Developing A Community Of Practice Among Educators: A Case Study Of The National Professional Diploma In Education (NPDE) In South And Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will explore the ways in which a new in-service teacher development programme, the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE), has sought to develop a community of practice among educators in South and Southern Africa.

The NPDE is a contact-supported distance education programme which is aimed at the professional development of classroom-based educators who have received the equivalent of only one or two years of professional training.

The paper will consider the ways in which the NPDE qualification could and should have been able to make a significant contribution to developing a common vision of good teaching practice among education stakeholders at national, provincial, Higher Education Institution (HEI) and local school level through the manner in which the curriculum has been designed and is being delivered. The paper will attempt to evaluate the ways in which the potential for developing common understandings and practice has been realised in implementation.

The discussion will be structured in the following way:
- An overview of the NPDE programme and the Unisa curriculum in particular
- An evaluation of the NPDE design from the perspective of an epistemological framework for developing communities of practice
- Lessons of experience from the macro management level
- Lessons of experience from the meso level management/implementation interface
- Lessons of experience from the micro level: a limited analysis of the impact of the Unisa NPDE on the 2300+ classroom-based educators on the programme through a triangulation of data supplied from student evaluations, student responses to formal assessment and limited classroom observations.
- Conclusions and recommendations for building communities of practice among educators in South and Southern Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Within South Africa, as part of the overall reconstruction of its society, there has been and continues to be considerable debate about whether the education system, at all levels, is meeting the educational needs of the country. This has resulted in a proliferation of policy documents seeking to fundamentally change the way that the system is governed and managed, the way it is financed, the curriculum that is offered, the pedagogies that are employed and the ways in which learners and the system are assessed and evaluated.

It is ordinary classroom-based educators in schools and colleges who are at the forefront of all this change. If we cannot get basic education right; if we cannot empower educators with the competences they need to in turn empower their learners, we will continue to pour resources into a system that is fundamentally unable to meet the challenges we have identified. As noted by the Department of Education (DoE, 1998), bringing about change in educational institutions is, however, no easy matter:

> *Schools, in particular, serve a distinctive constituency and play a particular educational and socialising role with respect to young people. They provide a foundation of general education, as well as more specific knowledge and skills to pre-employed youth. They also tend to occupy a distinctive place in the minds of parents, young learners and educators, which reflect deep-rooted cultural roles. For these and other reasons, changes in schooling worldwide tend to be gradual and incremental.*

> DoE (1998:13)

Bringing about change in these institutions means bringing about change in the **people** that staff them. However, many of our educators are ill-equipped for such change: many are still, after all this time, formally un(der)qualified and many more are formally qualified but practically, and motivationally, under-prepared for the enormity of the task with which they are entrusted. The National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) is a new qualification that seeks to address the former need and offers lessons on addressing the latter.

This paper will explore the extent to which the Unisa NPDE has risen to this challenge.

BACKGROUND TO THE NPDE AND UNISA'S INVOLVEMENT

Until 1994, a distinction had always been made between the professional development of educators destined for "white" schools and those destined for schools populated by "non-white" learners (Welch, 2002).

Under the apartheid policy of separate development, it was possible for educators to begin teaching in "black" schools with a mere two years of professional development (e.g. a PTC) and sometimes with no professional qualification at all (especially where a person had obtained a matric certificate and was living in an under-resourced rural area). The extensive need for the upgrading of educator qualifications, both in terms of scale and location, can be traced back to these earlier policies.

It is not an easy matter to simply offer additional training to those educators who currently labour under the stigma of being un(der)qualified. We cannot afford to remove these educators from their classrooms and therefore need to offer a credible distance learning opportunity to these potential teacher-learners. However, in 1994, an international commission on distance education provision found, among other things, that thousands of teachers were already involved in distance education upgrading programmes of various kinds but concluded that the distance education system as a whole was largely "dysfunctional" (SAIDE, 1994). This conclusion was reached after an analysis of the then current practice revealed that the dominant model for distance education was first generation correspondence with very limited learner support. Given that many learners were not adequately prepared for the kind of independent study that a correspondence model presupposes, it is not surprising that distance education programmes considered by the commission were characterised by high drop-out and low throughput rates. In both practice and perception, this concept of distance education provision remains prevalent (Mays, 2001) and clearly needed to be re-thought if a distance education model for the NPDE were to have any impact.

In 1995, a national teacher audit was conducted (Saide, 1995) and found that thousands of educators were involved in numerous training programmes but that these programmes were often of questionable quality and seemed to have very little impact on the quality of classroom practice.

In 1998, a research project under the auspices of the President's Education Initiative found that:

- there was generally not a culture of reading among South Africa's educators

- many educators had themselves not mastered the conceptual understandings of the learning areas they were required to teach; and
- many educators were still locked into a didactic, transmission style of teaching (Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999).

Meanwhile, during the period 1997 to 2000, a committee had been established to articulate a minimum set of norms and standards for educators and the final version of this committee's work was gazetted as government policy in February 2000 (DoE, 2000). The *Norms and Standards for Educators* policy document introduced the following ideas:

- the notion of applied competence and related integrated assessment
- seven roles within which educators would need to demonstrate applied competence
- a proposed new qualification framework with no 360 credit exit point.

The new qualifications structure proposed in the *Norms and Standards for Educators* policy effectively undermined the status of educators who had struggled or were struggling to complete programmes leading to a three-year Diploma in Education by proposing a four-year programme towards qualified teacher status and so the Department of Education initiated the development of an interim qualification, the NPDE, which would provide a national benchmark for a three-year route to qualified teacher status but also create a pathway to a fourth year of study for in-service educators who would not normally have had access to study opportunities at this level (SGB05, 2001).

In line with all the new qualifications proposed by the SGB for Field 5 (SGB05, 2001), the NPDE comprises four components which correspond with the National Qualification Framework 's (NQF) general structure for all qualifications:

Fundamental Learning:

- Component 1 (self): Competences relating to personal literacy and numeracy
- Elective learning:
- Component 2 (subject): Competences relating to the subject and content of teaching
- Core learning:
- Component 3 (classroom): Competences relating to teaching and learning processes
- Component 4 (school and wider world): Competences relating to the school and profession.

The NPDE further requires a degree of integrated assessment that will allow for the integrated and holistic evaluation implied by the notion of applied competence specified in the Norms and Standards policy document.

Following the registration of the qualification, the Department of Education was able to secure funding to offer bursaries as an incentive to educators to enrol with the NPDE programme. The Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) were engaged to manage the bursary process and opted for a regional model of provision. Potential providers were then invited to submit proposals to offer the programme. Unisa followed this process and was accredited as a provider during October 2001. In March 2002, Unisa was chosen as preferred provider of the NPDE to national bursary holders in Gauteng and Mpumalanga in 2002, in addition to the self-financed students who had already registered in other parts of the country.

THE SCALE OF THE NEED FOR THE NPDE

In its March 2001 *Edusource Data News* publication, the Education Foundation reported that there were some 85 000 teachers in South African classrooms with fewer than three years of professional training. A year later, and after a more thorough investigation, this figure was reduced to 65 000. More recently, with many teachers having completed their various in-service courses and with some 11 000 teachers having progressed though an NPDE, it has been estimated (Hindle, 2004) that there are still close to 20 000 teachers in South Africa in need of professional upgrading at this level and a similar need exists in many of the countries bordering South Africa.

UNISA'S RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE SET BY THE NPDE

The fact that UNISA should attempt to address the need for large scale teacher development and upgrading through offering an NPDE was recognised during the course of 2000, as a result of the debates that flowed from the publication in February 2000 of the Department of Education's *Norms and Standards for Educators* (DoE, 2000) and the Department's subsequent commitment to upgrading the competence of currently underqualified educators.

The Unisa NPDE proposal, approved by the UNISA council and senate, was subsequently approved by the Interim Joint Committee of the Committee for Higher Education which was constituted for this purpose. The notion of the university as a

provider of a qualification largely determined elsewhere and requiring a significant degree of face-to-face contact has introduced a new dimension into the work of Unisa's Faculty of Education.

TOWARDS COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING AND PRACTICE

It has been noted above that the NPDE is a new qualification. It is a qualification that seeks to use good distance education practice to meet the needs of a new kind of society within an international context which Barnett (1999/2002) characterises as one of "supercomplexity":

> *That is to say we live in an age in which our very frameworks for comprehending the world, for acting in it and for relating to each other are entirely problematic. We live in a world characterised by contestability, challengeability, uncertainty and unpredictability [and under such conditions] work has to become learning and learning has to become work.* (2002:7)

It therefore seems entirely appropriate to seek to address the professional development of educators in and through the workplace using distance education methods. In line with the blurring of boundaries between work and learning about work, we are also seeing a blurring of boundaries between distance and more traditional contact-based education and within the ways in which learning is increasingly organised, as noted by Marsick and Watkins (1999/2002):

> *Much of our work has highlighted the shift away from a compartmentalised, almost assembly-line, approach to learning towards a holistic, integrated vision of a learning organisation (2002:34) [and] It can be argued that all organisations learn, or they would not survive, but learning organisations demand proactive interventions to generate, capture, store, share and use learning at the systems level in order to create innovative products and services. (2002:41)*

In response to the challenges outlined above, the discourse in education has increasingly oriented itself towards notions of lifelong learning in learning societies. This discourse needs to take cognisance of influences at the macro, political level; the implications of moving towards a "learner-controlled" and away from a "systems-controlled" approach and the need to create appropriate learning environments. The discussion will be particularly pertinent at the meso-level of institutions, with regard to the ways in which they are organised and the kinds of programmes that they offer (Alheit, 1999/2002). Schuller and Field (1998/2002) argue that in reinventing institutions and programmes it will be necessary to strike the right balance between

the development of human capital (foregrounding individual needs) and social capital (foregrounding collective needs) and perhaps to be a little wary of what terminology like this implies about the underpinning philosophy. Keep and Rainbird (1999/2002 - building on the work of Marquardt and Reynolds (1994)) suggest that institutions responding to the challenges will increasingly demonstrate the characteristics of learning organisations, a term borrowed from the business world.

One of the things that is interesting about the characteristics of learning organisations suggested by Keep and Rainbird (ibid) is the emphasis placed on flexibility around systems and structures and the particularly high emphasis placed on interaction (with customers, with peers, within and between teams) in a search for common ground, indeed, Keep and Rainbird (ibid) go on to observe (2002:84):

> *Perhaps the LO [Learning Organization] literature's greatest contribution to debates about learning skills and knowledge is its implicit message that current obsessions with the individualization of learning are misplaced and that the social and systemic dimensions of learning are the key determinants of how an organization successfully acquires, productively deploys, and develops its stock of skills.*

The increasing interest in both the education and business development spheres in the social nature of learning, forces us to begin to make enquiries into the extent to which the programmes we offer and the ways in which we manage them are part of and contribute to the development of **communities** of learning and practice.

Wenger (2000/2002:163-4) identifies three characteristics of a community of practice:

> *First, members are bound together by their collectively developed understanding of what their community is about and they hold each other accountable to this sense of joint enterprise. To be competent is to understand the enterprise well enough to be able to contribute to it. Second, members build their community through mutual engagement. They interact with one another, establishing norms and relationships of mutuality that reflect these interactions. To be competent is to be able to engage with the community and be trusted as a partner in these interactions. Third, communities of practice have produced a shared repertoire of communal resources – language, routines, sensibilities, artefacts, tools, stories, styles, etc. To be competent is to have access to this repertoire and be able to use it appropriately. (2002:163-4)*

Moll (2003:17) agrees that facilitating learning necessarily involves making provision for the individual to engage with the ideas and experiences of others:

Learning is about the ways networks or webs of knowledge are established, built up and ultimately become the newly acquired understandings of an individual … This building of the networks of knowledge has both a crucial individual dimension and a necessary location in patterns of interaction between people involved in solving problems and carrying out practical tasks.

Moll subsequently goes on to outline the central challenge that must be addressed in offering a distance course within which there are obvious limitations on the degree and nature of inter-personal interaction within the learning community:

In distance education, the central problems becomes one of how best to create a situation in which learners are able to engage in and be supported in a particular, unfamiliar activity – a knowledge practice – without having to be in the constant presence of practitioners of that activity. (2003:21)

As a national programme subject to regular national meetings for reporting and discussion, a common curriculum framework, a commitment on the part of all providers to developing classroom competence and to providing an element of face-to-face contact support, the NPDE, and the approximately 11000 teacher-learners engaged upon it, should be able to make a significant contribution towards building a community of learning and practice among South African educators.

LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE FROM THE MACRO LEVEL

Nominally, the NPDE is a national programme following a national curriculum. Theoretically, therefore, with such common ground to build on collaboration and shared understandings and practice should be easily possible in at least the following five key areas of operation (there may well be others):

- Management and development of support and reporting systems
- Marketing and advocacy
- Curriculum design and materials development
- Learner support
- Assessment and evaluation.

It is the Unisa NPDE experience, as reported at the 2003 Nadeosa conference (Mays, 2003) that this is much easier said than done! Collaboration involves individuals and/or institutions working co-operatively together to achieve common goals, or separate goals that are complementary in one respect or another. Fundamental to the success of a collaborative endeavour is that all parties must benefit in some way from

working together. With respect to the NPDE, this has not always been possible to achieve.

In general, it has to be conceded that the introduction of the NPDE has had limited impact to date on developing a community of learning and practice at the macro level. There have been too many different agendas and interest groups involved to meet the kind of requirements outlined by Wenger earlier in this paper. However, there has been some progress in this regard with Unisa now involved with the Department of Education at national and provincial level and collaborating with other providers in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the North West in mutual quality assurance and the sharing of materials. Such arrangements are only possible where there are shared values and understandings and opportunities for meaningful engagement.

LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE AT THE MESO LEVEL

At the meso level, we are concerned with the programme's engagement within the institution and with other programmes within the institution. In this area the introduction of the NPDE has had a more profound impact. The RPL process adopted for the NPDE has, for example, been the subject of interest by a number of other academics responsible for other programmes and the NPDE is now represented on the institution's general reference group for RPL purposes. The process has also been adapted for the RPL of students outside of the NPDE who have fallen between two systems with the incorporation of their colleges into Unisa and the promulgation of a new qualifications framework for educators from 2003. In addition, both the RPL and integrated assessment portfolio processes within the NPDE are being dovetailed with the Professional Portfolio Development process being advocated by the South African Council of Educators (SACE).

Apart from growing synergy at the meso-level with the NPDE portfolio prcoesses, ongoing discussions with the Departments of Registrations, Examinations, Assignments and Computer Services have resulted in innovations in all of these areas and an ongoing discussion about ways in which systems developed for large numbers of individuals studying primarily using a correspondence model can be adapted to suit the growing number of programmes offering contact-supported studies to groups of sponsored learners as well as the reality of unemployed students who have effectively opted for Unisa as their full-time university of choice.

These discussions have resulted in increasing agreement regarding the value of decentralised support and assessment, and the systems needed to manage these

processes; the importance of tracking and monitoring student performance and cohort analyses thereof (as opposed to relying entirely on the motivation of the learner to meet assignment deadlines and prepare for examinations etc.) and innovations (for Unisa) such as year marks that count towards summative assessment and open-book examinations geared towards assessing applied competence rather than memorisation of content.

LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE AT THE MICRO LEVEL

Not surprisingly it is at the micro level of the Unisa NPDE programme team and its students where the greatest impact can be seen. At the end of the 2003 year, teacher-learners on the Unisa NPDE programme were invited to submit an anonymous evaluation of the programme. The results of this survey are summarised below.

STUDENT EVALUATION

There were 2318 students on the NPDE programme in 2003. 707 (30,5%) submitted an evaluation form at the end of the programme. The following information is based on feedback from these 707 students of whom: 22 were first years; 277 were second year Foundation Phase; 116 were second year Intermediate Phase; 63 were second year Senior Phase, 216 were second year students who did not specify their specialisation and 13 did not specify in which year of the programme they were.

In response to the request to rate the extent to which the NPDE programme had helped them to improve their teaching, the weighted average of 678 respondents was 4,85 out of 5 where 5 = I have learned and changed a lot and 1 = I have learned and changed very little. In a similar question on the impact of their programme on their assessment practice in particular, the weighted average was 4,77 among 654 respondents.

When asked to name the module they found **MOST and LEAST** helpful in helping them to improve their practice, 15,8% (112/707) of respondents said that no one module stood out but that ALL of the modules were equally helpful. In response to the request to identify the LEAST useful module, 42,4% (300/707) said that none of their modules was "least useful".

The following interesting quotations from students indicate that they have begun to engage with some of the core issues on the programme:

I can say I have accepted the change and have learned a lot in the NPDE programme, more especially I have gained a lot as far as aims, outcomes and assessments in lesson plans.
I have learned and changed a lot. I know how to assess learners in different methods.

All the modules have the same theem [sic] of how to teach your learners, how to arrange your learners and how to assess your learners.

Because of these modules, I am able to do the correct planning lesson and recording.

Reception year taught me to be more observant when teaching the young ones.

 ... and not to label ...

... and now help other teachers ...

What I learned is correlated with what I am teaching. I=ve changed totally and I feel great.

One of the key ways in which the NPDE programme differs from most Unisa mainstream offerings is the fact that 10% of notional learning time is spent in direct face-to-face contact with tutors representing and trained by the institution. These tutors were supposed to play a motivating and facilitating role rather than to lecture content. When asked to rate contact sessions on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being the best), the weighted average was 4,84 among 663 respondents.

The following quotations from students reflect the importance placed on the face-to-face contact sessions and the possibilities these presented for social learning. It was interesting to note the high emphasis placed on the interpersonal as opposed to the academic skills of the tutor:

Most of us wouldn=t have made it without the guidance of tutors.

Yes the contact sessions made me because that no man is an island. I needed to interact with my colleagues.

[The tutor was] Alike a mother full of love and patience@ [to us] A@old bags

Contact sessions have helped me to share ideas, gain confidence and I have improved a lot in doing my work.

I have gained a lot in these contact sessions and I would continue with my studies if only my tutor will continue with me.

Our tutors were very special to us. They are committed to their work. I also love them for their punctuality and dedication.

Towards the end of the evaluation form, teacher-learners were asked to outline their future plans:

- 59% (13/22) (100% of those who responded) of first years indicated their intention to move into the second year
- 81% (546/672) intended to register for a higher qualification
- 7,3% (52/707) indicated they had or would apply for a promotion post.

Given that the NPDE was targeted at a group of teacher-learners particularly disempowered by previous policies and noted for having self-esteem and related problems, and that one of the stated national goals was to provide an alternative pathway to higher study, the above results are little short of astounding. The Unisa NPDE appears to have been singularly successful in encouraging a return to formal learning among its particular target group.

The final section of the evaluation form offered teacher-learners the chance to comment on any aspect of the programme that they found particularly interesting or useful or particularly annoying or unuseful.

The following selected quotations indicate once again the central role that interpersonal communication played in this social learning programme and the fact that some teacher-learners have been sufficiently empowered actually to offer constructive criticism of the programme and to have an influence within their wider community of practice:

It is a lifelong programme which I will keep on referring to. My knowledge has expanded a lot. I help my colleague a lot with the information I get from these books.

There should be more contact sessions, it was helpful. Students get to know each other and share their knowledge and give support to each other.

AI enjoyed being grouped with other educators. We discussed about the modules and helped each other fairly.

I even helped my colleagues.

I would like to suggest that Understanding OBE and Continuous Assessment should be one because they are nearly the same.

The terminology in the module The Teacher in the Classroom should be changed.

"Apart from the structure of Assignments which were so challenging and interesting, compiling the intergrated [sic] assessment portfolio was very interesting to me. At first I thought it would be simple to do it, but I found it very challenging and it was really an eye-opener. It was as if I was a new teacher entering the profession. I would look at the learners portfolios and selecting their best work was always fascinating. It inspired them and they would all try their best to write neatly and correctly.@

With some exceptions, the feedback from teacher-learners' evaluation of the programme is overwhelmingly positive. There is a sense from these student responses that over two years of part-time study, the NPDE programme has encouraged learners to engage with their own experience and that of their peers in a developing community of learning. However, are the teacher-learners' impressions borne out in practice?

ASSESSMENT

Teacher-learners may well assert that they have been empowered by the programme and feel better able to engage reflexively and supportively with their own practice and that of their peers, but are these assertions substantiated by the work that they actually produce? As noted in another paper (Mothata, Van Niekerk, Mays: 2003), the focus of the NPDE has been to develop professional, classroom practice and for teacher-learners to demonstrate **applied competence** – which is a combination of three forms of competence (DoE, 2000:10):

Practical competence is the demonstrated ability, in an authentic (realistic) context to consider a range of possibilities for action, make considered decisions about which possibility to follow, and to perform the chosen action. It is grounded in foundational competence.

For **foundational competence** the learner must demonstrate an understanding of the knowledge and thinking which underpins the action taken, and is integrated through reflexive competence.

For **reflexive competence** the learner must demonstrate an ability to integrate or connect performances and decision-making with understanding and an ability to change the unforeseen circumstances and to explain the reasons behind these adaptations.

Both assignments (two per module counting for 50% of the final module mark) and examinations (one per module counting for 50% of the final module mark) have been designed with these considerations in mind. It is gratifying to note that of 2052 teacher-learners on the programme in 2002, 67% met the assessment requirements and qualified to enter the second year of the programme. Whilst the final results for the second, specialist year are not yet complete due to recent supplementary examinations, the preliminary results suggest a throughput in the second year of approximately 75%.

In addition to the assignments and examinations, all teacher-learners were required to compile and present for self-, peer- and tutor assessment an integrated assessment portfolio built around lessons taught, planned and reflected upon and some teacher-learners who entered the programme with fewer academic or professional qualifications were also required to compile and present a second portfolio for RPL purposes. Teacher-learners' comments on their own experiences in these portfolios is particularly illuminating.

Generally, students appeared to be competent practitioners but found it difficult to reflect on their work in a substantive way. Most reflective comments were superficial and not rooted in the underpinning theories of the course. We will need to provide more explicit guidance in this area in future.

Cumulative examples of student comments:

Range from the basic:

For many teacher-learners reflecting on their own practice and that of their peers was a new experience. As a result their comments were often superficial and general, as in the examples below.

"Very good lesson. All the groups enjoyed lesson and activities."

"Learners enjoyed using paper money. They knew how to calculate change. They used the paper money to play shop."

"I found the NPDE course very interesting and helpful. I have learned a lot from all the modules. The most interesting was Language and learning. I liked the Language as I have learned a lot in this module. I am really going to implement what I have learned the past two years in my classroom. During the contact sessions I met and made new friends. The tutor: I have great respect for her as a person and a tutor."

"The desks in my room I usually clustered so children could collaborate more easily with a partner or in small groups. All learner we ager [sic] to know what happening [sic] and they participate very we [sic]."

"Outcomes not achieved because a lot of the learners in that group could not do the activity. If I do the lesson over I'll have to teach them the symbols and letters."

To the more reflective, but not often making reference to the theory:

Some teacher-learners, however, clearly learned something from the process of self- and peer- assessment and reflection. Their comments indicate more focussed insights into the nature of the learning experience and their classroom practice.

"I was so happy in getting this chance of assessing myself and my peer, and it is my first time. I've never thought of it."

"In the discussions afterwards learners felt that it was more difficult to write the directions then [sic] to give it orally, so I have to plan more lessons where learners need to give written directions."

"This lesson [linked to RPL module FP Life Skills 2: NPD010-5] was very interesting. I was not aware that learners at such a tender age knew about their rights and though they shied away from the responsibilities, they ended up acknowledging them. They wanted to know why there were not involved in their input on children's rights because they made their own classroom rules. I had to explain that some committees were responsible for the approval of their Rights because it was nationwide. They listened with interest as I told them about the events of June 16, 1976. They were able to relate the fact that they were fortunate to have parents and guardians who were responsible

enough to provide them with proper housing and so on. They appreciated that though they were considered themselves to be poor at least they were better off than children who in the streets. The lesson was an eye opener for me and the learners as well."

To those beginning to try to show a link between theory and practice:

A few students were able to offer quite insightful reflective comments on their own work and that of their peers and to link these insights to the material they had studied.

[Extracted from a lesson planned in response to the purpose of the RPL module NPD044-G Teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase]

"- We then sang a song 'Ke ele, e dutse thabeng'. Thereafter the learners were able to talk about their feeling.

- I told them we were going to learn.

- According to Richard, Binker and Weil (1990:7) in the module: Reception Year - they say learning is the art of taking charge of your own mind.

- I told them that we should learn about the epidemic and the drugs used [the lesson focussed on a magazine article on the AIDS activist Zackie Achmat]. We should not take stories from people who only talk what they think."

And an example of learner's work [Grade 3] related to the above lesson in which they were asked to write a letter to the government on the issue:

1.   Please take care of other people.
2.   And want people that can be nuses [sic] and doctor [sic].
3.   Because there is nobody help them and nobody give them medicines.
4.   But help them very hard.
5.   Because and them they want energe [sic] and to be healthy.
6.   And money to buy the pills and medicines.

Reflection on an intermediate phase lesson:

"According to OBE, all learners should succeed, which implies that it is learner-paced. I took in consideration that learners is not yet familiar with research work, so I supplied them with books, notes and information

pamphlets, to get the necessary information needed for their task. They worked in groups, which can be successful because was done carefully, when I also took learners developmental age into account. Pupils can also benefit a great deal from groupwork and they learn informally from their peers when they discuss the task given to them.

In OBE the teacher acts as a learning mediator and facilitator. To do this I moved from group to group while the did the research to give advise and where necessary to assist them. All the learners in the group should have a task to perform, that is why I gave them the group-activity sheet and each learners role must be stated. I also made sure that during the reflection, I ask some individual learners in each group, how they felt having that role given to them, and what they have learnt from being in that role. The important issue here is that they must realise that, that role is not theirs permanently, but will change everytime.

If you give learners a responsibility they learn to be responsible citizens. They learn to respect others and their views. They learn how to work in a group and to be co-operative. It also help their sociolistic skills to develop. Groupwork helps a great deal with discipline, if you plan your activity well and you can easily observe all the learners and be quick to notice disruptive behaviour.

Learners were also developed intellectually by learning about other cultural groups in history. They learned to respect others and learn what is of value and importance to others. They learn through doing and that is when they acted out the groups of people they represented. Their communication skills were developed when they communicated with their peers and when they reported back to the class. They learned what is worthwhile to them, when they did research on the different groups and discovered that not everybody is the same."

DIRECT OBSERVATIONS OF PRACTICE

Of course, teacher-learners' own assessment of their practice and tutors and lecturers' assessment of teacher-learners' work for assessment do not, taken alone, provide sufficient evidence for the impact that the programme may or may not have had on their practice. For this reason a limited number of observations were also conducted of teacher-learners interacting with one another and their peers during contact sessions (10) and of teacher-learners in action in their classrooms (22).

These admittedly limited observations, on the whole, served to reinforce the message conveyed by the student evaluation and the work submitted for assessment. Teacher-learners engaged on the Unisa NPDE programme are being forced to re-evaluate their practice and, in particular to re-appraise their attitude towards OBE and Curriculum 2005. They are beginning to use the new language of their profession both in their own private lesson planning as well as in engaging with their peers. However, they still find it very difficult to reflect in depth on their practice and are naturally diffident about appraising their peers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND OBSERVATIONS

If we are to achieve the kind of goals that we have set ourselves in meetings like the World Education Forum in Dakar, in April 2000, and in policy discussions around NEPAD and other initiatives, then there is need for ongoing and concerted effort in the professional development of the educators who have first line responsibility for nurturing the achievement of the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes in our learners.

Meeting the challenge requires development, innovation and research at all three levels of engagement, the macro-, the meso- and the micro- but particular attention needs to be paid to the meso-level and the ways in which institutions design their programmes, deliver those programmes and the ways in which they engage with their learners and the wider community they serve. Increasingly, institutions will be expected to display the characteristics of learning organisations and to build internally a community of learning and practice that reflects the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that the institution seeks to encourage among its learners.

The scale of the challenges facing South and Southern Africa is such that collaboration is likely to become an increasingly important issue as we seek to meet increasing demands from already limited and strained resources. But this will not be easy if institutions who would like to collaborate do not share a common vision, ethos and values.

We will not make the kinds of strides that we would like to see unless we can build the kind of community of learning and practice that appears to be beginning to emerge within the Unisa NPDE at the meso-level partially and at the micro level in particular. As Wenger has noted (ibid.), building a community of learning and practice requires:

- Collectively developed understandings

- Mutual engagement; and
- A shared repertoire of resources

and this needs to happen at the macro-, meso- and micro levels.

There is still much work to do!

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