

Passion for Learning

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Introduction

How can we facilitate continuous, life-long learning in teacher education? How can we take into account every teacher students' starting point, working and life context? How can we ensure that teacher students really learn something essential and meaningful in order that they become better teachers instead of just passing through the teacher education? These types of questions have challenged us to strive for developing good practices in order to support continuous learning.

This is apparent both at a national and European level. Indeed, supporting individual learning and preparing personal learning paths is a challenge for European educators. For instance, the idea of the PLP forms one element of the implementation of the pilot study modules in a Leonardo da Vinci project titled Competent-Sys-Trainer. The project aims at developing and implementing a competence based management system for trainers in continuing vocational education and training (www.cstrainer.net).

On a national level, the vocational teacher education college has been developing the PLP for a number of years. At the vocational teacher education college the teacher students are adults. They already possess a professional degree and work experience. A majority of the students work as teachers besides studying. The background of the students, the professional fields and the mode of education that they represent and their experience as a teacher varies greatly. From our point of view as teacher educators, the teacher students possess a lot of potential which we want to give space to. In this article we describe the background and the method of the Personal Learning Plan in supporting continuous learning.

Continuous learning as a core competence of a teacher

The importance of continuous learning of teachers has

been highlighted from many perspectives. Firstly, the changes in the environment of education demand the development of education and teachers are at the centre of the process. As examples of the changes, new technology and international collaboration require new competencies of the teachers. Secondly, the new role of educational institutions is seen as being more dynamic in its environment than before. No school is a lonely, isolated island but represents different networks of teachers' work environment. The demands of regional development work mean that the teachers have to widen their development perspectives from the development of the classroom as a learning environment to the development of the whole school as a part of the region. Luukkainen (2000, 99) contends that the societal responsibility of teachers widens. The challenge is to create new, non-traditional learning possibilities for diverse students. Thirdly, new paradigms of learning challenges the teachers to develop their ways of working and to deepen their understanding about the learning processes. Teachers must increasingly be able to support and motivate the students' development in an individual, empathetic and reflective manner (Helakorpi 2005, 6). Fourthly, all of the above demands a comprehensive change of school culture which covers all levels of the school's action. Collegial collaboration becomes more important in order to meet the diverse challenges and develop the school as a learning organisation (Coppieters 2005, 134).

There are a number of descriptions of teachers' competence and expertise (Helakorpi 2005, Luukkainen 2000, Pyhältö 2003) and also of the demands that the teachers should meet. At the teacher education college we have tried to define the core competence areas which we consider the most important to facilitate during the basic education of teachers. Teachers' professional development and growth is seen as a continuum, life-long learning. Therefore, it is not possible to learn everything in the basic teacher education. On the contrary it is

essential to define a few fundamental matters which form the basis for teachers' life-long learning.

Characteristic to the concept of competence is that competence is understood as a whole by which a human being aims at to respond to the demands of different areas of life (Keurulainen 2005). Therefore, competence is a relativistic and dynamic state. At the Vocational Teacher Education College of Jyväskylä, the competencies have been defined firstly, by analysing the changing trends in society, secondly, by analysing the changes in working life and competencies needed in working life and finally, by analysing the changes in the structures of education, especially vocational education as well as changes in teachers' competencies. From the basis of the analysis, teachers' work is defined by wide, essential competence areas which are facilitating learning, development of the educational environment, cooperation and interaction and continuous learning.

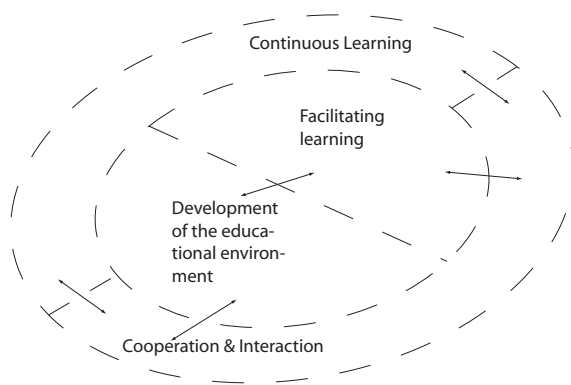


Figure 1. The core competences of a teacher's work (Keurulainen 2005)

The core competence area for teachers is the facilitation of learning. This competence area has traditionally received the most attention when the professional skills of a teacher are considered. New learning environments have expanded upon the traditional idea of the work of a teacher. A teacher is expected to have competence in finding new ways in which learning can be facilitated. The development of information technology has made web-based learning an option for the support of the learning/teaching process. The development of new ways of working demands that a teacher is conscious of the realities and developments in working life, the future demands of the teaching profession and that s/he has a perspective about the nature of human learning.

An important part of teaching is having a theoretical command of the content to be taught, which must also be flexible in order that the teacher can respond to changing circumstances. The required level of knowledge of the content differs for various tasks. However, a teacher should have the competence demanded by the teaching environment and teaching goals.

In addition to facilitating learning, a teacher must also be able to function at many different levels. A teacher is involved in the development of his/her own institution, and s/he must have the skills to do so. For example, a teacher must have the skills to develop curricula, the quality of the institution and undertake various projects. In this way 'intrapreneurial' skills are needed when developing the content and methods of an institute, so that there is a firm understanding of institutional quality and economic realities.

Now and in the future, teachers must be competent at communicating and interacting at many different levels. Cooperation at the institutional level requires the ability to form guidance and peer relationships. In a broader sense it

also involves the ability to work within organisations which form cross institutional cooperative relationships with other institutes and working life. In today's vocational education institutes teachers encounter this daily through their participation in such things as learning in the workplace and project work. In its broadest sense, cooperation reaches into international and global arenas, which for many teachers and institutes has become an everyday reality through international projects.

The institute and working environment of the teacher is made up of various cooperative relationships with local and regional working life. Knowledge and skills such as the ability to predict the direction of change in a profession, the development of professional skills and a command of the theoretical and practical aspects of assessment have become a very essential part of a teacher's work. In order to develop working life, schools must be in contact with each other to form a regional network. In its broadest sense the work environment of a teacher and an educational institute is composed of various national and international networks.

As mentioned previously, the ability for continuous learning represents an essential component of the core competence areas. The concept of reflection is what joins these areas of competence together, and in this way a teacher develops his/her own work, continuously develops a practical theory, and does not rely on given theory and methods alone. Nissilä (2005, 211) highlight the reflective skills as a key element in developing personal mastery and in team learning.

In order to develop one's own teaching and work environment a teacher must have the ability for self-assessment and reflection. However, it is important to remember that reflection is essential at both the individual level, as well as at the work community level too. In this way, communication becomes an essential tool, with which a common understanding can be formed about the work and development of a work community. Communication requires collegial cooperation and interaction, which is one of the key factors for the development of teaching.

Learner-centred approach as a stone base of teacher education

The roots of self-directed learning come from John Dewey's views about human beings' learning: all persons are born with unlimited potential for growth and development. Dewey (1918, 1938) saw that a teachers' role was to guide but not to interfere and control the learning process. Contemporary adult learning theory values a learner-centred approach (Williams 2001). At the Vocational Teacher Education College the education is based on ideas of adult learning, which highlight the adult learners' responsibility for their own learning, the capacity to manage their own learning and the focus on self-development.

The concept of self-directed learning has been described as follows: a self-initiated process of learning that stresses the ability of individuals to plan and manage their own learning, an attribute or characteristic of learners and a way of organising learning in formal settings that allows for greater learner control (Brockett and Heimstra 1991, Candy 1991, Caffarella 1993, Williams 2001). In self-directed learning the learner chooses to assume primary responsibility for planning, following through and evaluating their own learning experiences (Brockett and Heimstra 1991, Candy 1991). Personal responsibility has been described as the willingness to assume ownership of thoughts and actions, and is considered the cornerstone of self-direction in learning. In assuming responsibility for thoughts and actions, an individual also assumes responsibility for the consequences

of those actions. Within the context of adult learning, it is the ability and willingness of individuals to take control over their own learning that determines their potential for self-direction (Candy 1991, Garrison 1992).

Developing teacher students' ability to become aware of their learning

Self-directed learning includes three dimensions: the learning environment which makes self-directed learning possible, the learners' learning skills and the learners' orientation to learning. Lately in Finland the issue of personalising studies has been brought up strongly, especially in adult education, but also in education in general. The idea of personalising challenges the educational institutions to develop their action in a student-oriented manner so that the education supports adults to become participative developers of their work. The possibility to personalise the studies and to design individual learning paths demands flexibility in the structures of the studies. For example, the curriculum forms the framework and expresses the aims for the learning. There must be space for the students to make choices, to study what is valuable for them and to connect the studies with their work and life context.

Roger (2003) discusses the differences between teaching adults and teaching young children. He states that in the relations between teacher and learner there are profound differences because of the identities they both construct; and these differences impact on the processes of teaching. The difference between teaching adults and teaching children lies more in the power relationships than in the learning processes. Personalising the studies presumes that the teachers 1) have an ability to face the adult learners as experts of their own life and as equal interlocutors (2) are willing and have skills to facilitate learning by respecting the learners and their learning, giving time and attention, helping in problem solving, 3) support the growth of the learners' self-directed learning individually and together with the group, 4) have skills and also tools to map, identify and recognise the learners' knowledge and skills, 5) have skills and tools to identify the learners' strengths and difficulties in learning as well as learning styles, 6) assess the professional development together with the learners. In other words, we have to give power and responsibility to the learners to be the subject of their learning.

PLP as a tool

At the Vocational Teacher Education College the Personal Learning Plan (PLP) is a tool to catalyse self-directed and continuous learning process. The PLP is a content and mode-wide plan about how the learners can reach the goals of the teacher education individually. Planning a PLP is based on ongoing and active observation, assessment and reflection of one's learning in relation to the goals of the teacher education. The function of the PLP is to analyse and structure the individual progress of the learner. The PLP is dynamic, it becomes more specific and adapts to the student's needs as the studies progress.

At the beginning of the teacher education the PLP helps the learners to illustrate the paths of their professional growth heretofore: through what kind of professional and educational phases they have come to teacher education. At the same time the PLP contains a strong future perspective. The initial mapping of one's professional growth guides the students to analyse those matters they have learnt at different stages of their life and to find out the essential challenges for their learning from the teacher education point of view. One

aspect of the processing is that for teachers it is important to recognise the phases of professional growth in themselves in order to see and support the growth of their students.

The teacher education, in addition to the assignments included in it, is connected with the students' own work as teachers, work community and development of their professional field through the PLP. In that way the teacher education takes real and practical effect in the surrounding community and society.

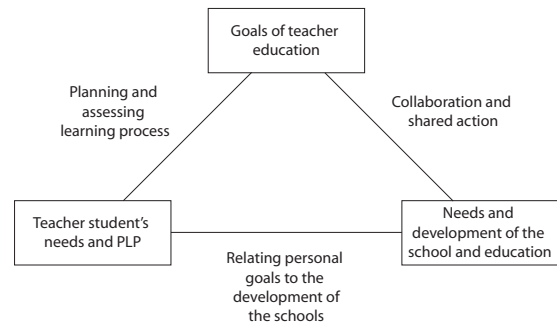


Figure 2. The aspects of the use of PLP

Figure 2 summarises and shows the different aspects of the PLP. Firstly, the meaning of the personal learning plan (PLP) is to support the student to plan and assess his/her learning process. The wider questions guiding the PLP are those that deal with the common goals of the teacher education. Secondly, the PLP is realised in detail from the student's own goals that relate to the development of his/her own teaching. And thirdly, through the PLP the teacher education is connected with and involved in the development of educational institutions.

Making the PLP is a process which starts in the beginning of the studies and continues until the end of the studies. It is important that the teacher students write the preliminary thoughts on paper in the beginning of the study process although for some students it is hard to define the needs and set the goals because they do not yet know what they need to know. When the studies progress the teacher students' awareness of the needs increase. Self-assessment, discussions with peers and the teacher educators are the essential parts of the awareness raising process.

The first draft of the PLP can include the following issues that the teacher students work on:

1. Analysing one's own study orientation
2. Setting preliminary goals of teacher education on a personal level
3. Mapping the resources for an individual study path (A tentative time table, persons, support, networks, etc.)

The teacher students analyse and discuss these themes in writing in a personal manner.

The teacher students analyse their study orientation by taking into account their working and life context, personal and professional expertise as well as work place skills as a basis for defining the individual study orientation. The previous experiences, contemporary work and life circumstances shape a teacher student's beliefs and conception of him/herself as a learner, motivation and motives as well as expectations. The other part of the analysis process is to reflect the views to the ideas of learning and the ways of working of the teacher education.

To get started the process is assisted by the following questions:

- What are my motives for taking teacher education?
- What is my starting point? Where do I come from to teacher education?
- What educational and professional milestones have been significant for my personal development as a teacher?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses as a learner?

To set essential and meaningful goals means that the teacher students take control and responsibility for their own learning. In order to set the goals for their learning the teacher students explore the teacher's competencies, which are understood as skills and abilities to be achieved at the personal level. The structure and implementation of the teacher education programme allow the teacher students to emphasise the personal needs and goals as well as the needs of their work community. There is an in-built idea of development orientation. The teacher students develop their human resources to be able to develop better schools and better education.

- What do the vocational teachers competencies mean to me?
- Which aspects of learning / teaching do I need to focus on?
- Are my learning objectives clear and realistic? Do they describe what I intend to learn?
- How can I gain meaningful learning experiences during the teacher education?

The PLP concretises the needed resources: time for the studies vs. other commitments, individual effort vs. collaborative effort, personal expertise vs. shared expertise, "hard" materials (books, web, etc) vs. "soft" material (social networks). The idea is to consider what are the learning strategies and resources reasonable and appropriate.

It's important to emphasise that the PLP will be updated, reflected and evaluated during the studies so that teacher students can access their learning from the perspectives of their own goals and the perspective of development of their work environment and can find evidences of their own learning.

Conclusions

The PLP is a practical tool to support teacher students' individual learning process and to make the learning process visible. Support from the peers and the teacher educators encourages the passion for learning and facilitates continuous learning as a heart of the teacher's professional development. Furthermore, Lee (2005) highlights that when persons can integrate what they learn with their context and they are able to get a variety of support, this cohesiveness helps teacher students keep their enthusiasm about new knowledge and novel applications.

According to our experiences the PLP helps the teacher students to become more aware of their learning. It empowers the learner and puts the learner at the centre of the learning process. The learner has the power to find his/her own ways to develop professionally and use the PLP as a written document in self-assessment. For teacher education the PLP is a method which provides multi-mode individual support for teacher students.

The PLP offers the teacher students an excellent possibility for self-evaluation and in practice is a useful assessment tool. The PLP makes visible the teacher students' values and relationships with learners and colleagues. The PLP is a link from the past to the future. Furthermore the PLP helps the teacher students to see their role as a developer of the

educational institution.

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