

Tools or Weapons?

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Introduction

The introduction of professional standards for teachers in Australia has caused, and continues to cause, a variety of responses. At one extreme, they do nothing more than reduce the complex art of teaching to a set of measurable attributes (Groves, Wallace and Loudon 2001), and rarely reflect considered theoretical educational perspectives (Petrosky and Delandshere 2001). At the other extreme, professional standards for teachers provide an opportunity for governments to impose structures whereby beginning teachers are subjected to levels of rigour so that school students will ultimately be educated to the best of their abilities (Nelson 2005). In between, teacher-education regulatory bodies and the deans of faculties of education in Australian universities, have developed a set of standards that guide the development of teacher-education programs, and which also acknowledge the limitations of such standards, noting that teachers' levels of knowledge, skills and understandings continue to grow throughout their professional lives (Australian Council of Deans of Education 1998).

In this paper, the authors, who represent a collaboration between a teacher-education school located on a regional campus of an Australian university and the regulatory body for the teaching profession in the Australian State of Victoria, consider the range of responses to the introduction of professional standards, and pose the question: can the standards for graduating teachers be used as tools and not weapons?

Setting the scene

Pre-service teacher education in the State of Victoria, Australia, is offered by eight universities, all of which are multi-campus. La Trobe University is one of these universities and has both metropolitan and regional campuses. While the main campus

of La Trobe University is in metropolitan Melbourne, this paper concentrates on the Albury-Wodonga Campus, which is one of the University's smaller regional campuses of approximately 1,100 students.

In Victoria, teacher education courses are approved by the Accreditation Committee of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). The VIT was established in 2002 as a statutory authority for the regulation and promotion of the teaching profession in Victoria. The Institute's Accreditation Committee is a committee comprised of teachers and principals from government and independent schools, teacher educators, employer nominees and parents. The main function of the Committee is 'to assess and approve teacher education courses for the purposes of registration under [the] Act consistently with the guidelines issued by the Institute' (Parliament of Victoria 2001, 51).

At this point in time there are many changes afoot in Victoria, such as the introduction of the *Achievement Improvement Monitor* (AIM), which is a statewide assessment and reporting program in English and Mathematics for all Victorian school students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9; the recent introduction of the *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* (VELS), a curriculum document that details the knowledge, skills and behaviours that students will need in the future, and the *Principles of Learning and Teaching* (PoLTs), which concentrate on the teacher's role in creating and maintaining conducive learning environments for students and which are designed to support teachers working with VELs (Department of Education and Training 2005, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2005).

Background to standards

Currently, the VIT Accreditation Committee uses the standards developed by the former Standards Council of

the Teaching Profession (SCTP) as interim standards for the approval of teacher education courses. On a cyclical basis, universities apply to the Committee for approval by providing documentation that describes the course and indicates how the course will prepare graduates in accordance with the guidelines (Standards Council of the Teaching Profession 1998). A Committee review panel examines the documents provided and then raises questions or issues for discussion with university representatives. When the panel is satisfied that the course meets the standards, it recommends the course to the Accreditation Committee for approval.

In this process, the approval is based on the assumption that if certain elements are evident in a course, then graduates from the course will have the skills, understandings and experiences needed to prepare them for teaching in Victoria. The expectations in the *Guidelines for the Evaluation of Teacher Education Courses* (Standards Council of the Teaching Profession 1998) are implicit rather than explicit. However, the recent changes in education in Victoria have brought about a shift in the culture of education towards increased accountability, where expected outcomes are explicit, measured and reported upon. This is particularly evident in the Victorian Parliamentary Education and Training Committee's report of their inquiry into the suitability of pre-service teacher training in Victoria, which recommended that the VIT enhance the existing approval process by:

- Requiring universities to provide detailed documentation outlining mechanisms for ongoing monitoring, evaluation and modification of teacher education courses, their curriculum and delivery;
- Implementing an annual survey of graduating teachers, mentor teachers and school principals, and
- Benchmarking the performance of teacher education providers (Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee 2005).

Partly in response to this change in culture and partly because of the need to review and develop the standards for teacher education course approval, the VIT initiated the *Future Teachers Project* in 2004. The aims of the project are to:

- Establish standards for graduates of Victorian pre-service teacher education programs
- Develop new guidelines for pre-service teacher education course approval
- Review the accreditation processes for pre-service teacher education courses

Stage one of the project involved a major research phase, aimed at determining perceptions of current teacher education models and identifying changes that should be made to better prepare future teachers. Stage two involved preparing a discussion paper on the proposed standards, guidelines and processes. Stage three, consultation on the discussion paper with teachers, principals, teacher educators, employer and other key stakeholders, will take place late in 2005 and early 2006. The final approval stage is expected to be completed during 2006, ready for implementation from the beginning of 2007.

To date, the Institute has produced the *Draft Standards for Graduating Teachers*, which have been developed after initial consultation with teachers, principals and teacher educators, as the standards of practice, knowledge and engagement that graduating teachers are expected to meet on graduation from their pre-service teacher education courses (Victorian Institute of Teaching 2004). The standards are still to undergo wide consultation with stakeholders before they are accepted and

endorsed by the VIT governing Council.

Intended purposes of standards in Victoria

The Standards for Graduating Teachers will have two essential purposes. They will seek to describe what a graduating teacher should expect to know and be able to do at the conclusion of an approved course of teacher education. They will also establish what the profession expects an approved course of initial professional learning to deliver.

As an important process in achieving the standards, the VIT will work to actively encourage the development of sustainable partnerships between universities and schools so that opportunities and experiences are provided for pre-service teacher education students that support their professional development and that enable the necessary integration between the theoretical and practical components of their program of study.

The introduction of the *Standards for Graduating Teachers* will also mean that all pre-service teacher-education courses in Victorian universities will be accountable to the profession and will therefore need to be able to demonstrate that graduating teachers can satisfactorily demonstrate the outcomes represented by the standards. This accountability will be achieved through the benchmarking of courses against the standards, using a survey instrument to gather perceptions of the suitability of teacher education courses from beginning teachers and their employers.

Graduate diploma in education (P-12)

La Trobe University Albury-Wodonga is a major regional campus of the La Trobe University network. The campus is located in Victoria in the City of Wodonga, with the City of Albury just across the Murray River in NSW. Together, Albury and Wodonga make up the largest rural regional centre in Australia (population:105,000). The Albury-Wodonga Campus, established in 1991, has a student population of 1,200 students.

The School of Educational Studies at this campus is part of the Faculty of Education, 150 students are postgraduate with some cross faculty undergraduate teaching in some units.

The Graduate Diploma in Education (P-12) – a course designed to prepare teachers to teach from the Preparatory year to Year 12 – commenced in 1997. The course was developed to reflect the curriculum offered in Government schools throughout the State at that time. The current structure and philosophy of the GDE (P-12) course has been as a result of a collaborative and evolutionary process involving lecturing staff; students in the course; graduates from the course, and members of education communities (including VIT) (School of Educational Studies 2005). The intensive nature of the course has remained consistent, with students required to attend from 9:00am to 4:00pm for 40 weeks. The initial student intake was twenty students, and since its inception demand for the course has been high and competitive. In 2005, the course intake has increased to eighty students.

The course consists of three subjects: *Issues in Education* and *Methods of Teaching* inform the students' fieldwork and teaching practice experiences, which comprise the third subject, *Teaching Practice*. In the *Methods of Teaching* subject, students identify where and how to source content and experience a range of teaching methodologies for each of the Key Learning Areas (KLAs): Visual and Performing Arts, Health and Physical Education, Science, English, Technology, Studies of Society (SOSE) and Environment, and Mathematics. All

students study methodologies for each KLA to Year 10. The content from the students' previous undergraduate degree provides the focus of their senior secondary school (Years 11 and 12) teaching method/s.

The GDE(P-12) was due for reaccreditation by the VIT for the commencement of 2005. On this occasion, the proposal was for a course that was at the forefront of educational changes in Victoria and which attempted to pre-empt the recently-introduced VELs and PoLTs initiatives. The course developers recognised that it was necessary that students be given guidance about what is expected of them as graduating teachers. With this in mind, the course developers used the professional standards for graduates from another State as a transitional step, which was a recognition that the imminent Victorian professional standards would be likely to be similar to these.

Standards as tools

The *Draft Standards for Graduating Teachers* (Victorian Institute of Teaching 2004) comprise eight standards as well as the nominated characteristics for each of the standards (refer Appendix 1). Rather than seeing the standards as weapons, which can be used to control or restrict, the standards were used to guide the development of opportunities for deep learning and understanding in an engaging manner for the students in the course.

In the following section of the paper, one characteristic from each of the eight standards has been chosen, along with examples from the course to show how the characteristic is demonstrated within the GDE (P-12) course.

Theme: Professional Knowledge

Standard 1: Teachers know how students learn and how to teach them effectively.

Characteristic: Have a critical knowledge of current learning theories and of pedagogical models from which they draw their practice.

Examples:

- Mentors in schools;
- Lecturers as mentors;
- Parallel things happening – theoretical (including hurdle requirements built into the different assessment tasks) plus fieldwork and practicum experiences and the personal/professional relationships that develop;
- Case studies assessment task
- Annotated bibliographies and literature reviews, which progressively link earlier insights into a philosophy essay and are then portrayed in portfolio presentations.

Theme: Professional Knowledge

Standard 2: Teachers know the content they teach.

Characteristic: Know the methodologies, resources and technologies used to support and assess student learning within their curriculum areas.

Examples:

- The work undertaken on PoLTs and VELs: linking the experiences to which the students have been exposed with their theoretical underpinnings;
- Recognition of the previous experiences and backgrounds that students have prior to entering the course;
- Approaches to using ICT are incorporated into the disciplines;
- An integrated approach to assessments;
- Lecturers and students all contribute to on-line discussions using the course's web-based instructional platform;
- Connections with practising teachers during VCE fieldwork and connections with VCE mentors and other teachers who act as guest speakers.

Theme: Professional Knowledge

Standard 3: Teachers know their students.

Characteristic: Demonstrate empathy and positive regard for, and rapport with, students.

Examples:

- My Mate: where our students support students in a local primary school over a period of 7 weeks so that they can experience for themselves how the students "fit" into the classroom environment and become aware of how teachers and others support students;
- Inclusive teaching practices are modeled and made explicit to the students, and strategies that they might utilize in their own teaching are explored. These include:
- Prior to conducting sensitive sessions, we ensure that the counselors in Student Services are notified;
- Making reasonable adjustments for students;
- Self-care strategies;
- Monitoring of the course's web-based instructional platform interactions and being sensitive to problems that might be arising – looking for warning signals
- Mentor groups – relationship-building with smaller groups of students.

Theme: Professional Practice

Standard 4: Teachers plan and assess for effective learning.

Characteristic: Plan learning sequences and units which are consistent with curriculum statements and frameworks and assessment structures commonly used in schools.

Examples:

- Collaboration with teachers within different cluster groups of schools to develop fieldwork opportunities, culminating in events such as presentations of the projects on which the students have been working with school pupils. These initiatives were informed by earlier research (see Keamy, Bottrell & Fildes 2003);
- Assessments of integrated English/BOSE/Maths units of work, which include role plays, fishbowls, scenario developments and multi-media presentations.

Theme: Professional Practice

Standard 5: Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments.

Characteristic: Manage the materials, resources and physical space of the classroom to ensure a safe and challenging environment for learning.

Examples:

- Exploring the multiple meanings of what constitutes a 'classroom', and managing alternative classroom environments;
- Shelter construction: exploring technological processes and materials by making shelters in a safe environment;
- Science of Schools – OH&S considerations and ethics;
- Arts exhibition and public art: encouraging students to take risks in a range of environments and by engaging with members of the community;
- Risk assessment: science-based risks, approvals processes, risk assessment and planning for excursions.

Theme: Professional Practice

Standard 6: Teachers use a range of teaching practices and resources to engage students in effective learning.

Characteristic: Model curiosity and enthusiasm for learning and are aware of strategies to make the content they teach accessible and relevant.

Examples:

- Pedagogical principles: develop a variety of approaches to learning and teaching ensuring relevance to students and acknowledging their diversity;
- The structure of the approach to assessment: compulsory and elective tasks – not only diversity of tasks but also diversity in the way/s in which students approach them;
- On-line postings of lecture material and supplementary information in an accessible manner using the course's web-based instructional platform.

Theme: Professional Engagement

Standard 7: Teachers reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice.

Characteristic: Understand the structures and skills that underpin collegiate practice and demonstrate a capacity to work collaboratively within the profession.

Examples:

- Group assessment, which encourages the benefits of teamwork as well as addressing the problematic elements of working collegially;
- Mentor groups, the modeling provided by lecturers team-teaching, including transparent planning, working with individuals' strengths but also being prepared to go outside comfort zones and explore new territory.

Theme: Professional Engagement

Standard 8: Teachers are active members of their profession.

Characteristic: Understand the social, political and ethical dimensions of education and within that framework can articulate a vision or philosophy of the role of a teacher and their work specifically.

Examples:

- The philosophy and portfolio assessment tasks allow the students to position themselves;
- Practising teachers and principals visit the students to talk about the social, political and ethical dimensions of schools;
- Invited guest speakers to discuss the social, political and ethical dimensions of education from a community and global perspective, e.g. Indigenous community members; a volunteer from Banda Aceh, global education specialist, and a sexual health professional.

Conclusion

Tools can be considered instruments or pieces of equipment that can be held in the hands, they may also be considered strategies or skills. Looking at standards in teacher education as tools can be useful; standards can provide flexibility – yes they are necessarily constrictive – but may also be manipulated in creative ways. The perspectives adopted in the Graduate Diploma in Education (P-12) at the Albury-Wodonga Campus of La Trobe University is that to be credible and effective in teacher education the development of genuine collaborative relationships must be modelled. In contrast, what must not be modelled for educators of the future is learning and teaching that is based on a top down model of imposed change.

The glimpses that have been offered in this paper into a collaboration between teacher-educators at one of La Trobe University's regional campuses and the Victoria Institute of Teaching, describe a range of responses to the introduction of professional standards, and establish a response that standards for graduating teachers need not be used as weapons and can most certainly be used as tools.

The authors of the paper consider that although much of the disquiet about the introduction of standards may be reason to ensure a vigilant stance about appropriateness is adopted, teacher educators must actively involve themselves in the development of such standards. This is particularly relevant in an educational culture where there is an increasing emphasis on accountability. The standards also provide a great deal of flexibility and creative interpretation and the authors consider that professional standards for teachers create opportunities for teacher-educators to bring to their teaching a melding of their own wisdom and informed educational insights, as well as an ability to work with curriculum innovations and improvements. Standards offer options for accountability but not necessarily conformity, which has been articulated in the nature of innovations introduced into this teacher education program. In this regard, the authors consider that professional standards for graduating teachers need not be weapons that control and limit teacher-education, but that they can be considered as tools that have the capacity to provide practical stimuli to inspire original instructional approaches that build on sound, educational theories. As in the safe use of any tools or weapons, the responsibility for those stakeholders in teacher education can be seen to be one of active collaboration rather than passive compliance in order to achieve standards.

Appendix

Draft standards of professional practice for graduating teachers

Pre-service Teacher Education Courses are an integral stage within the continuum of professional learning for teachers.

These structured programs of initial professional learning provide the foundation for future professional practice and the critical professional knowledge and skill required for teachers to engage with their profession, to contribute to policy and research, to analyse trends and initiatives within education and to contribute to the body of professional knowledge over time.

Standards for Graduating Teachers have two essential purposes. They seek to describe what a graduating teacher should expect to know and be able to do at the conclusion of an approved course of teacher education. They also establish what the profession expects an approved course of initial professional learning to deliver.

The draft standards which follow are structured to be consistent with the framework of broad themes and eight

standards which underpin the Institute's registration processes and which the profession in Victoria consider to be essential elements of teaching.

They are also designed to provide a foundation for the Institute's process for approving courses of pre-service teacher education.

The Victorian Institute of Teaching requires all graduating teachers to have had pre-service professional learning experiences which lead to the development of knowledge and practice in these eight areas.

A range of characteristics of professional knowledge and practice have been identified by teachers and teacher educators as essential for the preparation of members of the teaching profession.

These characteristics provide a description of the foundational knowledge which allows teacher's to engage in and reflect on professional practice and provides a sound preparation for practice within the profession on graduation.

All teachers graduating from a course of teacher education should have opportunities to consider, understand and develop this essential body of professional knowledge and practice.

Universities seeking to prepare teachers will have their courses reviewed for their capacity to provide candidates with this essential professional knowledge and practice and to demonstrate that graduates of their courses meet these standards.

These Standards for Graduating Teachers provide the profession with an opportunity to shape the practice and ensure the strength and capacity of our profession.

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