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Noticing a flow of networks

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Abstract
The world of the classroom is no less a ‘flow of networks’ (Castells 1999) than the globalised world outside its doors. In this fluid context of the world outside and the inner world of identity, the linear and somewhat found understandings of reflective practice (Schon 1987) and observations of classroom practice may serve to limit rather than reveal. The authors of this paper have been engaging with the ways teachers shape personal and professional theory through a movement - oriented process of noticing (Moss et al 2004). Noticing, working at the elusive intersections of observation and construction, permits non-linear connections. Noticing theorised in this way draws on the physical (Mason 2002). The movement occurs between the seen and the seer – between beliefs, identity and responses. The movement of the eye in noticing touches the seen in various places – pulling in and out of focus that which is seen. The same movement brings in and out of focus the seer- the beliefs and values held and let go in the seeing. The focusing in the act requires convergence and divergence (‘Notitia’ being known -‘Middle English from Old French from Latin Notitia being known from notus past part. of noscere know’). The paper will report on early data on the impact of implementing this theoretical model in mass teacher education at the University of Melbourne, Australia.
Over the last three decades teacher education has been informed by developments in the areas of personal and professional teacher identity construction (Greene 1998, Kamler 2001, Britzman 2003) and reflective practice (Schon1987, Mason 2002). The engagement of these approaches in preservice education comes in a period of rethinking of identity and pedagogy within a global context. Constructions of identity are shaped and constructed as (dis)located (Edwards and Usher, 1997), multiple and hybrid (Bhabha, 1994). The fluidity of identity formation operates for teachers alongside the normalizing processes of globalising trends to benchmark teacher practice.

Working in teacher education, with preservice teachers and practising teachers, the writers of this paper are engaged with the ways these teachers shape personal and professional theory. Drawing on personal and professional identity construction and reflective practice, they have argued a non-linear, movement oriented process of noticing (Moss et al 2004) as the central theoretical underpinning of a preservice teacher education course. In this paper the development of ‘noticing’ as a way of understanding teacher decision-making is traced. Early data from the responses of student teachers to ‘noticing’ indicates the possibility this may have for informing preservice education.

**Identity both personal and professional**

Within our globalised world (Castells 1999) a poststructuralist understanding of identity ‘proposes a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think and speak’ (Weedon, 1987, p.32-3). For Edwards and Usher identity is (dis)located as we experience, in a globalised world, ‘the feeling of being neither here nor there yet also of being here and there’ (1997, p.259). Identity is understood as having spatial and temporal locations. Space and time ‘are collapsed in their very axiomatics by teletechnic dislocation, rhizomatic spreading and acceleration’ (Lather, 2000, p.189) in the construction of new and multiple identities. For positioning theorists, Harre and van Langenhove (1999), identity has spatial
understandings as it is constructed in one’s positioning with others and within a moral order and may be recognized in autobiographical stories.

Teacher professional identity has commonly been explored through narrative involving biography and autobiographies, ‘teachers lives are “storied” and their experiences are shared for the purposes of self-expression, or as a means of breaking through an apparent wall of isolation and self-doubt into a space of shared professional identity’ (Hay and White 2004, p.1). Connelly and Clandinin use narratives to engage critical reflection and imagining selves (1999). Researchers in preservice education have made use of narrative as student teachers participate in ‘authentic conversations’ (Clark 2001) and for others teacher identity is narrated through tracing the choice of metaphors for teaching (Gillis & Johnson 2002).

Narrative approaches are not necessarily preoccupied with the collection of data but with ‘data storying’ (Lather and Smithies, 1997). Britzman's work on becoming a teacher uses a range of narratives to construct the storying of teacher professional identity. Teacher identity is conceived, like personal identity, as not already constructed or found but emergent. Understanding of professional identity, like personal identity, suggests that this is an iterative process of construction and reconstruction. This changing and multiple reading of identity has implications for engagement with pedagogy.

Observation, Reflection and Noticing

These pedagogical engagements have become the central thrusts in preservice courses. It is here that teachers begin their continuing work of reflecting on their practice to inform their decision-making. Schon (1987) suggests and argues for teachers as ‘reflective practitioners’. In this practice, the teacher or practitioner develops or constructs an awareness of personal practice and distinguishes this from being a practiced or experienced professional. It involves a ‘living in’ the practice (1987, p.311). Schon argues for three forms of reflective practice: reflection-on-action (thinking back), reflection-in-action (being aware of inner thoughts while engaging in a practice) and
reflecting-through-action (awareness of practice through the act of engaging in that practice). The ground of enquiry in reflective practice is the professional incident and reflection may be on different levels – classroom, school, societal.

Mason (2002) constructs a ‘discipline of noticing’ beyond reflection into action. He proffers a ‘pragmatic approach to enquiry’. He argues that the reflective practice of Schon is too vague and instead advances a discipline of observation and reflection and action, ‘the essence of noticing is being awake to situations, being mindful rather than mindless’ (p.38). For Mason, noticing can be ‘sharpened, can be developed and refined, as part of professional development, even disciplined to form the basis for recognized research’ (p.38).

Mason makes distinctions of noticing, marking and recording in his discipline of noticing: ‘To notice is to make a distinction, to create foreground and background, to distinguish some “thing” from its surroundings’ (p.33) and the discipline includes marking ‘to mark something is to be able to re-mark upon it later to others’ (p.33). Marking provides specific data to draw on. Recording is the third distinction and he suggests ‘recording could use words as in a list, journal or creative writing, but might be expresses in some other medium including performance’ (p.34).

**Identity and reflection in Preservice Education**

As educators in preservice education, we are confronted by understandings and constructions of teacher professional knowledge that appear dichotomous. At one end of the continuum university, school and professional bodies are constrained and underpinned by understandings of content driven knowledge that are linked to competencies evident in action. Preservice teacher education is marked by linear and sequential programming: entering the course as ‘student’ teachers, hurdles of ever increasing demand, graduation and then an accreditation process from provisional to accredited as official ‘teachers’. At the other end of the continuum, another view of teacher professional knowledge, which we support, has strong links to identity and has a
focus of process and action research (Britzman 1991, Connelly and Clandinin 1999). We have long held the belief that ‘learning to teach, like teaching itself, is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation’ (Britzman 2003, p.8). And like all teachers, including those preservice teachers in our courses, we are involved in the continuing theorizing of our practice which is an iterative process. It, too, is not necessarily linear and is a fluid process of construction and reconstruction.

**Noticing: the theory practice moment**

> Perhaps one reason why teaching is one of the hardest occupations is because as a teacher you constantly get a reflection of the person that you are in the world, the life skills you acquired or didn’t, your problem solving and communication skills, the way you interact with human beings and yourself. This is a confronting place to be in. It’s also a place which is very easy to project your personal agenda on students who usually perceive themselves to be in a less powerful position to that of the teacher.

_Sivan – student teacher (Moss et al, 2004, p.13)_

> ‘Notitia’ being known -

> ‘Middle English from Old French from Latin Notitia being known from notus past part. of noscere know’

We begin the storying of the way we conceive of noticing with a short tale.

The authors of this paper had been working on the concept of noticing as a way of theorizing teacher decision-making. They had been doing so over a period of time with endless argument and discussion and with the great passion and joy. They had recently completed their first writing of ‘noticing’ (Moss et al 2004). An interstate trip for some of the authors was required on another matter involving a meeting with a respected...
The link between the teacher, their personal and professional beliefs and their teacher action is not often clearly articulated. Noticing is as much about personal perception as about what is actually seen. It draws on identity theory. Noticing involves recognition of our beliefs and these include those beliefs that are part of our personal identity. As teachers, noticing involves ontological beliefs (about what it is to be human) axiological beliefs (about ethics, right and wrong and aesthetics) and epistemological beliefs (about how we learn) (Smith & Lovatt 1990, Green 1998). Our own distinct blend of principles, beliefs, values, theories, experiences and narratives about teaching and learning is a filter through which we construct and perform as a teacher and through which we construct our students.

**Figure 1. Shaping personal and professional theory**

Three interdependent aspects of Figure 1 continually interact with each other. We have called the movement between these elements noticing (Moss et al, 2004). Noticing is an
active process or awareness, reflection and response. Noticing within the understandings of observation or reflective practice means looking beyond the superficial to recognize the interpretation of influences and elements that are not always directly observable or recognizable. It is knowing what to observe and most significantly it involves recognition that what is observed and how it is interpreted comes from within the seer’s particular framework of self, knowledge and belief. This recognition of self is not limited to recognition of the professional self with all the encumbering professional knowledge and values but is focused or lensed with and through a professional/personal identity constructed with personal knowledge and values. What is noticed and how it is noticed involves noticing of our own professional/personal identity.

Noticing holds no heavy claim to pathways to truth, no linear progression from what is seen through consideration to truth finding. Rather, it embraces the interplay of movement to and from the seer to the seen. The movement of the eye in noticing touches the seen in various places – pulling in and out of focus that which is seen. The same movement brings in and out of focus the seer- the beliefs and values held and let go in the seeing. The focusing in the act requires convergence and divergence. In noticing there is a moment of stillness between the seer and the seen. This movement of the eye is reminiscent of the researchers gaze as described by Carolyn Ellis: ‘autoethnographers gaze, first through ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moves by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p.739)

The practice of noticing allows recognition of all or fragments of what is behind the moment. This includes the student’s stories and teacher ‘storying’. The noticing is always tentative. It is not a search for causal relationships. It is bringing all or other factors into play. It changes what is significant. The movement of the noticing model is somewhat akin to the movement suggested by Bruner (1990) as he argues that we imagine ourselves from the outside in and from the inside out, from culture to mind as well as from mind to culture in an iterative process. Noticing is not linear. It does not reveal the truth of the
situation, the real reading of the critical incident. Rather, it suggests readings of the action or the situation. It acknowledges the possibility of many readings. In doing this, it opens spaces for new readings in which there may be new constructions of the ‘noticer’ and the ‘noticed’. Noticing is akin to a cinematic technique. In filmmaking, camera operators will use a ‘pull-focus’ technique. Here, the wide shot of a scene will be changed through ‘pull focus’ so that the viewer sees one person sharply and the others are backgrounded. The shot can then be shifted to bring the others into focus. So too in noticing the situation is pulled in and out of focus. Noticing frames, spatially and temporally dislocates and focuses the seer and what is seen.

Noticing, whether of the whole group or a particular student, has a lightness to it. Observations of students are often recommended in educational texts (Schon 1987, Mason 2002). It is suggested that detailed records be kept. The checklists of activities, the running records, may become rigid containers or extended labels. This is not to argue against the use of recorded observations. They need to be viewed with the lightness of noticing, as incomplete, contingent, fluid and dynamic and in and out of focus.

In developing and teaching through this understanding of noticing the writers/researchers/teachers see much of value in the approaches of reflective practice and in Mason’s Discipline of noticing. In many ways they are complementary to what we have been arguing both here and in the education classroom. We have distinguished noticing through its quality of linking the personal and professional and its ground in the professional incident (for us there may be no recognizable or substantive critical incident). Further, these moments and the noticing may be spatially and temporally dislocated and the weight of the process of ‘noticing’ may be light even ephemeral.

**Noticing in preservice education classrooms**

We have been engaging in the construction and teaching through ‘noticing’ in preservice education classes in 2003 and in 2004. We work in a large Australian university where we teach core education subjects to a student cohort of approximately nine hundred. The
place of personal and professional identity in becoming a teacher now holds a strong place in core professional studies in preservice education. Britzman argues the place of biography in becoming a teacher:

To understand the process whereby experience becomes meaningful requires that we situate ourselves in history and as critical the relationships and intersections—both given and possible—of biography and social structure. (p.232).

So, too, in our subject the student’s work is underpinned by the construction of their professional identities, ‘there will be a personal and unique match between you, the elements of your environment and certain crucial incidents or formative moments’ (Moss et al 2004, p.9). In our course, the notion of emergent teacher identity is seen through four processes:

1. Narrating Identity (Stories about teaching and identity)
2. Imagining Identity (Contemporary theoretical approaches to teacher identity and identity through metaphor)
3. Acting Out Identity (Examples of teacher values and beliefs in action)
4. Integrating identity (Personal transformation)

Britzman argues for the dual work of identity and reflective practice in teacher education ‘The teacher-as-researcher movement offers the research strategies and the reflexive analytical skills that can encourage the development of sensitive practices’ (2003, p.239). For us, this practice is shaped, not by reflexive analytic skills, but by the lighter and fluid concept of noticing. As described earlier these are no less analytical or critical but encompass greater tentativeness and resist certainty. In our classrooms, the student teachers ‘write’ and stage texts of their personal and professional identity through our construction of noticing.

The data for this research draws on the student experiences in this subject with its emphases on identity and noticing. Our research is in its initial stages and comes as we have worked alongside our students as they engage with these theories. Much of the
teaching and learning activities draw on an arts based approach drawing on performance as a way of constructing personal and professional identity (Dixon & White 2003; Dixon, White and Smerdon, 2003; White & Dixon, forthcoming). In assessment activities the students produce texts in which they draw on biographies that ‘include fictive, imaginative and authored reconstruction of events’ (Richardson, 1994, p.523). We see that there is no single way of ‘writing’ of their noticing of their emergent identity. The students have written, photographed, digitalised their noticing of identity in a myriad of performances.

For Manoj an annotated book of photographs from his home, from the university classroom and from his classrooms on school experience construct and communicate his noticing. In his first photograph of himself in the classroom he sits alone and notes his place as an outsider. He notices he is an outsider to the other students because he is a ‘foreigner’ to this country and he is an outsider because of the way we are teaching and because of the theories of noticing and identity that underpin this course. For him this theoretical work is not the objective knowledge with which he is familiar. As the pages are turned the configurations of people in them alter. He can be seen working with the group; they even work at his house. He ‘notices’ how he has placed himself inside and outside. There are then photos of him with his own school students taking them all on excursion. He finishes the book with ‘There will be no foreigners in my class’.

For Katie a fractured mirror as a puzzle constructs and communicates her noticing:

As I reflected on the formation of my identity, I realised not only is it a multi-layered complexity with various pieces of experience presenting themselves, it isn’t refined. Not all elements of my identity are represented [in the mirror] in an easy to comprehend form. Therefore, to leave the underside of the puzzle unpainted is to represent the raw and coarse nature of the formation of one’s identity…. as I look into the piece, I can hold my gaze in the mirror that forms my identity. Not only do I see my reflection,
but I notice it and prevent myself from naming the reflection, in a sense, placing myself in a student’s shoes.

Mark, a student with a strong academic background including doctoral studies, has found the content of the course frustrating. He refuses to engage with personal identity as a construct of professional identity and views the fluid and non-linear stance of noticing as insubstantial, ‘I have an enormous responsibility to Maths. What I know about Maths is the significant factor in how successful I will be and I need to spend my time learning about the strategies which are most effective in teaching that knowledge, not in talking about myself or what I think I see.’

At this stage of the semester the students are about to go into schools and engage with noticing and its links to decision making. In this work they will be transgressing much of the history of reflective practice in schools. They will be invited to bring to the fore the place of their personal identity, their personal values and beliefs, alongside and entwined with their professional identity, their professional values and beliefs. They will be encouraged to notice the flow of networks of identity, values and action. Like Britzman, we ask ‘What would a utopia of teacher education be like? What kinds of identities might be made available?’ (2003, p. 340). We also imagine how teaching might be if teachers notice the blurring of their personal and professional identities. It is still much in our imaginations at this early stage of teaching and researching and we look forward to the possibilities of real imaginings.
References


