

Reflections on Teacher Training

At our 2011 Final Assembly, staff member Mr Pope reflected on his just completed university teacher-training course. It taught him that state schools' New Zealand Curriculum promotes participation and self-centredness instead of knowledge and mastery. Here is his speech:

The Graduate Diploma in secondary teaching which I have just completed this year accurately reflects the current thinking in education circles. There were no exams, and hence very little emphasis on knowledge being learned and remembered. Assessment was primarily assignments and online discussions, meaning as long as you participated and completed the work, you passed. The most useful part of the course was the in-school placements, where we could develop our skills in a real-life classroom. Overall I feel like I have come away from the course more resolute that the NZ education system is in trouble.

The fact that there were no exams in the course reflects the current trend in education in NZ away from learning knowledge and skills to an outcomes-based education. The NZ Curriculum carefully defines the values and key competencies that young people should hold and possess as they move through our education system. Yet the prescription of what knowledge and/or skills that should be learned along the way is extremely vague, supposedly deliberately so that individual schools can tailor their curriculum to meet the needs of the students, community etc. On one level this sounds good, however there is a very specific prescription in the NCEA standards (National Certificate of Educational Achievement), which seems to directly contradict the philosophy of the NZC. This dichotomy was also reflected in my course, with the subject-specific papers (especially physics) having a solid focus on content, and the general teaching-learning papers having very little.

Apart from the assessment of teaching competence from the two seven-week placements, assessment was primarily through completion of assignments and participation in online discussions. This reflects the current trend towards participation and contribution, rather than knowledge and mastery, as the focus of education. The NZC vision is for "Young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners" - which are not bad things in themselves but seems to be a strange focus for an education system! And impossible to assess. What about "Young people who are knowledgeable, literate, diligent and wise" - I am reminded of the words in Proverbs, "To give prudence to the naive, to the youth knowledge and discretion" (1:4) and "Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!" (4:5). I know that to add 'righteous, just, humble, and willing to serve' may be a step too far for our secular society, but surely wisdom and understanding are still valued.

The in-school placements were the most useful part of the course, where we gained experience in teaching students in classrooms. It was here that we developed the necessary teaching skills of unit and lesson planning, classroom management, assessment, and organisation. My experience in working in a state secondary school was eye-opening. The behaviour and language of many of the students was disturbing, their attitude toward the teachers and school in general was appalling, and I felt the lengths to which teachers went to make lessons 'interesting, engaging, and relevant' to their students - in an attempt to 'sell' them on paying attention so that they might learn something - promoted self-centredness. It was sad to see the state of things out there, and it reminds me again of Proverbs: "Fools despise wisdom and instruction." (1:7).

Overall, I have come away from my training somewhat saddened and bemused. Not only was I trained in a system that contradicts itself, doesn't promote knowledge or understanding, and encourages self-centredness, I wasn't even trained that well in it! I didn't really have to learn or remember anything as I was not examined on it. I passed mostly by participating and contributing, presumably under the assumption that I was learning along the way (perhaps by osmosis!). I think the biggest thing I learned was that people do not learn this way - so I will be instructing, explaining, assessing, and examining my students, despite what today's experts say.