



TROUBLING TEACHING

Alison Stephenson

Victoria University of Wellington

In our early childhood teacher education program the young child is positioned as a competent and resourceful participant in his/her own learning. Reflection on this image led me to recognise that some aspects of tertiary institutions mean students themselves can be positioned as less empowered learners. As a result of this recognition, new methods of learning/teaching have been employed in a course that focuses on extending students' teaching practices and their skills in reflecting, in an attempt to reposition students as co-constructors of their own knowledge. Strategies used over the past four years include student participation in decisions about content and assessment criteria; cooperative group-work; jigsaw reading tasks; weekly reflective journals; and audio taping, transcribing and reflecting on my own teaching. In order to include a student perspective, students' comments on the process from end-of-course evaluations are included.

In naming this account of a four-year teaching journey 'troubling teaching' I wish to convey two ideas: first that I am troubled by aspects of teaching, but also, and more significantly, that I am troubling my teaching. Moss and Petrie (2002, p. 10) write of 'putting a stutter' into narratives which 'speak as if they were the only possible version of events'. I have been consciously trying to put a stutter into my teaching.

Provocation to do this came from my growing awareness of the gulf between the image of children as active learners that is promoted in our early childhood teacher education program, and the reality of how students are often positioned as learners within the institution. The sociocultural approach of *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, is fundamental to the program. In reflecting on their role as teachers, students engage with the implications of seeing children as 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent' (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10), as active participants in their learning, and of children and teachers co-constructing meaning and understanding. Just as the work of teachers in Reggio Emilia, which provides the foundation for some of these ideas, has challenged many of us to think critically about our practices with young children (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), it provided the catalyst for me to critically review my practices as a tertiary teacher. Increasingly I became aware of the dissonance between what I said about the role of the teacher, and what I did in the classroom. My work was strongly influenced by institutional requirements which include pre-set learning outcomes for courses, content often delivered in lectures, and non-negotiable assignment tasks. Uncomfortably, I recognised these practices implied

an image of students as 'empty vessels' and a pedagogy of transmission-style teaching. Recognising this dissonance helped me to problematise the concepts of 'student' and 'teaching', alerted me to some of the 'taken-for-granted' discourses of tertiary education, and led me to reflect on the image of the student as learner that is apparent in the way I teach students. It led me to ask:

Can I find ways of learning/teaching that have more resonance with the image of the young child as active learner that I am espousing?

What changes are possible within the policies and practices of a tertiary institution?

Supporting literature

Through reading, I became aware of others in tertiary education following similar journeys. For example, Ridgeway and Surman (2004) have also drawn on the philosophical underpinnings of Reggio Emilia in challenging some of the dominant discourses of tertiary education. They explored the use of a social constructivist approach to encourage teacher education students to be more actively engaged and responsible for their own learning. In a third-year pedagogy course Loughran (1996) used strategies I was experimenting with—student journal writing, and modelling reflection himself, both in a journal he shared with students and also by 'thinking aloud' during classes. His account of these latter strategies provided guidance for me in what had seemed uncharted territory. Student journals were used in November (1997) for ongoing communication, and his description of the evolution of a course provided reassurance that others had found similar challenges and pitfalls in designing and teaching courses. Knowing Keesing-

Styles (2002) had involved students in the assessment process, and in generating assessment criteria, encouraged further exploration of the modifications that might be possible in the assessment processes of my own institution.

The framework of critical pedagogy has been valuable in increasing my awareness of the power dimensions of learning and teaching (Hinchey, 1998), and how students may be positioned by 'hidden' aspects of the curriculum (Margolis, 2001).

In an effort to reposition students as active learners I used cooperative learning strategies in the classes—group work and jigsaw tasks—which are recognised as effective ways of increasing student engagement and learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Other ideas for empowering students in learning/teaching (Weimer, 2002; Zepke, Nugent & Leach, 2003) extended this approach.

My journey

The opportunity to develop and teach the course, 'Teacher roles in young children's learning', to a class of four third-year early childhood diploma students offered the initial opportunity to experiment with teaching/learning processes that would give students more control over their learning. The focus of the course on unpacking and reflecting on the complexities of the teacher's role seemed an appropriate setting for my own reflective process.

In the first four years, the course was offered five times and class sizes ranged from 16 to 24 students. Each group was predominantly or entirely female, and in each there were students of a range of ages, of cultural backgrounds (e.g. European New Zealander, Māori, Samoan, Chinese) and with prior experiences in early childhood education. Following an ethical process approved by the institution, students received written information about the research project at the start of each course, before choosing whether to participate. Students' comments included here come from two end-of-course evaluation forms: one the institution's formal evaluation, and the second an informal evaluation in which students were asked to 'list 10 things that you remember'.

From the beginning, I used an action research approach, which I continued for five cycles of the course. I audiotaped, transcribed, and reflected on my role in sections of each course; I kept a journal through each course which I shared with students; and I used my reflections and student feedback to guide the refinement of each successive version. The process has, therefore, been one which largely fits Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) spiral of cycles, each of which involves planning, acting, observing and reflecting/

evaluating. My hesitation in defining it as action research stems from their stipulation that action research is a 'collaborative' process (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 23) and for the first three years it was a course in which only I taught. However, there are two ways in which it might be considered collaborative. The first is that students contributed to the evolution of the course through their comments and their evaluations; the second is that for the past two years I have worked alongside other staff in the course, and they are now making their own modifications.

The process I undertook also fits Loughran's description (2003) of 'self study' for teacher educators. Loughran defines self-study as a combination of reflective practice, action research and practitioner research, and describes the starting point as a 'dilemma of practice', a point at which 'dissonance between beliefs and practice' (2003, p. 143) highlights the need for congruence. I recognised that my dilemma of practice had been the tension between the model of teaching/learning I promoted and the one I practised with students.


The explicit educational aim of the course was to support students to reflect on themselves in their role as teachers. My implicit aim, however, was to shift the power imbalance between teacher and students and give students' voices more prominence. Both these aims have contributed to the organisation of the course. While it is possible to present these as separate threads, within the reality of the course they are inextricably intertwined. In this paper I first describe the strategies I used to 'trouble' my teaching and shift the power imbalance, and then explain how these mesh with the focus on reflection. Finally, in reviewing the journey, I identify what still remains 'troubling'.

Shifting the power imbalance

Introducing the course

While there are arguments that pre-set learning objectives may have potentially stifling effects (Brookfield, 1986, pp. 211-219), they are a requirement of this institution (along with attendance and assignment requirements), and are a constraint on students' input into course content. Initially I showed students the learning outcomes in the first class, and asked them to discuss the content they would like to cover. Now, following student feedback, I send students the learning outcomes before the course so they are better prepared for that discussion.

Towards the end of the first two-hour session students compare their suggestions with the draft planned sessions (in the required course outline). When possible I have (a) student(s) chair this session to ensure my perspective does



not dominate. As part of this introduction I also describe briefly what I am attempting to achieve in this course, and discuss the issues of power. Reflecting on the course, one student recalled feeling 'a bit of confusion and surprise to begin with being given more control'; another wrote, 'We had a say in what we wanted to learn about'. Students report finding the first session 'scary', 'exciting', 'exhausting', but leave feeling this course will be different.


Negotiating the assessment process

Keeping a weekly journal which reflects on their interactions with children, and which makes reference to the readings and material covered in class, is the single, and non-negotiable, assignment. (Students attended practicum one day per week.) Each entry is handed in for formative comment, and the full set submitted for summative assessment at the end of the course. Initially I assumed I would mark the journals, but for the last three years students have taken a role in negotiating both the assessment criteria and the assessment process. Classes can decide who they want to assess their journals—self, peer, lecturer. The proviso that no student can be the sole assessor of their own work is a negotiated position that has been deemed to meet the institution's assessment requirements. Interestingly, everyone has opted for a lecturer to be part of the assessment process. As students' comments suggest, these negotiations can be challenging: 'The hilarious co-construction of assessment' and 'Tedious discussions in session one ... Oh God could we make a decision please'.

Group discussions

The bulk of the work is done in cooperative groups, which are selected by me, with the aim of defining groups that are both heterogeneous and compatible. The group is the forum where students share their weekly reflective journals and review the readings. Comments from students reflect their appreciation of working in depth with peers: 'Our small group sharing and discussion has been rich' and 'We were treated like adult learners, and our knowledge and life experiences were valued'. In order to support the group work I try to provide an optimal environment. For one class this meant shifting to a larger room; for another it meant using two adjoining rooms.

The readings



The readings book is prepared before the course begins, with readings added or removed in response to students' evaluations of those in the previous course. As a result of the negotiation of course content, it is always necessary to compile sets of readings to cover the new sessions. I use a jigsaw reading strategy (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) with the four readings for each topic covering much of the

content, which reduces the need for 'teaching'. Each student is allotted one reading to share each week with their group of four, and the group's learning is therefore dependent on the effectiveness with which each member does this. Reflecting on the course, students frequently comment on the quantity of reading—'Reading, reading and more reading', 'First time in the whole course I have read all the articles provided'—and on the significance of the readings in their discussions.

My role in the group process

In keeping with the prominence given to students' voices, I take the role of observer when groups are working, sitting slightly separate, silently listening, taking occasional notes and avoiding eye contact. Later I often acknowledge the quality of the discussions and, with students' permission, make reference to particular detail. I noted in my journal:

'One thing that listening has confirmed for me—there is no way I, or I suspect anyone, could produce that wealth of expansion of each of the readings that is occurring in the small groups.'

I am reminded of the quote from Malaguzzi (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1994, p. 77) displayed on the wall in one of the Reggio centres: 'Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning'.

Because I am committed to allowing students uninterrupted discussion time, there are flexible follow-up activities for groups who finish earlier. Occasionally I have to remind absorbed group members that the two-hour session is about to end.

Other strategies that have been used to ensure that prominence is given to student voices are:

- asking students to lead class discussions;
- collecting feedback from students on how they rated each weekly reading;
- recording (with students' permission) and transcribing sessions to reflect on how often, and in what way, I contribute to class discussions; and
- using transcriptions to monitor the type of questions I ask, and pause time in waiting for answers.

The reflective teacher focus

The course focuses on extending students' repertoire of teaching strategies, developing their awareness of the strategies they are already using, and honing their reflective skills. The students' weekly reflective journals are central to this process.

Journals

Students report enjoying journal writing for a range of reasons. Initially, some find it intimidating, but once launched they appreciate the chance to explore their own ideas, and receive feedback from their peers. The process of sharing their journals often leads to intense discussion, and students will draw on examples from each other's journals to illustrate points they are making.

Reflecting on their practices as teachers is fundamental to the teacher education program, and the journal is seen as a way of improving their skills: 'Reflecting—modelled and made easy', a student wrote. Each year I have introduced more support for the processes of journal writing and reflecting, for example by offering a range of possible formats (O'Connor & Diggins, 2003), and this continues to be an area where some students ask for assistance.

Students are appreciative that the weekly journal replaces any larger end-of-course assignment, and that they have control over the assessment criteria. Comments have included: 'Lack of fear with regard to failing' and 'No obsessive emphasis on compulsive—obsessive referencing'. At the end they are often surprised at how much they have written.

Journal entries are handed in each week, and returned the next with my thoughts and comments, but with no summative assessment. I value very highly the students' openness in sharing their reflections, and the communication through the journals provides a rich additional layer to the process taking place in the classroom. Reflecting on my written comments, a student noted: 'The reflective journal made me able to express myself, my feelings, ideas and thoughts and I appreciate your open-mindedness, because some of my ideas and philosophy I follow may not be the same as yours.'

My journaling role

The decision to share my journal with them seemed a natural reciprocation; it was also a way of modelling my personal commitment to reflective teaching, and gave students access to my thinking about our shared experience in the classroom. Inevitably, the knowledge that I will share my journal has some impact on how I write about the course.

I audiotaped and transcribed periods of the class where I have 'taught' from the front, and these audiotapes/transcripts are also available to students. In these practices I am modelling the kind of intense scrutiny of content that Paley (1986) has used and is a feature of Reggio Emilia. Both the transcribing and the journaling push me to revisit

class content and alert me to missed opportunities. Some ideas are revisited the following week and, while many are missed, at times the intensity and thoughtfulness of student-led discussions suggests the process of empowering students is working.

I also model reflection for students at times by making explicit some of my reflection-in-action during class. In one session I recorded myself saying 'Now that was a terrible example of a question where I know the answer, and you have to guess it. Let's see if I can do better.'

The second layers of troubling teaching


I have described above how I am 'troubling' my teaching to find ways to give students more control of the teaching/learning process. There is, however, a second layer of 'troubling' in the teaching. I experience this in two ways.

The first is the challenge of finding the appropriate balance between the students' voice and mine. End-of-course evaluations show students' appreciation of the change in power dynamics: 'Allowing class to 'take control' of the class without letting us get too off track'; 'No teacher view dominated. Our opinions were valued'; 'Open time frames allowing total participation'.

However, I realise that in respecting the student voice I have made it harder for myself to act as a provocateur, both in responding to their journals and in the classroom. I reflected in my journal on the challenge of finding 'the balance between stimulating and giving autonomy, which is partly provoking discussion, but also being able to let it flow'. Giving prominence to the students' voices has made me reluctant to introduce an abrasive, critical tone into the mix. This is an area I continue to work on.

In a few sessions I have felt less satisfied with the depth of the discussions of one or two groups, and it is my struggle to manage these situations, and my reactions to them, that provides the second way in which teaching is troubling. At times I am aware of adopting what I call 'strategies of subterfuge' when things do not go according to my plan. I grapple with the strategies I use in my role as an 'empowering' teacher when students do not, at that moment, choose to respond in the way I expect/want. I am forced to confront, as I have tried to indicate with quotation marks, the challenge of shifting to a more student-led orientation. I am forced to consider whose agenda is really still driving the class.

At times I have confronted issues directly with students. On one occasion I was disconcerted by frequent outbursts of laughter, apparently unrelated to the discussion. I reflected on this, outlined potential strategies in my journal, and



shared these reflections with the class. They were apologetic and took charge of monitoring this behaviour on the few occasions when it reoccurred.

At other times I resort to less overt strategies to 'tweak' the class, while still maintaining the semblance of shifting the power imbalance. For example, I:

- choose to comment approvingly on some journals and not others;
- give feedback to the class about the effective strategies I see some groups using;
- design written group evaluation sheets to focus students on their own group processes, and how effective (or ineffective) they are; for example, asking them to rate themselves on 'Do you all have a good understanding of all the readings by the time you finish?'; and
- move to observe groups who I suspect are working superficially.

In one session, when students were sharing articles about the environment, I became aware that the topic under discussion for one group was 'gloop'—how you made it and used it with children. I moved closer, as a strategy of re-engaging them. But what intrinsically makes abstract thoughts about effective environments a more worthy topic than the practical realities of gloop? I find myself reconsidering for the umpteenth time whose agenda takes priority, and why I consider my agenda has more value. I am torn between a need to tell them 'to get on with it' and a desire to maintain the role I have taken of handing responsibility to them. Weimer (2002) writes that 'Power is redistributed in amounts proportional to students' abilities to handle it' (p. 29), and discusses the challenge of finding the balance in how much control and decision-making can be shared before the responsibilities associated with being a teacher are compromised. Yet feedback from these students showed they believed they were learning effectively.

Where to from here?

Engaging in this process of action research has led me to think in depth about the image of the student as learner that is implied in my pedagogical practices. I continue to be committed to finding ways which will allow students greater control of, and responsibility for, their own learning. While the academic requirements of a tertiary institution can be hampering, it has proved possible to make changes in the way course content and assessment criteria are decided. Students report finding these changes significant.

My challenge now is to find ways to take what I have learned here into other areas of my teaching, which often

require giving lectures to large groups or taking a few isolated tutorials. I remain committed to the process of 'troubling' my teaching for two reasons. The first is the impact that students report the course has on their learning: 'I have probably learnt the most from this class than any other. So thank you for trusting us and thank you for this experience. My way of thinking has definitely changed' and 'Let's have more of THIS!!'

I am also committed to it because I find it so exciting and challenging. It feels like teaching on the edge, it feels like real teaching.

References

- Brookfield, S.D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning: A comprehensive analysis of principles and effective practices*. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (1994). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Hinchey, P.H. (1998). *Finding freedom in the classroom: A practical introduction to critical theory*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Johnson, D., & Johnson, R. (1999). *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning (5th edn)*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Keesing-Styles, L. (2002, August). *The nature and purpose of assessment in teacher education*. Paper presented to the TEFANZ conference, Wellington.
- Kemmis S., & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner (3rd edn)*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Loughran, J. (2003). Pursuing scholarship in teacher education. In D. Fraser & R. Openshaw (Eds.), *Informing our practice: Selections from the 2002 TEFANZ conference* (pp. 141-155). Palmerston North: Kanuka Grove Press.
- Malaguzzi, L. (1993). For an education based on relationships. *Young Children*, 49(1), 9-12.
- Margolis, E.E. (Ed.) (2001). *The hidden curriculum in higher education*. New York: Routledge.
- Moss, P., & Petrie, P. (2002). *From children's services to children's spaces: Public policy, children and childhood*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- November, P. (1997). Learning to teach experientially: A pilgrim's progress. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22(3), 289-300.
- O'Connor, A., & Diggins, C. (2003). *On reflection: Reflective practice for early childhood educators*. Wellington: Open Mind Publishing.
- Paley, V.G. (1986). On listening to what the children say. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(2), 122-131.
- Ridgeway, A., & Surman, L. (2004). Practise what we preach. Why reflective pedagogy? *Journal of Australian Research in Early Childhood Education*, 11(2), 1-13.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centred teaching: Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Zepke, N., Nugent, D., & Leach, L. (2003). *Reflection to transformation: A self-help book for teachers*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.