Assessing for work integrated learning experiences: A pre-service teacher perspective

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A critical aspect of the debate about work integrated learning in the university context is the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities in terms of student learning. In an Australian pre-service teacher education program this blurring of boundaries is apparent in stakeholder tensions about the nature and role of assessment during the practicum. In the study reported in this paper, students responded positively to the content of assessment tasks but maintained that their efforts to implement the associated planning in the workplace were stymied because of disparate understandings between university and school staff about the purpose of the task. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2011, 12(1), 1-17*)

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INTRODUCTION

Out of the international debate on the impact of the global economic crisis have emerged questions about the future of universities. In Australia, speculation is rife about the federal government's plans to increase participation rates and move the sector to a more competitive base through the introduction of student vouchers. Vouchers will give students greater choice over what and where they study. The Bradley Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. 4) argues that the sector faces a period of unprecedented change and that "Australia needs a higher education sector that is responsive to unpredictable change on a global scale."

For many, the economic climate makes training and further education even more important. Moreover, students who want to be competitive in the job market need to respond to employers' demands for work-ready graduates able to hit the floor running. Whilst it has long been recognized that work integrated learning[2] (WIL) provides students with a context and an opportunity to develop their generic

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[2] The World Association for Cooperative Education (WACE, n. d.) provides the following definition of work integrated learning: "Work Integrated Learning combines professional work experiences with classroom studies in many forms, including: Research, Internships, Study Abroad, Service Learning, Student Teaching, Clinical Rotations, Community Service, Industry Attachments, Cooperative Education [and] Professional Work Placements."

employability skills, there is much debate regarding the optimum way of measuring the acquisition and development of those skills. It is to the issue of relevance and demands for work-ready graduates in areas of national need that this paper turns. The paper considers teacher education and the way that work integrated learning experiences in the teacher practicum could be improved to produce workplace-ready and futures-oriented professionals. A recent national media article claimed that in times of employment uncertainty, teacher training numbers are set to increase as people seek more secure and safe employment options (Rout, 2009). This predicted increase in student enrolments in teacher education courses provides a timely opportunity to re-examine the way that universities approach teacher training and, in particular, how assessment in the teacher practicum supports the development of work-ready graduates. In teacher education, as in other discipline areas, it is of the utmost importance to provide students with the opportunity to participate in assessment tasks that provide the opportunity to reflect, and are grounded in the actual doing.

The study reported in this paper of a university teacher education program explores the nature and role of assessment during a work-integrated learning experience (practicum). Analysis of the data collected from students provides an insight into their experiences of completing an applied assessment task from the perspective and interpretation of the social reality of implementing plans constructed on campus into practice in the workplace. Several themes emerge in relation to the value students place on the authenticity of the task and the importance of clear expectations and knowing what is expected of them.

CONTEXT

The Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) was introduced into a regional Australian university in 2001 to replace the conventional Bachelor of Education (BEd) program. Created to respond to the perceived need for program reform in pre-service teacher education (Smith & Moore, 2006), it represents a paradigm shift away from traditional programs that are based on the assumption that theoretical underpinnings, provided through on-campus course work, will be automatically translated by pre-service and beginning teachers into actionable sequences in the learning site (Lynch, 2003).

Comprising the BLM are four key knowledge domains: *Essential Professional Knowledge, Futures, Networks and Partnerships*, and *Pedagogy*. Courses within these domains include a theoretical background in instructional theory and design, and an understanding of the meta-analysis of teaching/learning, with a particular focus on the role of the teacher in achieving learning outcomes in students (Allen & Smith, 2007). The on-campus work done by BLM students focuses on the practice of classroom teaching rather than the discipline languages of educational psychology, child development patterns, sociology of education and other mainstays of traditional BEd programs (Smith & Moore, 2006).

One core initiative of the BLM of particular importance in this study is the reconceptualization of the traditional practicum-type periods in schools common to pre-service teacher education programs. The practicum has been designed so that students are required to put into practice the concepts and theories explored on campus (Smith & Moore, 2006). In practice, this plays out as follows: all core courses of the BLM comprise two major assessment tasks; the first usually seeks to determine students' understanding of theory while the second is a practical task, designed to be applied in the school context. The latter applied task in one core course is the focus of this study.

Key to the success of the practicum is effective partnership arrangements between the university and industry, in particular "Teaching Schools." The Teaching Schools model is an arrangement that requires commitment by both the university and the schools to a central rationale and input of expert knowledge into the BLM (Turner, 2006). Thus, one premise of the BLM is that course work and assessment are co-developed and that all Teaching Schools' participants—students, academic staff and supervising teachers—follow the same script (Smith & Moore, 2006). In terms of student assessment, this means that the in-school supervisor should be trained in, and knowledgeable about, the details of the assessment task and what is supposed to be achieved.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The theoretical orientation of this study is derived from the interpretive school of thought of symbolic interactionism. This approach allows us to focus on the active input of pre-service teachers as they articulate their experiences and perceptions of assessment during practicum. Central to the symbolic interactionist perspective are emphases on subjectivity and interpretation in the creation of meaning (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, the participants' own understandings, viewed from their own experience of social realities, become the subject matter for research.

According to symbolic interactionism, participants' beliefs and past experiences play a role in their present behavior, most importantly in helping them define their current environment. They then act according to this definition (Blumer, 1969). That is, participants are not controlled by their beliefs or by what happened to them in the past, but rather they use beliefs and past experiences to interpret the current situation and then act accordingly (Charon, 2007). In this research, we explore how some pre-service teachers involved in the teaching practicum construct, perceive and interpret the social reality of implementing planning constructed on campus into practice in the workplace. Their perceptions of the meanings they attach to their experience are central to this research.

A fundamental premise of symbolic interactionism is that the capacity for taking the role of the other is essential to the development of self-concept, symbol use, and culture (Mead, 1934). Role-taking involves imagining the world from the

perspective of another, and it is the perspectives of this "generalised other" that allow individuals to view themselves (Blumer, 1969, p. 22). Taking the role of the other is necessary for learning one's own perspectives, for working through social situations, for knowing how to manage others, and for symbolic communication. Individuals continually assess how they affect others and how others affect them (Blumer, 1969).

In taking the role of others, individuals frequently encounter incompatible or opposing expectations. An example is the differing expectations encountered in the role of psychologist in a public clinic. Such a role requires the provision of exemplary care to each patient while abiding by budgetary constraints determined by administrative staff. The perceived difficulty in meeting the conflicting demands of different sets of expectations and obligations when performing one role is known as "role strain" (Goode, 1960). Many roles have differing role dimensions and previous studies have shown that, within the meaning making of the individual, this can lead to a prioritization of one or more dimensions over others (Becker & Geer, 1958; Smith-Lovin, 2007; Stryker, 1980). That is, individuals compartmentalize or abandon dimensions of their roles as primary interactional methods in order to decrease feelings of strain (Hicks, 2008). Based on previous empirical research (Allen & Peach, 2007), it is our hypothesis that this occurs within the pre-service teacher practicum experience.

METHODOLOGY

The study reported in this paper used a qualitative approach to explore the nature and role of assessment during practicum from the view of pre-service teachers. Our decision to focus on this particular group of stakeholders was guided by the need identified in the literature to incorporate the student voice. Korthagen, Loughran and Russell (2006, p. 20) point out that "candidates' voices are rarely used to ascertain whether their teacher education program achieves its goals."

A purposive sampling technique (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) was used to select respondents who had recently completed a practicum in schools. The temporal dimension is important in data collection (Blumer, 1969) and we reasoned that, given the short period of time elapsed since the practicum, these students would be well positioned to provide their perspectives about the assessment experience. Thus, the sample included one group of second-year students who had completed their second practicum five weeks earlier. The practicum was linked to a core BLM course, *Essential Professional Knowledge*, which these students, from both the primary and secondary strands of the BLM, had all undertaken the previous term.

Students in the sample were extended an email invitation to participate in the study and were advised of the voluntary nature of the project. They were also assured of anonymity, which was ensured through the use of pseudonyms; removing any

identifying details from the surveys; and the employment of a Research Assistant with no affiliation with the students or Faculty to collect and de-identify data. Of 23 students enrolled in the course, 17 agreed to participate, representing a response rate of 74 percent. Participants were sent the survey and an information sheet by email attachment and were advised that the return of the survey (as an email attachment or in hard copy) constituted consent to participate in the study. The 17 completed surveys were returned by email within the two-week time frame stipulated in the information sheet.

The survey comprised both closed and open questions (see Findings section). The 11 closed questions were presented as items on a five-point Likert scale and were designed to gauge students' perceptions of the assessment task as they relate to the principles of good practice in work-integrated learning programs (Atchison, Pollock, Reeders, & Rizzetti, 2002). The four open questions were less specific and provided a way to further understand the nature and role of the assessment task from the participants' point of view (Kvale, 2008). The particular task that provided the focus for the survey was the second of two assessment items in *Essential Professional Knowledge* and was worth 50 percent of the final course grade. The aim of the task was for students to demonstrate their understanding of planning through the interpretation and enhancement of a pre-existing unit plan or module. The expectation was that students would subsequently use this planning as a basis for their teaching during the three-week practicum. Supervising teachers in the Teaching Schools were, in principle, made aware of the requirements of the task by university practicum staff and, in line with partnership arrangements established between the university and schools (Allen & Peach, 2007), were expected to oversee its practical application. University staff conducted assessment of the written task. The practical application was not assessed per se.

Data analysis was a twofold process. First, we analyzed each item of the Likert scale separately to provide descriptive statistics about participants' perceptions of the task (Clason & Dormody, 1994). Results are percentages based on a scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Second, we conducted a categorical analysis of responses to the open questions. This began with sifting through the data and assigning both in vivo and abstract codes to significant words, phrases and ideas (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). We then generated categories in order to understand "the patterns, the recurrences [and] the plausible whys in the data" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69) and finally established linkages or themes identified in and between the categories. Themes in this study, while relating closely to the content of the data, are generally those that we constructed and which took us towards concepts of a more analytic, theoretical relevance. That is, we moved our coding process from identifying categories that aligned closely with the original data to those that inferred broader analytic issues (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

FINDINGS

The survey consisted of two parts: an overall student rating of the task and written comments in response to open questions.

Overall rating

Percentage ratings of the first part of the survey are outlined in Table 1.

TABLE 1:
Percentage ratings of the Likert scale survey

	STATEMENT	RATING
1	The task is similar to the real work done in a professional context.	**68.4%**
2	The task effectively integrates required workplace skills with university academic requirements.	**72.8%**
3	Timely feedback enables students to act upon the criteria of the task.	**68.2%**
4	The task reflects clear alignment with the rest of the course.	**71.6%**
5	The task emphasizes assessment for learning rather than just for grading.	**67.2%**
6	The task is fair and free from bias and does not advantage or disadvantage any groups of students.	**67.2%**
7	The task is based on criteria negotiated with students to ensure they understand the nature of the task and what constitutes quality in terms of the outcome.	**71.8%**
8	The task provides clear evidence that students have achieved the desired learning outcomes.	**73.0%**
9	The task is motivating, enjoyable, sustains interest, and is challenging, but achievable.	**64.6%**
10	The task provides opportunities to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills needed in professional situations, as well as the cognitive and performance skills relating to graduate attributes.	**74.2%**
11	The task incorporates self, peer, and client assessment in conjunction with academic teacher assessment.	**68.2%**
	The overall average rating of the task	**69.4%.**

Written comments

Written comments further elucidated participants' perceptions of the task. Table 2 provides a summary of the concepts identified in the data analysis.

TABLE 2
Summary of written comments about aspects of the task

QUESTIONS	COMMENTS
What were the best aspects of the task and why?	• The opportunity to learn how to develop and write a unit plan • Relevance and practical 'real life' application • Clear explanations about task requirements provided on campus • Modifying an existing unit plan • Developed understanding of the pedagogical framework, *Dimensions of Learning*
What factors (if any) limited its effectiveness for you?	• No opportunity/restricted opportunity to implement in the school • Lack of understanding of task requirements by the supervising teacher • Extra workload in writing alternative unit plan/s for the workplace • Time constraints associated with completing the task • Limited/delayed feedback
In your opinion, how might the task be improved?	• Revise length and format of the task • Establish similar task expectations between university and school staff • Improve channels of communication between sectors • Separate university and practicum work
Please provide a personal reflection on your own learning from the task.	• Opportunity to understand and practise unit planning was beneficial • Task was challenging/interesting and developed important workplace skills • The requirements of the task (length, format) were clear but difficult to achieve • Significant differences between unit planning at university and schools • That the unit plan could not be implemented detracted from the practicum experience • Students have no input into task content or design

These results highlight the need to consider carefully how assessment of work-integrated learning experiences (such as the teacher practicum) can potentially help us move towards stronger partnerships between stakeholders and move towards negotiated learning outcomes in relation to the desired learning outcomes of the practicum. Boud (2001) argues that assessment should be *for* learning rather than *of* learning and that sustainable assessment is that which meets the needs of the present and prepares students to meet their own future learning needs. We argue that the assessment experience during practicum should provide an opportunity for students to learn and not merely satisfy compliance with university process. This is explored in more depth in the next section.

DISCUSSION

The generation of themes in our data analysis was guided by core principles of effective assessment as identified in work-integrated learning literature (Bryan & Clegg, 2006). The following discussion is framed around two of the principles of effective assessment shown to be valued most by students, namely, *authentic tasks* and *unambiguous expectations*[3]. Within these groupings, we discuss how respondents reported making meaning of the assessment experience and how they dealt with the dimensions of their role during practicum.

Authentic tasks

The literature has strongly established that students value tasks that they perceive as having real life application and that mirror the skills required in the workplace (Allen & Peach, 2007; Barnes, 2008; Yayli, 2008). In this study, 13 of 17 participants noted the authenticity or real life feature of the task as one of the best aspects of the assessment experience. These comments are indicative:

> You were able to gather skills that will be used in the workplace.
>
> Using my unit plan in a real life setting was the best part. The reason for this is I got to see if it was good or not.
>
> It related to the job that we are involved in, e.g., this task identified what is needed for a unit plan when teaching.

Students particularly valued the opportunity to write the unit plan, which they saw as a basic requirement of the role of teacher: "It allowed you to plan something like a teacher." It would seem, based on participants' responses, that the understanding gained through their planning, was of comparable importance to the projected implementation of the unit. For example, students provided the following comments about the best aspects of the task:

[3] For the purposes of this paper, we limit our discussion to these themes and leave others for later discussions.

> Learning the structure of a unit. Didn't know how much it involved and now I feel more confident.
>
> Actually planning a unit. What a thorough unit would look like.
>
> Provides more practical knowledge of planning in real life.

Several observations can be made in light of these data. First, students perceive the authenticity of the task in both its content— writing a unit plan—and in its applicability in the workplace. That some students were ultimately unable to implement the planned unit (see below) did not seem to negate its meaning for them as an authentic task. In the words of one respondent, "having a go at a real unit plan" was the best aspect of the task despite the fact "it was not in the right context … and had to be changed anyway." The students saw the task as valuable in its own right.

Second, these findings stand in contrast to studies showing that students tend to be dismissive of on-campus instruction that is incongruous with practice in schools (Allen, 2009; Grossman, Smargorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). Indeed, one of the factors that produces and sustains the theory-practice gap in teacher education is that students tend to equate university work with theory, no matter what its nature, and work in schools as practice (Allen, 2009). Participants in this study, however, made meaning of the task in terms of both its value as a professional tool and its anticipated applicability in their work at a later stage. The following comments exemplify the responses of the ten participants who indicated that they did not implement the unit:

> I enjoyed this task once I got my head around it. I found it was not as daunting as I first thought it would be. It was also a challenge, integrating a number of subjects.
>
> [I liked] finding out what a unit plan constitutes because this was our first real go at developing one.
>
> The template and explicit explaining were very helpful. Something I can use as a teacher.

Participants' beliefs about the authenticity of the task can be interpreted through the perspective of symbolic interactionism. As teachers-in-training, these students were constantly searching for the perspectives and rules of the group they aspired to enter (Mead, 1934). That is, while currently in the role of student, their concern was with defining situations in their projected role of teacher. When planning units of work on campus, students were constantly defining and evaluating the meaning of this work in the context of the school. Their responses about the value of the task suggest that, in the main, they were able to validate the task as meaningful in the workplace.

That many students still credited the task as real life and valuable, despite not implementing it in the workplace, can be understood through their interpretation of the generalized other. The data suggest that many of our respondents were disillusioned about how things transpired during the practicum, particularly in the seeming discrepancy in task expectations between university and school staff (discussed further in the next section). It would seem that, rather than discrediting the task as dissimilar to the type of work they believed defined the teacher, students distanced themselves from the practices of their supervising teachers:

> The unit I had to work with, my teacher did not sit down and go through [it] with me. So I had to make assumptions.
>
> I learnt a lot from the task even though I did not do it well. I was able to reflect on this during [prac] and I would do so much differently next time. It's hard to come up with a unit when you don't know the class well and what resources are available. Also the relationship between teacher and prac teacher also plays a part.

In short, students held onto beliefs about teachers and teaching that did not necessarily incorporate the particular teacher by whom they were supervised. This is consistent with Mead's (1934) concept that defining and interacting with the generalized other is a highly subjective and fluid process.

Unambiguous expectations

Knowing what they are working towards and what is expected of them are important criteria for students in assessment tasks. Tertiary students value transparency in how they will be assessed and expect a clear relationship between what they do in lectures, tutorials and practicum and what they are expected to demonstrate they know and can do (Patrick, Peach, & Pocknee, 2008). They anticipate both timely feedback on their achievement and constructive suggestions for how they can improve (Herrington & Herrington, 2006).

Participants' comments in this study indicate that the largest impediment in implementing the task was the disparity between expectations of university and Teaching Schools staff. This is very concerning in light of agreed partnerships arrangements in the program, which include collaboration between university and Teaching Schools on the nature, development, and implementation of tasks. Clearly, there are flaws in these arrangements[4].

A significant hurdle, reported by more than half of the respondents, was that they had difficulty in using, or were unable to use, the unit plan during practicum

[4] A study of a different sample of students in the BLM found that many of the partnership arrangements between the university and Teaching Schools were at best inadequate and at worst non-existent (Allen, 2009). The reasons for this are the focus of future study.

because the supervising teacher was unaware of the task requirements. These comments are indicative:

> It was hard to use this task as planning for [prac] as my supervising teacher was not sure what I would be teaching. Therefore, I had to do this task as a separate assignment and it wasn't part of my [prac].
>
> [Limiting the task's effectiveness was] the fact that I was unable to actually teach the unit in the classroom and … had to do a unit plan for university and then another one once [I] went into the school.
>
> I was disappointed with implementing my unit. I completed many lessons from the unit but my teacher wasn't interested in reading it. … My teacher felt units were supposed to be progressive and not so much structured. She doesn't do units but puts it together as the term goes on. So I found it hard when university work is basically a waste of time if this is not what the teacher wants.

This perceived discrepancy between university and school requirements and expectations was a source of great concern for students, with 13 (of 17) participants identifying it as a weakness of the assessment experience. For these students, the task could be improved in the following ways:

> [Practicum] teachers should be informed about why we did this and the specific information that was included.
>
> Through encouraging the teachers of our learning site to help us with the unit.
>
> Schools need to be made more aware of requirements. Some teachers and schools are not aware of what we are to do on pracs.

Brodie and Irving (2007) argue in their discussion about assessment of work-based learning that outcomes for participants include the acquisition of discipline-specific skills and knowledge, application of learning principles in a work environment, analytical problem-solving skills, and recognition of the limits of their knowledge. This model allows students to engage with assignments, improving their ability to articulate, reflect upon, and interpret knowledge. Students in this study were largely stymied in their efforts to engage with learning in this way because of the ambiguity of university and school expectations. The assessment task enabled them to engage in higher order thinking, such as critical and problem-solving skills (74.2% rating), yet they were unable to apply it and therefore critically reflect on their skills and knowledge.

The need for more timely feedback, particularly from university staff, was also an issue for some respondents. Their concern related to the length of the task coupled with the "unreasonably short" period of time they were given to complete it. Unless they made special arrangements with their university tutor, students did not

receive feedback (or a grade) for their task until after their practicum. Participants' comments on the issue of feedback included:

> I believe the task needed more time as it was a very short term. Also, I didn't know how I went until I got my grade in term 2. Feedback from [the tutor] in class was good but I needed more.
>
> It would be better if this was the first assignment as it was extremely busy leading up to our prac and this is a very big assignment. And we only submitted it on Friday, started prac on Monday!

For those students who did implement the unit, the need for feedback from teachers was identified:

> Fill-in teachers for the class were not able to give feedback because they had not been given background on the instruction.
>
> If [the supervising teacher] had helped me through it, and told me what to cover next, and talked about what I'd done, it would have been easier for me to know what is expected of me and my implementation of the unit.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) point out that feedback, when combined with effective instruction, can be very powerful in enhancing learning. It should be about the particular qualities of the work, with advice on what or how the student can improve, and must be timely to ensure effectiveness (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2002). Findings in this study suggest that the delayed/limited feedback that some students received clouded their understanding of what was expected of them by the different stakeholders.

Further, it is our contention that respondents in this study, having encountered different and oft-times conflicting stakeholder expectations while fulfilling the one role, were subjected to what symbolic interactionists refer to as "role strain" (Goode, 1960). As pre-service teachers, they were searching for the norms and social and cultural traditions of their future profession, including an understanding of the organized attitudes and expectations of others (Stryker, 1980). The strain participants reported experiencing arguably occurred because, in contradiction to articulated partnership arrangements, the two primary stakeholders—the university and the Teaching Schools—comprised and projected a different set of attitudes and expectations to the pre-service teacher. It is evident that the *unambiguous expectations* in assessment anticipated by tertiary students (Bryan & Clegg, 2006) were not a reality for our participants. This spelled a problem for their successful accomplishment of work integrated learning assessment tasks.

In arguing this, we are not suggesting that role strain in and of itself is an unusual or even deleterious condition in human interaction. Indeed, given the complexity of social structures and the number of dimensions attached to most roles, instances of role strain are abundant and, in a sense, a normal product of social life (Dolch, 2003;

Hicks, 2008). The problem lies in the fact that our participants had not yet taken up the role (of teaching). Thus, as trainees, they were being asked to make meaning of a new set of knowledge and skills (about unit planning) while simultaneously encountering conflicting concepts of what that set of knowledge and skills entailed. This is a daunting challenge for students. The role strain they inevitably encountered in trying to make meaning of the task impacted negatively on their achievement.

Two issues are noteworthy at this point. First, the BLM, like many work integrated learning programs, attempts to shift the emphasis on student proficiency from academic development to professional capabilities. It is widely agreed that this can only successfully occur when robust partnerships among stakeholders are co-developed and co-sustained (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2005; Patrick *et al*., 2008; Taylor, 2008). Findings in this study suggest that work-integrated learning assessment can only be of value for student learning when there are common stakeholder viewpoints about the specific nature and content of assessment. Programs based on rhetorical or overly broad concepts of partnership set their students up to encounter role strain which, judging by this study and others (Allen & Peach, 2007; Yayli, 2008) can be detrimental to their work-integrated learning experience.

Second, when individuals encounter role strain, they tend to compartmentalize dimensions of their role, privileging some over others, in order to reduce the feeling of strain. This often leads to abandonment of one or more dimensions. The risk in work-integrated learning programs is that unless established synergies of practice and beliefs exist between stakeholders, students will abandon university learning in order to privilege workplace practice. This type of role behavior has been documented since the professionalization of teaching in the 1960s (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Mitchell & Schwager, 1993). The risk here is twofold: (a) students fail to engage in the type of innovative, futures-oriented and research-based work that many work-integrated learning programs offer; and (b) we return to a pre-professional model of teacher education where pedagogical practice is predominantly learned through transmission teaching or a brief period of apprenticeship with experienced teachers during practical placements (Hargreaves, 2001).

In summary, participants' experiences of the assessment task were mixed. While most perceived the task as authentic and could appreciate its applicability in the real life of the classroom, many were stymied in their efforts to implement the task because of ambiguous and conflicting stakeholder expectations concerning the nature and content of the assessment item.

CONCLUSION

The Australian Prime Minister (PM) (then Deputy PM), Julia Gillard, recently declared that the onus must fall on universities to ensure seamlessness between the university and vocational sectors and to meet the broad range of Australia's skill needs (Healy, 2009). In doing so, she reiterated wide-held concerns that universities cannot always show how theory and practice combine in undergraduate and postgraduate programs to produce students who are workplace ready (Patrick *et al*., 2008). Work-integrated learning attempts to respond to these perceived shortcomings by requiring students to be situated in workplaces where skills and knowledge learned on campus can be applied in practice.

One obdurate weakness in this type of learning is the ways in which students are assessed. Tertiary students commonly suggest that, whilst they are good at teaching, are good nurses, are good coaches, and so forth, most of their grades within their degree program are based on their ability to *articulate that* they are good, and why they are good, rather than focusing on the fact that they *are* good teachers, nurses or coaches (Brodie & Irving, 2007). Capability is central to successful work-integrated learning and must be included within the assessment process. The program and course providing the context for this paper attempted to foreground students' workplace capability through an assessment task undertaken on campus (writing a unit plan) and applied in the workplace (delivering the unit of work). Our interpretation of students' responses to questions about the task leads us to two major conclusions.

First, students valued the task for its practical applicability. They were able to project themselves into the role of teacher and deemed the task real life and what real teachers do. That is, they associated the task with the norms and values of the profession to which they aspired (Mead, 1934). That many were unable to implement or had difficulty in implementing the task did not seem to diminish the value of the task for them; they accepted the situation and responded to the requirements of the written assessment. Moreover, these students still associated the unit plan with what happens in the real world. This is surprising in terms of what we know about how people behave in roles. Generally, when individuals meet a conflicting or incongruent response in an environment (in this case, the unit plan not being accepted by the supervising teacher), they will modify or control their actions in order to align with the behaviors of the group to which they aspire (Blumer, 1969). This is especially the case with novitiates who have the least power in the practicum triad and who lack the confidence to "teach against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 2001, p. 3). Based on our findings, we posit that students had formed strong beliefs on campus about the practical value of the task and were able to hold onto these beliefs in the face of contradictory expectations by the generalised other of the classroom teacher.

A second and associated conclusion is that students met unnecessary hurdles in work-integrated learning assessment experiences because of weak or non-existent partnership arrangements. This was evident in the contradictory expectations about the nature and content of the task by university and Teaching Schools staff. This meant, in effect, that students encountered role strain (Goode, 1960) between their role dimensions as university student and pre-service teacher. While role strain is a normal product of social life (Dolch, 2003), it is our contention that it must be minimized by the institutions responsible for the work-integrated learning experience. As individuals struggling to adopt the knowledge and skills, behaviors and beliefs of effective teachers, students need to receive similar and consistent understandings from the different stakeholders. It is up to the institutions to establish clear links between theory and practice. In short, we cannot afford to knowingly establish work-integrated learning programs in which role strain is an inherent and significant feature.

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The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education, or work integrated learning (WIL), issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based. In 2010, Australian Research Council (ARC), which administers the Excellence in Research (ERA) ranking system, awarded APJCE a 'B' ERA ranking (top 10-20%).

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