teachers would welcome curriculum reform that developed from their own classroom experiences - and not just what others think that their classrooms should be like - the work of Fox (2005) with aspiring chartered teachers supports this contention.
- (3) The post-McCrone era offers new opportunities for teachers' professional development - and action research should play a significant role - with recent evidence from down south affirming this (Duffy, 2005).
- (4) There already exist networks within Scottish education that can be transformed into communities of practice (e.g., Assessment is for Learning) and work has already begun in this area by the Learners, Learning and Teaching Network of the Applied Educational Research Scheme.

Developing professional knowledge - for student teachers, academics and experienced teachers - within a community of practice is a challenging enterprise. But it could prove a wonderful journey for both STNE and interested partners. The fundamental question is - are you up for the challenge?

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