

Communities of learners: students learning while practising their skills

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Abstract

An example of a “community of learning” can occur when teachers study a particular course within a qualification. Within this discussion session, Elaine and Rosie discuss two communities of learning: Elaine facilitated a course for experienced teachers who work in any kind of teaching environment, and Rosie was a student within that course; Rosie facilitates the learning of early childhood student teachers and supervises their practical placements. In each case the students practice their teaching in different settings from each other. The students share discussions about their teaching experiences with their peers in the class. This session focuses on how Rosie and Elaine foster shared learning among the students in their courses. Each teacher in their courses is a part of two communities: one as a student and one as a teacher. They argue that the skilled learner is able to take questions and understandings from one site to the other. It is the role of the teacher-facilitator to foster learning skills which link these two learning spaces.

Introduction

Within teacher education, we have all heard of stories that the school experience is seen by the student teacher as much more relevant than the experience at College. The theory we espouse challenges this contrast. It is not helpful to make judgements about whether one teaching/learning site is more relevant or useful than the other. It is more useful to ask questions about how the two sites of learning might interact and inform each other.

"Does this apply to bakery?", asked a colleague, "How would this idea work for a baker's apprentice who argues that the theory he is being taught is not relevant in his work placements? My son is dropping out of his apprenticeship because he has lost interest and cannot see the sense in it all."

"Yes," we reply, "it applies."

If there is a mismatch between what is being taught and what is being experienced, then it is the role of the teacher in the classroom, and of the associate in the workplace, and of the student, to identify the mismatches and to see where the tensions lie. The student has the responsibility of asking questions and identifying her/his emerging understandings. The teacher-facilitator needs to teach this skill of making links and asking questions. Society cannot build systems where there will be a unified message coming from industry and from the classroom: change is too rapid now, ideas are too complex, we no longer believe that there is a 'best' answer to apply in each situation. What is needed is to develop skills so that each practitioner is able to learn from varied experience, both practical and theoretical. It is on the basis of this kind of learning that we each make decisions in our daily lives.

We seek to capitalise on the tension between workplace and classroom theory rather than to eliminate it: we suggest that what is important is not the tension itself, but rather the way that students, teachers and associates use this potential for disagreement as a catalyst for learning. We

argue that it is *harmful* to learning to ask whether one site of learning is better or more relevant than the other - it is more important to wonder about the differences; we argue that the *skilled learner* is one who carries questions and observations from one setting to the other so that each of the participants, the student, the teacher, and the associate, are able to grapple with the issues raised; we argue *that a key role of the teacher* is to facilitate the skills necessary for robust, healthy conversations to take place among the participants; we argue that *the classroom* is the place where diverse views from a variety of workplaces can come together, not to create a 'truth about best practice', but to allow the students to debate relationships between theory and practice.

When students identify tensions between their classroom and their workplace experiences, they raise questions which are worthy of discussion. When students have an "aha" moment and are later able to share their insights with others, two things happen: they adjust and consolidate their emerging understandings, and they enable others to learn from them. When students notice a mismatch between theory and practice, and question the difference, they open up the possibility for learning, both their own learning, and collective learning for the teacher-associate-student triad. If students merely make judgements about which site of learning they preferred they escape the need to learn from the differences, but by raising questions about the mismatch, students open up meaningful investigations.

We begin by describing our respective classrooms as cohort communities, and highlight the fact that Rosie is a member of both communities of learning: she is both student and teacher. Secondly we use a story from Rosie's teaching to explain our emerging understandings of the roles of teacher and student: skilled learners carry questions and insights from one setting to the other, and back again. We conclude by sharing some of the insights and highlighting some of the questions which have been generated in the process of developing these ideas.

Describing our practices: working within cohort communities

Lawrence (2002: 83) refers to cohort groups as (usually) strangers who are connected only through a mutual desire to complete a common course of studies: they come together with the expectation and willingness to work collaboratively. Even though cohorts of students are not a community in an ongoing sense because their formal links end when the courses end, students who are expected to work collectively and discuss their experiences do form communities where they establish their own ways of working together and supporting each other in their learning.

During 2002, Elaine led the reflective practice strand within a course for postgraduate teachers: TL811 *Critical Reflection on Theories and Practices of Teaching and Learning*. Rosie, who works as a teacher within a diploma of teaching in early childhood at another institution, was a participant in the course. Two years later we have come to appreciate the ways in which Elaine's work with practising teachers and Rosie's work with pre-service teachers are similar. In each case we are working with students who gain practical experiences related to the taught curriculum through their work. The students are all employed or have practicums outside the institution where they are studying; in each case they are developing and refining skills that relate to their paid employment (or in the case of pre-service teachers, their future employment).

Figure 1 Cohort communities: learners belong to other communities

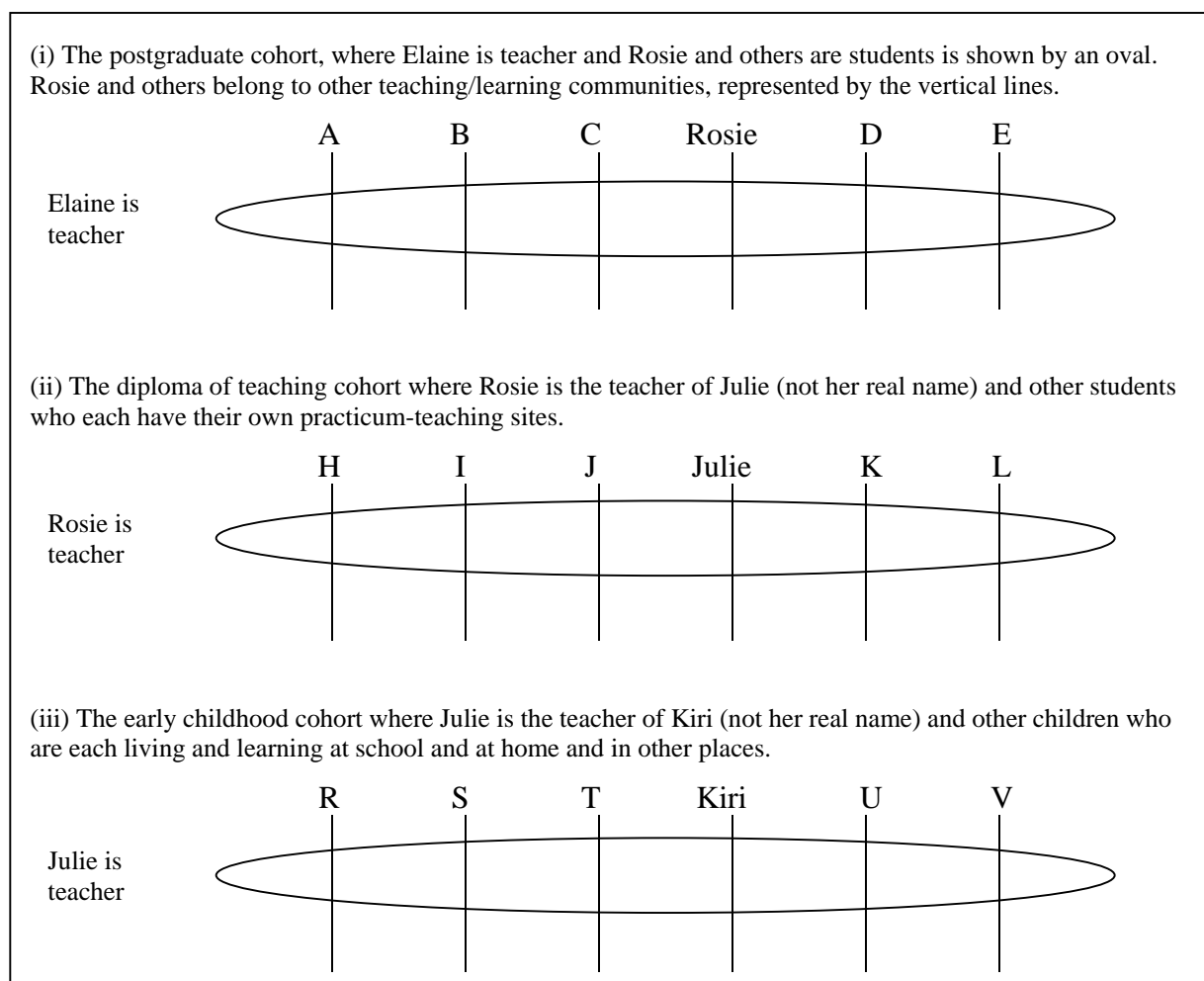


Figure 1 illustrates the idea that each participant is a member of both the community of learners (the course of study) and of the community of practice (the practicum). The ovals refer to the cohort communities who assemble in class with the teacher where the focus is on learning (or making sense of links between theory and practice). In diagram (i) for example, the oval shows that all the participants (A, B, C, Rosie, D and E) take part in the discussions in the postgraduate classroom, while the vertical lines show that Rosie (and H, I, J, K and L) are each part of another community when they are away from class: this latter community is illustrated in diagram (ii), etc.

There are many similarities in the ways in which we, Rosie and Elaine foster learning, even though the contexts of our teaching are different. Elaine teaches a postgraduate course in which the participants reconsider theory surrounding the notion of reflective practice: they question the very notion of reflection and wonder about its effect on teachers; they trial different strategies suggested by various theorists; they develop a portfolio of their experiences; they seek to understand what assumptions influence the choices they make as teachers; and they talk with colleagues, they gain insight by asking questions of their students, they think back over their experiences as learners, and they search the literature for ideas that might challenge their strongly held views.

The participants in the course were all practising teachers in schools or early childhood centres or were involved in various forms of adult or tertiary education. Participants lived in various parts of New Zealand and came together only once for a three day workshop. Other communications took place using flexible teaching methods: readings were posted to students; discussion took place on an Internet site (StudentNet) where different groupings of students discussed various issues of

common interest; we held two telephone conferences; there were also email and telephone conversations between individual students and Elaine.

Rosie teaches third year student teachers in the Diploma of Teaching in Early Childhood Education in a small private College of Education. The students come from throughout New Zealand to attend the three year course. The programme comprises face to face classes and practical placements which are undertaken in a variety of early childhood settings. During the programme, they are involved in a variety of informal learning interactions.

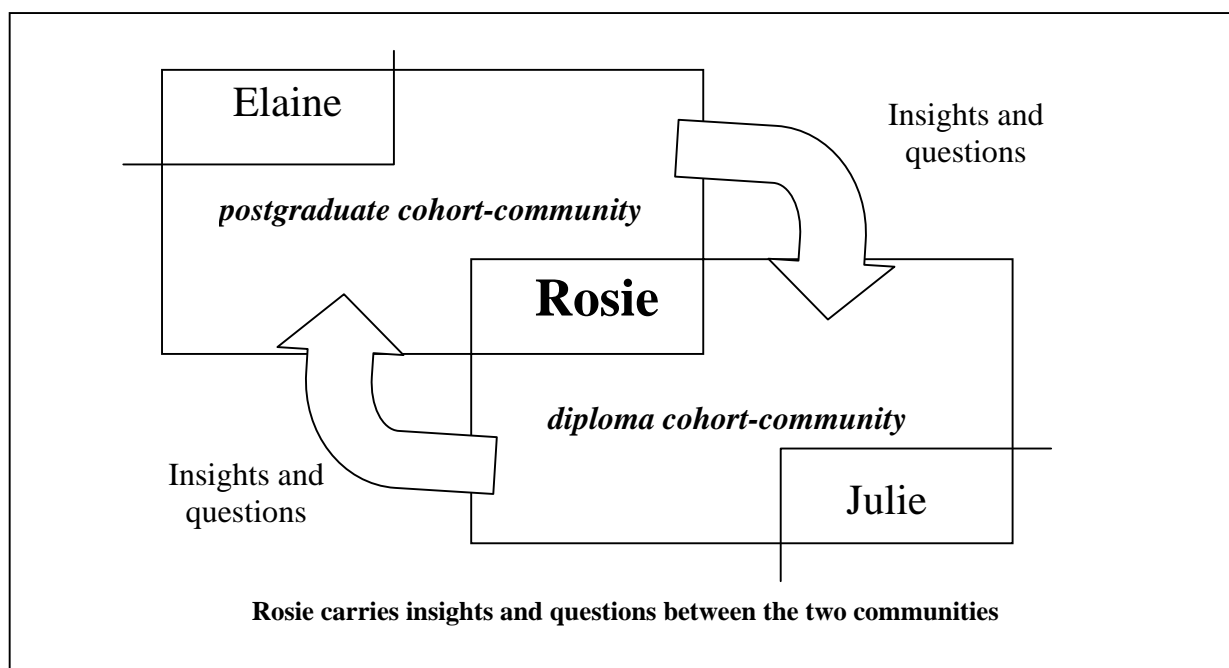
Part of the programme requires the students to meet weekly in informal study groups where they discuss practicum or assignment requirements. Each group member is expected to record her/his learning as a result of these discussions and to submit these reflective comments to Rosie as part of an ongoing conversation. This means that each student is working with peers, reflecting individually on their learning, and taking part in an ongoing dialogue with Rosie. Rosie also writes in an individual journal which is made public to the students who may discuss this material in their next weekly group meeting (referred to as 'Friday Forum'). The conversations (written and oral) within this arrangement include both material covered within the formal curriculum and experiences gained from practicum.

Although the contexts are different, there are similarities between our groups. Both cohorts of students met with each other in a variety of informal ways. For example, Rosie met with classmates over lunch where current assignment work was discussed, and she knows that her students meet in similar ways in a variety of places. Elaine is aware of one student who lacked confidence and sought out support from another student: unknown to other participants, a separate tutorial space was created on StudentNet; the resulting conversations fostered confidence. Rosie has teamed a student who lacks confidence with another who is able to scaffold her learning and foster her independence. Strategies are different, or evolve: texting between cell phones for Rosie's students takes the place of the mainly-landline phone calls of Elaine's more mature students of two years ago.

Emerging insight: learning emerges across the communities

Parallels between the two cohort communities can be extended. We are both aware that some students who achieve well are particularly skilled in using the one setting to challenge assumptions made in the other setting, and they use these questions to enhance their learning. Our insight is that the *skilled learner* is able to take questions and understandings from one site of learning to another. A skilled learner investigates the ways in which meanings she/he constructs in one location are helpful in other locations. This is a reciprocal relationship in that experiences from the practicum inform discussions in the classroom and vice versa. Rosie illustrated her skill when she talked about her experiences and raised questions within StudentNet, and when, in her own teaching, she trialed and adapted strategies such as keeping journals and used the literature (for example, strategies from Brookfield, 1995) to promote discussion among her own students.

Figure 2 The communities of a learner: Rosie is linked to two cohort-communities.



Later, as we talked about this, Rosie identified that the teaching strategies Elaine was using were ones which she was now using more within her own teaching. What happened in Elaine's class was echoed in Rosie's class, what happened in Rosie's class was echoed in those of her students. This is illustrated in figure 2 which shows Rosie's involvement both as a student in the postgraduate classroom and as a teacher of diploma students within the early childhood college. The arrows in this diagram show that Rosie's questions and insights are carried between the two communities.

The pattern continues. Rosie tells a story which links the diploma classroom with the early childhood centre where her student, Julie was working. Julie now becomes the person who links two cohort communities together as illustrated in figure 3. Julie becomes the person who, as a skilled learner, carries ideas questions between settings.

Rosie was concerned that Julie, when on teaching practice, was acting as "children's friend" rather than standing aside and allowing the child time to learn. Current theory in early childhood argues that one of the teacher's roles is to facilitate children's learning by encouraging them to take the initiative and to think and problem-solve for themselves (Ministry of Education, 1996). Julie tended to "play" with the children and do some of the activities herself and make suggestions about what they might do next. This had been identified as a problem on the previous placement: Rosie and Julie agreed that a focus for Julie's next practicum placement would be to step back from playing with children, to observe more, to ask open-ended questions, and to facilitate play rather than take part herself.

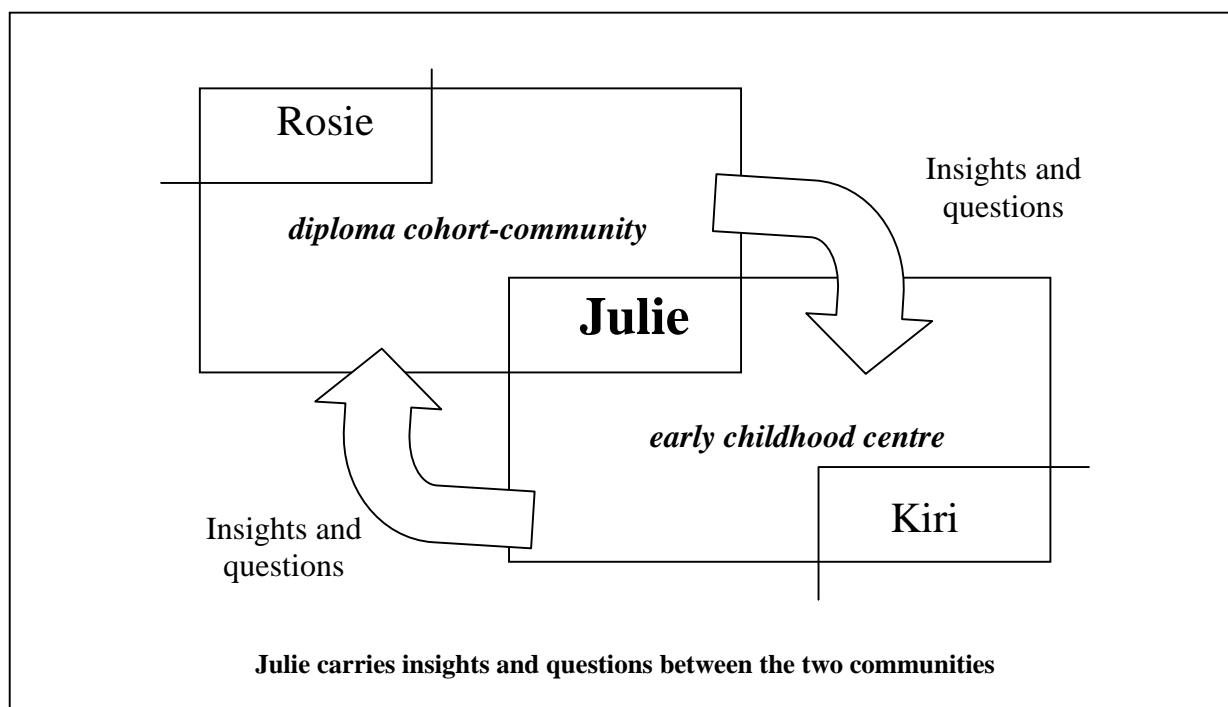
During a visit to the centre where Julie was on her practicum placement, Rosie saw Julie making the same kind of mistake; she reminded Julie of her focus for this placement; and stepped back and away from the teaching space. Rosie reports:

"Julie carried on with her teaching and I moved aside ... Julie went on with her teaching ... then ... it was like a light suddenly went on ... she looked at me and said "Oh, I know what it means now."

We argue that the skilled learner is able to carry insights and questions between the sites of learning. We also argue that the role of the teacher-facilitator is to foster learning skills which link these two learning spaces. The aim is to build the student's skill in learning within both the

classroom and the workplace. In Julie's case, (a) she selected her focus before teaching practice based on analyses of her previous experiences; (b) she was reminded of this at a critical moment during teaching practice and (c) she then gained an insight which resonated; (d) she consolidated her learning in the rest of her teaching, and (e) she later reported to her classmates, in the Friday Forum within the diploma programme, that she "felt like a real teacher." It is evident that Julie had learned to act in ways that she and her cohort sees are appropriate for a teacher: she has integrated theory and action and, furthermore, she was able to talk about her learning: her learning made sense of links between workplace experience and in the classroom theory.

Figure 3 The communities of a learner: Julie is linked to two cohort-communities.



Rosie played two roles here. Firstly, as teacher who is supporting students to learn to be early childhood teachers, she helped Julie identify her need, she reminded her of this need during placement, and she debriefed with her and celebrated the learning that had taken place. Secondly as a teacher who is helping students to gain effective skills to apply to ongoing learning, Rosie has put in place processes whereby Julie knows that she is expected to make links for herself between the things that happen in class and in the workplace: reflective journals and Friday Forums require Julie to identify places where there is a mismatch between theory and practice, and to investigate these, or to identify places where her learning can be enhanced by adapting the strategies used by other teachers. Julie has not only learnt to let her learners do the thinking, she has also come to realise that her own learning was enhanced because her teacher stepped back and left her to build her own experiences, but also supported her by challenging her to think for herself and to talk about her learning.

Similarly, Rosie reports that Elaine had a strategy of allowing groups to find their own interpretations of readings by *not* answering direct questions to her, but by standing back from discussion: teachers are left to grapple with their own issues related to the reading. This strategy has been reinterpreted and adapted by Rosie, in her role of the teacher-facilitator: she encourages her students to discuss issues for themselves in the Friday Forums and participates only when she

sees the need to alert students to assumptions they may be making or to link their ideas back to the curriculum. Julie's insight into letting the child "do the thinking" is a multiple re-interpretation and adaptation of many other teaching strategies.

At all levels, not only in early childhood, one of the teacher's roles is to facilitate learning by encouraging learners to take the initiative and to think and problem-solve for themselves.

The teacher-facilitator, therefore, needs to foster strategies that enhance such learning. We have highlighted the need for students involved in cooperative education to capitalise on the differences between two sites of learning by identifying insights and raising questions. The questions and insights that arise in one setting are the challenges the learner can take to the other space. The learner has the responsibility of investigating tensions between the two settings, with the support of both teacher and associate, and in the context of the classroom and of the workplace.

Emerging questions:

We have argued that the tension, within cooperative education, between workplace learning and classroom learning can set one site of learning in opposition to the other: the tension might be eliminated, or at least reduced, by bringing practice and theory closer together so that the associate and the teacher agree on what should be taught, and how, and share understandings about what is good practice, and how innovations are introduced into practice. This approach is unrealistic: even if it were possible for teachers and associates to agree on such complex things, there is no time for extended discussions between them.

The challenge, therefore, for teachers and associates in workplaces is to foster students' questioning skills and to foster their ability to relate theory and practice. Our story has told of emerging insight into teaching, it does not tell of how the questions that Kiri, or Julie, or Rosie asked led to cohort discussions where fresh understandings emerged. We argue that the role of the teacher is to foster the skills of noticing patterns and asking questions, but we recognise that asking questions is very difficult. It is difficult to ask questions that challenge our own assumptions, and it is even more difficult to respond to questions raised by student teachers. In order for the model we espouse to work, relationships within the teacher-associate-student triad would need to be negotiated so that each partner understands and values the questioning, investigative, problem-solving approach to learning that is being fostered.

By focusing on the cohort communities and the ways that insight emerges across communities, we have shown one way that learning occurs for teachers and those who are learning to be teachers. We have defined the skilled learner as one who reflects on differences between theory and practice and who seeks insights and questions that will enhance their understandings. We have not addressed the ways in which teachers might foster these skills in students, associates and themselves, nor have we explained how the conditions for this learning can be fostered within the three-way relationship among associate, teacher and student. But questions are emerging: as we finish the writing of this paper Rosie talks:

That teacher-associate triad is so important - I wonder about how to make it safe for students to let their associates know about their concerns - the journal may be one way, where the associate gets to read the student's journal, and the student words her concerns in ways that are not too challenging. I wonder about how to make it safe for the associates too, because it can be very challenging for them if a student asks too many questions or asks them in a way that is undermining ...

Just as insights emerge within cohort communities, questions emerge as we discuss ideas across our networks: questions arise when we are challenged to explain our ideas in other settings.

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