Becoming a tertiary teacher in New Zealand:
some perspectives on workplace learning
in communities of practice

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This work-in-progress paper presents some findings from an on-going doctoral research project. The research takes a interpretive, qualitative approach, developing case studies focused on three different institutions, a polytechnic, a university and a wananga (Maori tertiary institution). The initial findings indicate a lack of systematic and sustained support for teacher development in some institutions; inconsistency between teaching departments or disciplines within some institutions in their support for newer staff; and a heavy reliance on teachers’ own experiential, on-the-job learning. A tentative conclusion, drawing on Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice, is that identifying ways to build, maintain and pass on a sense of teaching community could also strengthen forms of support for people becoming tertiary teachers – and so help them, like their students, to learn for an unknown future.

Keywords
Community of practice, academic staff development, tertiary teacher education

Background of the project

I have been involved in polytechnic staff development and tutor training since 1981, and degree level education for tertiary teachers since 1995. During that time I have also had considerable contact with university academic developers, tutors in private training establishments (PTEs), and staff at one of the wananga. I therefore became interested in the routes that led people to become tertiary teachers in different contexts, and how they gained their teaching knowledge and expertise in different institutional or disciplinary settings. I use the term “tertiary teacher” in this paper generically to include academics, lecturers, tutors and similar labels used in various contexts.

Literature review and development of research questions

A broad range of literature relevant to my research interest has addressed matters such as teachers’ conceptions of teaching (e.g. Prosser and Trigwell, 1999); excellence in tertiary teaching and its recognition (e.g. Dunkin, 1995; Ramsden et al, 1995); aspects of staff development related to tertiary teaching (e.g. Webb, 1996); or the contexts of tertiary education (e.g. Taylor, 1999). However, few writers have looked at the ways by which tertiary teachers become or develop as teachers, and few other than Pratt et al (1998) have looked at tertiary teaching across a variety of settings.
Unlike most school teachers, few tertiary teachers receive pre-service training for teaching, nor do they later achieve qualifications in teaching (Johnston, 1998). They therefore learn mainly on-the-job after their appointment, in a form of apprenticeship in their community of practice - but without the traditional contractual commitment to induct and train the new member in the occupational skills and knowledge. They do generally have opportunities to engage in in-service courses and continuing professional development activities related to their teaching practice (e.g. Brew, 1995).

Work on situated learning (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991; Billett, 1996) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), was already available when my project began in 1999. More recent studies indicate an increasing interest in how people learn in the workplace: for example, Beckett and Hager (2002) consider know how, practice, and practical judgement in the work of professionals. However, only a few studies refer to the concepts of situated learning or community of practice in relation to tertiary teaching, such as Malcolm and Zukas (2000), Trowler and Knight (2000), MacDonald (2001), or Viskovic and Robson (2001).

Situated workplace learning is often contrasted with the formalised but decontextualised learning that occurs in educational courses, leading to conclusions that authentic activity is needed as part of the process of enculturation, and can be linked to the concept of learning in a community of practice. Similar conclusions can be found in the literature of education for the professions (e.g. Eraut, 1994), where practice-based learning and on-going professional development are expected to complement the formal learning that led to an initial qualification. If we relate this to tertiary teaching, what are the implications of relying on situated, experiential learning, with little underpinning of formal knowledge? What is the role of the community of teaching practice in supporting members to engage with and contribute to a common body of knowledge and practice? Such concerns led me to the research problem and questions to be addressed in this project:

**How do people become tertiary teachers in New Zealand?**
- How do tertiary teachers perceive and develop their knowledge and practice of teaching?
- How do they become full members of a teaching community of practice?
- What influences may context/community have on the ways by which people become tertiary teachers?
- How well do the theories of situated learning and community of practice contribute to interpreting and understanding how people become tertiary teachers?

**Implementation**

An interpretive research methodology was adopted for the project, using multiple case studies. I gained permission to conduct research involving their staff from three different types of institution: a polytechnic, a university and a wananga. Data (mainly qualitative) was collected through an initial survey questionnaire; semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers (one from each of art/design, computing, engineering and communication at each institution) and staff developers; some observation of teaching; and examination of documents such as charter statements and institutional policies and procedures. Data collection took place between June 2000 and June 2001.

This paper offers some key findings about teaching and support for teacher development in the three institutions. Internal documents referred to are not included in the references, to
keep the institutions anonymous, and “staff development unit” (SDU) will be used as a generic name in each place. As this is a work in progress paper, the focus is on discussion of initial trends, rather than more developed conclusions that will further apply Wenger’s theories.

Findings from the polytechnic case study

**General statements about teaching**

The Mission Statement says the polytechnic will provide educational programmes developed and taught to the highest possible quality standards. For this it needs qualified staff, sensitive to their own and other cultures, who are provided with opportunities for personal, technical and professional development. A Staff Profile document refers to the student focus of key strategies; effective teaching and learning are fundamental to the ongoing life of the institution, all staff will be learners and will support the learning of others.

**Teaching matters related to induction, probation, promotion, appraisal**

The polytechnic’s induction process provides for a global induction through HR and a faculty/division induction, followed by a two-year probation including a personal/professional development plan. Academic staff are required to attend Certificate in Adult Teaching (CAT) modules if they have not had previous training as an educator. The polytechnic has substantial packages for teaching appraisal and promotion processes. Following a restructuring, there is no longer an integrated staff development unit: the staff development manager is located in Human Resources and other SDU staff have gone into a teaching department. The manager referred to concerns from student feedback leading to increased attention to teaching support in some areas, and he was reviewing systems.

**Staff Development related to teaching needs**

The Collective Employment Contract provides for tenured academics to receive up to 12 weeks training in the practice of adult and tertiary education. Full-time academic staff have ten duty days per year for all professional development activities, plus some financial support. Learning opportunities available for all staff include: formal courses; seminars and workshops on a needs basis; on-line packages; coaching, mentoring and peer review; use of in-house or external expertise as required; and support, advice and coordination from HR.

**Qualifications for teaching**

This polytechnic is one of several that offer certificate and diploma programmes in tertiary teaching, for both their own staff and external participants. However, many new staff currently complete only the first two modules of the CAT (about two weeks). This is considerably less than their full entitlement, and the 12 weeks that were nationally compulsory till the early 1990s (Viskovic, 1994).

**Indications of the institution’s “community of practice” related to teaching**

Various documents imply values and practices that are associated with this institution as a whole, but do not refer specifically to “community of practice”. The Collective Employment Contract’s characteristics of teaching staff include these that link to the idea of community:

- Demonstrate that their practice is informed by the current body of knowledge about effective teaching and learning
- Be able to contribute to the effective outcome of work teams
- Participate in the broader professional and academic life of the institution
The staff development manager observed that differences in attitude could occur in parts of the institution: “If it is a good department and good school they [new staff] will be supported well. If it is not there can be some problems”.

**Some of the interviewed teachers’ experiences**

One started with part-time tutoring in a university and then moved to the polytechnic; one worked in a vocational occupation before becoming a polytechnic tutor in that area; one qualified at university in science, did research work, had a family, and then moved into part-time and then full-time tutoring in computing; one went from university into related employment, then ran his own business before becoming a part-time and later full-time tutor. All had experienced some form of institutional induction and probation, but none had been formally mentored. They had few opportunities for observing other teachers, except for one person who co-tutored regularly with a colleague.

One had completed six weeks of the old 12-week tutor training. One had not done CAT, and another had done it long after appointment and found it unchallenging – however both those people continued to attend one-off staff development seminars. The fourth had completed a diploma in tertiary teaching, mainly through self-directed modules and projects: its influence showed in the depth of the person’s reflections on education and teaching.

All valued being responsive to individual students’ progress and concerns. They were aware that students expected their courses would prepare them for employment, and also the need to develop students’ personal attributes and attitudes, not just work skills. Several referred to things they had learned by experience and wished they had known sooner, such as the ease with which power relationships with students could be abused by teachers.

A sense of teaching community seemed to vary between departments. Two people talked about considerable interaction among staff on teaching matters, with a strong sense of common ownership of and commitment to the programmes. Another talked of the geographical isolation of offices, and the impact of part-timers and full-timers “passing like ships in the night”. All found that new curriculum development was a common factor in generating a focus on teaching among their colleagues. However, some perceived that new degrees had in some departments moved the focus away from teaching towards research and further discipline qualifications. Asked about ideas for supporting new staff now, none offered suggestions that were very different from the status quo. It appears much would depend on the level of collegial support offered in a department, and on an individual new teacher’s perceptions of needs and willingness to seek help; much learning about teaching will continue to depend on self-directed, situated learning, on-the-job.

**Findings from the wananga case study**

**General statements about teaching**

The *Charter* opens with a statement of the wananga’s kaupapa [culture], including provision of a Maori cultural learning environment; holistic educational opportunities; support, encouragement and guidance to all students in their pursuit of personal development, learning and employment; encouragement for staff to develop personally and professionally to their full potential. The wananga’ fundamental purpose of assisting students to learn will be achieved through excellence in teaching, curriculum development and assessment, and processes for consultation with staff and students.
The Tutor Handbook contains policy and procedures, job descriptions, and a large section on teaching strategies and ideas. The section on roles and responsibilities says: “Kaiako [teachers] are fully committed to the needs of tauira [students]”. The staff development manager explained that many of the students had low self-esteem in relation to their ability to learn, with negative attitudes because they had not enjoyed secondary school. As a result the wananga model for tutors was more like that of primary schooling: “They take on the responsibility of the primary teacher, which is to look after the whole person”.

Teaching matters related to induction, probation, promotion, appraisal
Quality management policy statements refer to:

• Employing staff who will ensure a close working relationship between kaiako and tauira appropriate to the special character of the wananga
• Developing and maintaining effective induction packages and procedures
• A cyclical staff appraisal and professional development planning process

The staff developer commented on the high level of personal support that complements the formal processes:

We do have the advantage I suppose of being small in numbers, like a campus might only have 10 - 15 tutors, so when somebody arrives they are coming into a small group, and their whanau [family] experience of being a tutor is very high… there will be people always looking after you.

Staff development related to teaching needs
There is support and encouragement to participate in a variety of professional and personal development activities, both internal and external. The staff developer said:

Our professional development for tutors is aimed at a student-centred, learning styles or accelerated learning approach.

… [Support is offered through] what we call Hui a Kaupapa. All the tutors [from several campuses] are coming here and will spend three days together. The primary intention of the three days is to get them into their subject areas…

Qualifications for teaching
All staff with no formal teaching qualifications are required to enrol in a 120-credit certificate in tertiary teaching. Part-time classes in certificate modules are held on campus once a week. Some staff were also studying through a university towards BEd(AdultEd).

The staff developer talked about people’s commitment to teaching:

They believe that they should be improving, they believe that they should be student centred and trying to cater for everybody, even although they have got some of the hardest tertiary students in the block…

Indications of the institution’s “community of practice” related to teaching
The special character of the wananga, with a strong community focus on the tauira, te reo Maori [language] and the kaupapa, is very evident to a visitor. The emphasis on student-centred teaching and on staff achieving the certificate in teaching also supports a community view of the importance of learning and teaching. The staff developer talked about the strong community of teachers, saying, “The really good ones are the ones that are fully involved with their students”.

Some of the interviewed teachers’ experiences
Three had led varied lives covering a range of occupations, before joining the institution to teach in subject areas related to their life experiences; the fourth had been a primary school
teacher. They had experienced strong personal support from campus colleagues, but subject area support was less immediately available than in the other institutions, as there tended to be one specialist in each subject area on each campus, and so those colleagues met mainly at cross-campus hui. All those interviewed had been with the institution many years; earlier they had been funded to do adult teaching courses at a nearby polytechnic, and now they were in a group completing university papers on adult teaching.

The tutors were each expected to be the “all-round” teacher for students in their programme, incorporating things like Te Reo Maori, communication skills and self-esteem as well as the content units for the specific qualification: this meant spending almost the whole day with their students, and drawing on their own broad life experiences. This approach provided support and continuity for people who had been unsuccessful at school and/or unemployed for some time. While in the past many of the tutors had taught on Access and MAccess courses, all were now teaching in the wananga’s own qualifications, and thus involved in curriculum development.

Those who had come into the wananga from other occupations said they valued their new status as teachers. However, when asked about ideas for supporting new staff now, most addressed practical suggestions for coping with resources and systems, rather than a focus on teaching – perhaps because teaching support could be taken for granted in this community.

Findings from the university case study

General statements about teaching
The Charter referred to providing the best possible resources and teaching to enhance the intellectual development of students; observing in recruiting academic staff that teaching is inseparable from research; and providing programmes of instruction in teaching, and staff development programmes. Planning goals and objectives included developing and strengthening high-quality teaching and learning in a collaborative and supportive environment. Teaching and Learning Plan 2000 proposed strategies such as establishing policy and procedures to identify and reward good teaching, and ensuring new staff were actively supported in their teaching roles. Mechanisms to achieve those strategies included:

- Promote teaching profiles for promotion and other teaching related decisions
- Establish awards for teaching and grants to attend teaching conferences
- Establish a programme of systematic and required training for new teachers

The staff developers observed that, for some academics, the teaching that was valued was in papers at higher, more intellectually challenging levels, not in lower level papers. They also noted disciplinary differences, with some departments trying interactive, student-centred teaching, while in others a more transmission model was usual.

Teaching matters related to induction, probation, promotion, appraisal
The university had a documented process for staff applying for promotion. Promotion to senior lecturer depended primarily on a high level of achievement in teaching and scholarship and research. Promotion to higher levels depended primarily on high achievement in scholarship and research. The staff developers noted that there was not yet a system that linked professional development planning with performance review or appraisal. They also noted tensions for new staff who might come in with a lot of enthusiasm for teaching and attend SDU courses, but then find they had to focus their attention on research if they were to be rewarded in the institution.
Staff development related to teaching needs
The SDU’s mission (in *SDU Plan 2000*) was “To affirm teaching throughout the university community as a scholarly and professional activity directed towards enhancing opportunities for effective student learning”. The unit sought to model good practice, establish collegial relationships, recognise teaching as part of a whole with research, and promote teaching as “a public activity open to review and embedded in local, national and international discourses”. The SDU’s *Programme Booklet* offered a wide range of available courses and resources, such as: consulting (with individuals and groups); support for lecturers (e.g. observation and feedback); courses on teaching (core workshops, extended seminars, one-off events); contacts with new academic staff; information (e.g. practical guides, reports, library books); research (with individuals or academic departments); a website; and support for course reviews and student feedback processes.

The staff developers commented that most people consulting them or attending SDU activities were committed to teaching, already competent, and saw teaching as an important part of their role. Some asked for SDU activities they had attended to be offered to their departmental groups. A few came needing more help and support, perhaps advised to by their HOD, but they would be in the minority.

Qualifications for teaching
Academic staff can study a postgraduate certificate or diploma, awarded by another university, but with workshops available on this campus and on-line links to students at the other university. There was no institutional expectation or requirement that academics should achieve such a qualification.

Indications of the institution’s “community of practice” related to teaching
Documents referred to above present the university’s formal view as an institution that values teaching, and confirm the commitment of resources to support teaching. Another publication, *xxx Teaching*, in which staff write about their teaching approaches, provides a more immediate connection with the sorts of things that happen in the teacher / student / discipline interaction, and gives more of a sense of the university as a teaching community. In its introduction the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) noted:

> Teaching in this university, as in many, has been taken for granted, as “that activity which everyone does”… Assessment of our potential as lecturers (and I use the term advisedly) would seem to have been primarily on the basis of our achievement as researchers… For an educational institution such an attitude is, to put it kindly, bizarre. …To some extent we “got away with it” because for a long time our students were people like us… Many students [now] are not like that at all. [The university] is now actively engaged on a mission to ensure we have teaching of the very highest quality… An important task in ensuring that quality is to discover good practice and share stories.

The staff developers observed that most academics identified themselves as disciplinarians first of all, working in a university in order to do research and gain recognition as experts in their discipline. The institution’s demands for quality assurance, to teach and do assessment, to produce teaching portfolios, cut across those interests. “But I think that we have good teachers who define themselves in terms of helping people enter into their discipline”. They also noted that:

> … departments here have a life of their own… a history. When new people come into it, they tend to come in ones and twos, and they get absorbed into that existing culture.
Some of the interviewed teachers’ experiences
Two of those interviewed went from post-doctoral research into lecturing; one gained a part-time lecturing position then one-year contracts in other universities, and finally a full-time position here; and one spent about 14 years in a professional occupation before becoming a lecturer.

All started teaching with little direct assistance such as an offer of workshops on teaching (but they noted that new staff today would have this available). Support from departmental colleagues was mentioned by only one person, and one reported feeling very isolated for some time. For most their early teaching approach reflected memories from their own students days – of role models they perceived as effective, and practices they wanted to avoid. One had become very interested in education and completed, part-time, a degree in Education - but was now being pressured to produce research results in the original discipline area. All reported attending SDU seminars and workshops over the years, and continuing to reflect on ways to improve their own teaching.

All had many contacts with students in addition to their immediate class teaching, through being programme coordinators or a dean of first year students. One perceived that teaching was not valued or discussed in their department (colleagues found bad course surveys embarrassing, while good surveys suggested spoon-feeding or entertainment); but the other three believed that teaching was valued and frequently discussed in their departments, and that good teachers were people who liked that part of their academic role. Asked about ideas for supporting new staff now, several suggested mentoring and all recommended the resources of the SDU.

Conclusions
In all three institutions, appointment of a new academic staff member focuses first on subject area or discipline: do you have the relevant life experience / work experience / qualifications / research record that will fit you for our institution? If the person has previously done some teaching that is an advantage, but not expected. It is assumed that success in other areas of life is likely to result in a successful teacher. Yet it is clear that, in each institution, the students today’s teacher engages with may be very different from the groups he or she studied with many years ago. Such students are affected by a wide range of personal, social and academic factors, so that strategies from the past may not be good models for facilitating learning today. At times many new teachers, especially in the polytechnic or university, can feel quite isolated, with few opportunities to observe others teaching and few occasions of being observed by a peer and given feedback, let alone mentored in a more developed way. Central SDU support is available in each institution, but it is mainly up to the individual teacher to engage with SDU staff and activities.

It appears that in the university and polytechnic I was collecting data at a time when teaching needs were being recognised, but widespread changes in practice were yet to come: the wananga was already providing considerable support for teaching development, both formal and informal. There was mainly tacit assumption in many departments that most learning about teaching will be experiential rather than formal, but no evidence of institutions considering what the balance between these might or should be. In work still to follow in this project I intend to examine the implications of Wenger’s work on community of practice: a concern emerging from the data to date is the inconsistency of support for teaching at the immediate departmental level in the larger institutions, where disciplinary demands are most
likely to compete. Should more educational development be focused in departments in future, as writers such Jenkins (1996) suggest? What are some factors that may inhibit or contribute to a sense of a teaching community of practice? It is not just students who face an unknown future, but also their teachers: I believe strengthening teaching communities would be one way of supporting both existing and new staff as they move into an unknown educational future.

References


Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering. The perspective of communities of practice is therefore also relevant at this level. In business, focusing on communities of practice adds a layer of complexity to the organization, but it does not fundamentally change what the business is about. In schools, changing the learning theory is a much deeper transformation. This will inevitably take longer.