

# Being and becoming TESOL educators: Embodied learning via practicum

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper reports on a qualitative study of the practicum learning experiences of thirty students of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) enrolled in a Masters of TESOL Education at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia. Drawing on current thinking about the role of reflective practice in teacher education, the value of real world learning beyond the classroom and the pedagogical affordances of the practicum, the enquiry aims to identify the types of practitioner learning that occur during practicum placements in terms of enhancing learners' knowledge and skills, increasing their self-reliance and self-confidence and contributing to their growth as educators and individuals, their professional and social identities. Utilising reflective surveys from a portfolio of authentic practicum documents as data, the researchers create thematic narratives of 'being and becoming' which foreground the salient themes. Hence, we demonstrate how the practicum develops participant practice teachers' realisations of their emerging agency as practitioners, makes manifest their perceptions of their increased professional confidence and then serves to indicate the pedagogical value of applying theoretical learning from the classroom to their professional practice. These results suggest the importance of preparing teachers for discovery, both the usual and the unexpected, in the process of planning, implementing and evidencing practicum work, and emphasise the importance of being and becoming to the practicum's work of embodied learning.*

### **Introduction: Practicum enquiry**

Becoming a teacher, Graham and Phelps (2003) wrote, is a multi-faceted process involving individuals intellectually, socially, morally, emotionally and aesthetically engaging in community-focused activity. In TESOL teacher education, the practicum is recognised as a crucial, socio-educative experience where practice teachers both witness theory in application and become members of a real-world community of practice (Ishihara, 2005; Wenger, 1998). In Bourdieusian terms, they realise capacities, gain dispositions, and ways of thinking, being and acting. Practicums contribute to the ongoing formation of the *habitus* and expose the value of types of learning that occur; the cultural, social and symbolic capital of the practicum (Bourdieu, 1986).

Offering insights to language teachers involved in connecting the classroom to the world beyond the classroom and particularly to tertiary lecturers in TESOL, our study identifies and describes key forms

of learning, both the expected and the unexpected, adding further weight to research valourising the practicum as a site of valuable and authentic learning, and learning that occurs through *thinking, being* and *acting* the teacher and becoming closer to the aspiration of becoming a confident practitioner. We do not detail what a successful practicum looks like, as Ulvik and Smith (2011) have done, nor what practice teachers focus on, like Brinton and Holten (1989). Building on the literature, our interest lies in identifying what forms of knowledge result and how they impact practice teachers' reported confidence, how they enhance a 'teacherly' *habitus*, and how they lead practice teachers towards being and becoming TESOL practitioners. Simply put, our research question is: *What forms of learning gained on practicum do postgraduate practice teachers value?* We engage with a consideration of how these forms affect practice teachers' professional identities.

In the postgraduate context of a Certificate, Diploma or Master of TESOL program, the learners, the ‘practice teachers’ (Richards & Farrell, 2011; Ulvik & Smith, 2011) are no longer ‘students’, ‘novices’ or ‘trainees’; they are working professionals aiming to ground their teaching practice within the discipline by becoming more aware of how to become more effective teachers within their teaching and learning communities. The practicum, consisting of twenty-two days of placement including seven observations and fifteen days of planned, supervised teaching, is a core unit which provides a set of structured experiences and students document these via their practicum portfolio comprising a range of identity texts: teaching practice notes, reflective diaries and observation reports, supervisory reports, lesson plans and retrospective, reflective surveys (Velikova, 2013). These texts are embodiments of practice teachers’ reflection for, in and on action (a literary constant from Schön, 1987 to Farrell, 2015 & 2016).

As lecturers and researchers on the postgraduate practicum unit, *Professional Practice*, in the only university in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, the authors were in a unique position to construct a practitioner enquiry into the process of being and becoming TESOL practitioners. Hence, in the manner of Richards and Farrell (2011), this study aims to mine the reflective potential of completed students’ (VU) practicum portfolios for narrative data to investigate the pedagogical and learning value of practicum. For this paper, we analyse their reflective surveys, drawing from their lesson reflections to triangulate the data. Connecting a body of knowledge of work on experiential and participatory learning beyond the classroom to practicum experiences, our investigation sets out to discover the pedagogical and learning benefits of the guided practicum through analysis of the experiences embodied within the reflective texts.

### ***Background: The practicum***

One reason why this study is unique is that it occurs in the context of an MTESOL unit taught in the Western suburbs of Melbourne in the College of Education at Victoria University, Melbourne, a university marked for its ethnic and educative diversity. The learning outcomes focus on curriculum, learning approaches and assessment in a range of teaching and learning contexts with the particular attention to meeting diverse needs of students. The learner population includes domestic adult, secondary and primary EAL (English as an Additional Language) teachers and international students. Because of its necessity for endorsement by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), the practicum is a

compulsory unit, one of seven within the Masters. This is positive because, as we will argue, the unit offers a context where practice teachers can apply the theoretical units gained in their methodology, literacy and theory units to the communities in which they teach, affording at the same time valuable information about their awareness of their developing *habitus* as educational professionals. The practice teachers comprise qualified secondary and primary teachers, ‘mainstream’ language teachers, experienced EAL educators and those with limited classroom experience so the study has interest for EAL educators in any sector where the curriculum contains a real-world component, including the language teaching mainstream. Further, matters of teacher literacy, such as the ability to plan and sequence lessons, appear, too, in the study, as components of professional practice.

Another distinctive feature of the VU practicum is its embeddedness in the partnership model that underpins the university’s mission to work with workplaces and deliverers of community education. Such partnerships offer chances for professional integrative mentorship (Preston, Walker & Ralph, 2015) and individual embodied learning (Ulvik & Smith, 2011), but are increasingly seen as expensive and logistically challenging. Santos, Olsher & Wickrama (2015, p. 91) remind us ‘the practicum course remains perhaps the most tangible, most visible reminder of the interdependence of universities and *real-world* classrooms’ in TESOL teacher education. Among the settings of the practicums are Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) centres, Community Houses; English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) colleges and Technical and Further Education institutes (TAFEs). Since many of the practice teachers already have work experience in areas other than TESOL, practice teachers are encouraged to choose their own practicum setting/s, although the historic nature of the partnership model means the college does have placements to fall back on when necessary. As in most mentorship pedagogies (Preston, Walker & Ralph, 2015), there is a requirement for qualified and experienced supervising teachers to support the placement and ‘quality assure’ the practicum (Zeichner, 2001) and because a supervising teacher’s report and a portfolio are among the assessment tools of this unit. Central to the creation of an evidence portfolio is the narrative, praxical, evaluative, embodied technique of reflection.

### ***Literature review***

#### **The importance of reflective practice**

Kumaravadivelu (2012, p. 95) tells us that teaching is a

'reflective activity' in its nature and we know that reflective practice helps teachers 'to analyse and evaluate what is happening' in their own teaching (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012, p. 3) because it focuses 'on the process rather than on a specific method or model of teaching' (Richards & Crookes, 1988, p. 12). Schönian reflection for, in and on action (1987) are core components of the curriculum for practicum enquiry (Crookes, 2003; Farrell, 2015; Oprandy, 2015). According to Mattsson, Rorrison and Eilertsen (2011, p. 1), reflection includes 'the process of forming concepts and theories related to authentic cases and experiences'. Practice teachers' 'interpretations and reflections on classroom events during their practicum are central to their development' (Mattsson, Rorrison & Eilertsen, 2011, p. 47). Crookes (2003, p. 180) and many others since concur that without teachers' ability to engage in reflection, a practicum could 'never foster teacher development'. Reflectivity, framed as stories told over time, brings to the fore new possibilities for identity (Rogers & Scott, 2008); in this way is the learning *embodied*.

While the importance of reflective practice, outlined above, is clearly the first theoretical frame informing this study, we situate it also within three other constructivist frames, always acknowledging that narrated teacher identities are always sites of struggle, in flux and subject to the discourses of the desirable and the powerful (Jenkins, 2008; Mishler, 2006; Rogers & Scott, 2008; Weedon, 2004).

### Real world learning: enhancing learners' knowledge and skills

Practicums are course-related organised learning opportunities where participants spend a specified period in a chosen community to achieve course-related outcomes; students become initially peripheral apprentices to communities of practice and potentially socialise into emergent professional identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). During the practicum, practice teachers are required to observe experienced ESL teachers before they start their own teaching round, an exercise in itself filled with multiple pedagogical possibilities (Lesham & Bar-Hama, 2008; Oprandy, 2015). The purpose of the observations is to reflect on specific aspects of a lesson and make sense of their observations and experiences (Ishihara, 2005). The focus is on practice teachers' development and accountability (Lesham & Bar-Hama, 2008). The next stage is observation by a supervising teacher (Preston, Walker & Ralph, 2015). This builds on Lortie's description of 'an apprenticeship of observation' (1975, p. 61) and involves learning embedded in the trainee-supervisor dyad (Crookes, 2003; Oprandy, 2015; Richards & Crookes, 1988).

It is a crucial part of the practicum because practice teachers go through the process of identifying their strengths and weaknesses. This process raises their professional awareness through receiving feedback and recommendations.

Practice teachers gain exposure to legitimate professional Discourses ('big 'D' discourses') where they witness and participate in 'ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular socially situated identities' (Gee, 1991, p. 155). They fuse the Deweyan apprentice (mentorship) and laboratory (observation and experience) models of practice experience (Dewey, 1904). They are sites giving rise to activities which Barnett (2004, p. 247) describes as leading to embodied learning that he terms 'ontological turn' and 'authentic being' and which Pennycook (2004) demonstrated allows for experiencing critical moments. Students are encouraged to learn in communities, represented by their sites of practicum, through apprenticeship (Wenger, 1998) to professional actions and discourses. Speaking of language acquisition, but also applicable to practicum learning, Gee (1991, p. 171) wrote:

You cannot overtly teach anyone a Discourse, in a classroom or anywhere else. This is not to say that acquisition can't go in the classroom, but only that if it does, this isn't because of overt 'teaching', but because of a process of 'apprenticeship' and social practice.

Real-world learning enables practice teachers, then, to access the discourses of the profession, discourses wrought with desire and power.

This constructivist notion, inflected with post-structural theory and Gee's notion of embodied literacies, post-dates the Richard and Crookes 1988 work on practicums for language teachers, where they established the practicum is 'the major opportunity for the student teacher to acquire the practical skills and knowledge needed to function as an effective language teacher' (1988, p. 9). After a long hiatus, research into language teacher practicums boomed recently (Cheung, Said & Park 2015; Farrell, 2015; Oprandy, 2015) and recent studies, such as that of Ulvik and Smith (2011) are compatible with a constructivist framework. They write: 'it is not enough to read about teaching or to observe others teach' (p. 7). Practice teachers, they argue, 'have to practice themselves because practical knowledge and wisdom are held by the individual and cannot easily be transmitted from person to person' (p. 7). The notion of practicing themselves serves to underscore that not only are the practice teachers actually given a chance to be the subject of practice as opposed to being merely a witness or apprentice; they

also get a chance to rehearse their future identities, to practise an act of becoming. In this way, practicum can be seen as a trial and error process, the Deweyan ‘laboratory’, which encourages practice teachers to try and test new ideas in a collaborative environment to reflect on their teaching and learning in new ways (Leshem & Bar-Hama, 2008).

### *The practicum as pedagogy*

Teaching and learning via a practicum, as opposed to classroom and text-based learning, has the capacity to become learning for life. Practicum is a multi-activity process that theoretically impacts life-long learning from practice (Farrell, 2015; Richards & Crookes, 1988). This is largely because learning is on-the-job and in response to planned and unforeseen challenges (Yunus et al., 2010), each of which leads to enablements that impact learning within and beyond the classroom (Farrell, 2015).

The ontological value of practice teachers’ learning on practicum is the most important form of capital. Parks (2005) argued that the way a teacher’s identity develops is influenced not only by access to practice, but also by the nature of the participation within a particular community. Being apprentice to a community of practice and learning from supervisors and inspiring individuals, though, is not to be mistaken for uncritical replicatory transmission. Mann and Edge (2013, p. 6) validate the kind of action embodied in practicum-based learning: ‘copying is, admittedly, a term frequently tinged with negative overtones, but it is not to be so understood in this case’. A great deal of teaching tradition deserves to be copied and passed on to the next generation’ (Mann & Edge, 2013, p. 6). In the words of Ulvik and Smith (2011, p. 520), ‘to reach beyond their current personal level it is useful to be guided by someone who is more experienced’ and the practicum communities are sites where professionals go about their activities and Discourses authentically. Gee (1991, p. 99) stated identity involves ‘being recognised as a certain kind of person in a given context’. Hence, as Uzum, Petron & Berg (2014) argued, practical experiences often create teachers’ understanding of the profession and contribute to their ongoing professionalisation. Clearly, practical experiences and reflexivity can serve as a valuable platform for teacher identity development (Edge, 2011).

### *Teacher identity*

A key goal of the practicum is that student teachers develop a professional identity (Zeichner, 2002). The educative possibilities of the practicum extend beyond patterns of observing and copying or ‘acting’ for the

duration, and as we argued, require reflection to make sense of what is observed and practiced. Embodied pedagogies involving reflection allow practice teachers to access their ontological development. Danielewicz (2001, p. 3) argued most strongly:

If we need teachers who effectively educate ... we need to know how the best teachers have become themselves. What makes someone a good teacher is not methodology, or even ideology? It requires engagement with identity, the way individuals conceive of themselves so that teaching is a state of being, not merely ways of acting or behaving.

To access *identity*, practicum experience needs to be situated, structured, and assessed authentically. When successful, it offers experiences with different mentors, curricula and institutional structures that may help practice teachers become familiar with a variety of classroom practices and actions and provide opportunities for them to ‘develop new dimensions of teaching identities’ (Beynon et al., 2004, p. 442). This involves a process of building on an individual’s core beliefs and capitalising on existing experiences, developing the inner creativity central to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) thinking.

Learning to become a teacher involves, Carter and Doyle (2006, p. 31) emphasise, ‘(a) transforming an identity, (b) adapting personal understandings and ideals to institutional realities, and (c) deciding how to express one’s self in classroom creativity.’ As a record of the practicum, a portfolio has the capacity to capture evolving identities, narratives of adaptation and critical moments of realisation and creativity. We want to know what practice teachers learn and how this learning contributes to a process of ‘becoming’ a TESOL teacher (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). The practicum portfolio accumulates an album of authentic, performance-related, reflective and evaluative data. We believe the retrospective, reflective survey, the final output of the submitted portfolio, offers researchers an accessible and authentic window into practicum learning and identity development. As we stated earlier, becoming a teacher involves individuals intellectually, socially, morally, emotionally and aesthetically (Graham & Phelps, 2003). The portfolio potentially collects information on these aspects as well as the cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective, socio-cultural, socio-political.

### *Methodology*

This practitioner research study employs the naturalistic methodology known as qualitative descriptive analysis (Sandelowski, 2000). It is imbued with phenomenological and narrative enquiry undertones (Polkinghorne, 1995), exploring practice teacher

experience on its own terms. This approach was chosen due to the nature of the study: the personal knowledge and discursively-constructed subjectivities of the practice teachers' professional development during the practicum are read closely using their own personal perspectives, voices and interpretations.

This has a number of key epistemological advantages. Firstly, it enables the voices of participants, speaking through the narratives of their end of practicum reflective surveys to emerge as authentic data and enable practitioner-researchers to create theme-based narratives of lived experience, 'reshaping an experience through narrating' (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 6) and narrative knowledging. This is a legitimate way to accessing participants' daily thinking of narrative cognition (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014), impacting a human-centredness that is central to our beliefs about knowledge creation via interaction in practicum education. The participants' narratives are valuable, situated demonstrations of 'how conscious and reflective persons re-present and re-story their memories of events and experiences' (Mishler, 2006, p. 36). Secondly, treating these data narratively enables us to capture 'critical moments' (Pennycook, 2004; Farrell, 2004), 'ontological turns' (Barnett 2004, p. 247) and 'moments of experience' (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337) to demonstrate turning points of practice teachers on practicum. These point to moments where confidence increases or something makes sense. Thirdly, it enables the practitioner-researchers, inextricably complicit in both the practicum narratives and indeed this academic restorying of them actively to reposition themselves as the authors of 'a reconstruction of experience and meaning' (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). This text is at once an honest *bricolage* of 'the scholarly, the anecdotal and the autobiographical' (Arnold, 2011, p. 66), our discussion fused epistemologically to our findings.

### *Ethics, data collection, participants*

We gained ethics approval to use the texts of the portfolio as data. The portfolio included: a brief description of theoretical underpinning of practice teachers' personal approach to teaching EAL, lesson plans including reflections, the supervising teacher's report, and a set of reflective responses to survey questions designed to capture impressions of the practicum-based learning. For this paper, we limit our data to the reflective surveys, aware that they best represent the emergent *habitus* of each participant, capturing experiences of journeying towards professional identity (Uzum et al., 2014; Yunus et al., 2010). As well as serving as a key mirror of learning, the survey is also an evaluative document allowing lecturers to track students'

challenges. The thirty participants are practice teachers studying in a core unit in an MTESOL. They range in age from 22 to 70, 30% are male and 70% are female. As the Appendix shows, they range in experience from none at all to 15 years. 85% are native speakers of English.

### *Data analysis*

We use qualitative descriptive analysis (Sandelowski, 2000) to access and present narratives of how practice teachers present experiences and identities. Because we present thematic narratives rather than retold stories of individuals, we apply the principles of 'evolved' constructivist grounded theory (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006). The researchers identified 'indigenous themes' (Patton, 1990) by using a holistic, instinctive, multiple-technique method. This method employs the 'word-based' and 'scrutiny-based' techniques of observation that Ryan and Bernard (2003) identified as fundamental to 'querying the text', constantly comparing data within the sample. This process enables researchers to locate specific topics that can indicate major social and cultural themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In practice, this means that each researcher reads the data and inductively creates categories based on their perceptions of recurrent themes. These are often marked by recurrent ideas, such as the frequent reports of encounters with culture, and key words, one of which 'confidence', came to serve as part of one main theme.

Cross-checking, a common qualitative check for reliability and viability (Patton, 1990), occurs when the researchers compare notes, and the themes which converge are those presented in this study. To apply the thinking of Polkinghorne (1995), we analyse the practice teachers' narratives thematically and re-present our findings as narrative enquiries. Of the storylines that emerged, here we present three: The value of real world learning, increasing self-confidence; and developing professional identities.

### *Findings*

#### **Real world learning**

The value of applied learning in the real world during practicum is defined by a range of forms of learning. Rather than being mega-eureka moments, these small-scale critical moments serve to demonstrate the nature of a practicum pedagogy where students serve as apprentices to communities of practice with mentor figures, develop their *habitus*, and learn to work agentially, making sense of the real world, reflecting with initiative and hopefully taking action.

The most significant form of learning is increased awareness of practicum as pedagogy and a way of visualising practice, and this incorporates practice teachers' ability to access the literacy practices of language teaching. It is reflected in Maya's comment about a multi-faceted engagement when practice teachers get involved in a complex world of language teaching. She wrote:

The most valuable experiences that I gained from the practicum were using a range of skills and competencies of teaching such as preparing lesson plans, managing the classroom, using teaching strategies and classroom resources, interacting and communicating with students, evaluating students' learning, forming positive attitudes towards the profession and towards the students themselves.

This is Maya *thinking, being* and *acting* the teacher. Alex charted a similar trajectory, writing: 'I believe that I have grown academically. My understanding of teaching ESL moved from a phase of what is written in the curriculum and what can be practically achieved'. Being and becoming a teacher on practicum activates and articulates theory, allowing authentic being a chance to show itself. Rima indicated that through the practicum she developed a greater awareness of the way that her growing knowledge of TESOL and literacy theories influence her teaching choices. She discovered that she is very good at planning and sequencing her lessons 'to best support learning outcomes'. However, she needs to work harder on grading her language for lower levels of learners.

Participants reported perceptible learning gains: 'It connects theory with practice in a very real sense', Lester wrote, speaking of how textbook methods operated in a classroom. In a similar vein, Garvin stated that professional practice 'allowed me to go back and analyse interactions and to explore theories as to why students behaved in a certain way'. Donald indicated that practicum has given him 'practical teaching experience – putting into practice what I had learned in the theoretical units'. Reflecting on theories of motivation and future selves brought him closer to understanding his classroom experience. Bella, too, speaks of a 'different perspective' afforded her on practicum. Being face-to-face with the reality of students, she realised she had taken for granted 'the students' background, their skills and level of education' enabling for her an act of learning that she terms 'determining'. Another experienced mainstream teacher, Sue, realised that individual approaches to learner needs are more vital in EAL classrooms than in mainstream classrooms as these required her to become more effective in lesson planning, modifying her teaching approaches and tailoring strategies.

The pedagogical contexts bring practice teachers understanding about what is unique about being TESOL teachers. Teaching in an EAL context proved a crucial experience for another primary school teacher, Ryan. He came to understand that in the EAL context he needed to slow his delivery of lessons and attend to scaffolding. He states that EAL students 'require much more scaffolding than in general subject class teaching'. He also realised it requires continuous development of pedagogical approaches. Erma noted that observing 'real-life language learning activities, tasks, difficulties, successes and other related classroom observations enabled insight into a deeper layer of TESOL ... and provided realistic examples of the daily routine of teaching TESOL'. Erma's language emphasises the realness of the practicum; observing both within the community of practice and the Deweyan laboratory add value to her experience. Rava reports realising 'that teaching TESOL is a very specialised field and it is something [requiring] respect and tolerance for other cultures'. Rava's emerging realisation about the importance of cultural understanding relates to the theme of multiculturalism discussed shortly.

Confronting the reality of how multicultural and multilingual Australia has become led to new understandings. Mina, herself a migrant and an experienced teacher, reported learning about students 'from different backgrounds [speaking] different languages'. She wrote: 'Despite all those differences, I saw that they were living together as if they were one.' Her original teaching context was monolingual; recognising the multiplicity of Australia and seeing the different students working together is cultural capital for her.

Awareness of students' cultural background is just one form of realisation. Mary wrote: 'It was good to learn more about the students' backgrounds and become more aware of the challenges and issues some carry. As a teacher, I learned that students cannot leave their concerns and anxieties at the door of the classroom'. Practice students gained entirely new perspectives onto the manifold influences impacting the various migrants, refugees, working holiday visa holders and international students. They also comment on how policies reflect such diversity. Mina, for instance, wrote: 'I learned much about multiculturalism, and so much about AMES policies and vision, and the way they embrace diversity and eliminate discrimination'. Her learning is not only about reality; it is also about institutions. Alice said she 'relearned so much about the beauty of different cultures and the ways that people think and behave'. Insights into the cultures of others represent positive learning for the majority of the participants.

The practicum facilitates intercultural literacy learning for practice teachers in the broader community beyond the traditional mainstream environment. Settings like Community Houses, AMES and ELICOS centres which have their structures, culture and demands allow practice teachers to develop insights into teaching culturally diverse groups of students and reflecting on the challenges of those centres.

The practicum enables practice teachers to experiment and find their own ways of teaching, an aspect of their *habitus*. Mary emphasises the importance of trying new approaches and techniques ... to discover what works well and what suits [students'] style of teaching'. Mary identified her teaching style as two-way and continued: 'I hope to work in partnership with students and allow them to lead as they know what is best for their learning'.

Another micro-narrative points to a lesson about the importance of being student-centred. Reflecting on her practicum, Joanna identified her realisation that 'when preparing the lesson and activities I should be placing myself in the students' place and viewing everything through their eyes and ears'. She realised that her impact on the learners was more apparent when she embodied this quality of identification, and writes that this philosophy will impact her lesson planning henceforth. The teaching skill that more practice teachers comment on than any other is the need for high levels of language awareness.

The practicum offers more specificity to those who are mainstream teachers and have previous teaching experience in mainstream classrooms. The EAL pedagogical context encourages them to improve their knowledge of the functions and structures of language and to become more confident with classroom instructions and questions. Mainstream practice teachers indicated the practicum provided them with the learning environment for developing their capacity to produce sustained and relevant exercises and a variety of techniques and technologies enhancing learning for diverse learners. Jack sees his experience in one of the centres as 'invaluable' in transitioning from his previous experience as a secondary school teacher to working with adults. He identifies the areas he needs to work on. His particular interest is in recognising and implementing more student-centred learning strategies. He understood that:

This style of teaching is crucial for students in gaining independent learning skills and strategies for future work and for further study. The chance to observe a seasoned teacher ... was ... invaluable as it allowed me to appreciate the range of strategies available in the context of working environments.

The practicum enables practice teachers to look for areas of improving linguistic awareness and identifying areas for further improvement. Mary comments: 'It is essential for teachers to maintain and build a high level of linguistic competence, especially when teaching a second language'. She singles out learning how to teach phonetics and phonology as particular focal points for future learning.

Ryan emphasised that teaching grammar requires more attention. Ryan said: 'I have learnt that I need more practice/knowledge in some areas of grammar. I am looking into improving that and collecting resources'. Brian became aware of two obstacles to teaching focus on form: his own over casual use of slang, and shortcomings in his understanding of grammar. An increased awareness of register and of lesson preparation were learning gains for him. For Brian, speaking a language did not automatically translate into the ability to explain its linguistic features. Eva noticed: 'Being a native speaker, when I speak, I do not notice errors. I do not pay much attention to what I say. However, while I was teaching I found that there were instances where I would have to stop and think about a sentence when reading or trying to explain it to students'. This ability to notice one's own shortcomings in action indicates a reflective capacity to learn on practicum.

Many practice teachers also realised there may be a gulf between textbook content and student needs or levels. Eva details a critical moment:

During this lesson, I realised how important it is for the texts to be related to students' real lives and why it is important to teach language using authentic texts. Texts as such are necessary for students. Therefore authentic, relevant texts not only motivate students, but also engage them. Students actively participate in learning language through texts because they can see the purpose and benefits of learning these texts.

Mina, too, said that 'creating teaching resources was a big challenge for me'. A further challenge for Mina was a gap between awareness of the affordances of technology, and their availability in the various teaching contexts. During the practicum, it became evident that simply using current textbooks and available technology did not make teaching engaging and student-centred; it required planning and creativity too. Mary wrote: 'The teaching challenges I faced during the practicum were the large amount of time required for lesson preparation and dealing with difficult situations during the lesson'. She continues:

I also realised I am not good at teaching without preparing. The other teaching challenges involved situations during the lesson that required me to change my lesson plan and adapt to the needs of the students.

Here we see Mary being and becoming through reflecting in action. Her learning about the importance of preparation was consolidated, as was her ability to accord with the needs of the students even if it meant deviating from the lesson plan.

Practice teachers were able to reflect on potential challenges of the industry as well. Both Mary and Alice pointed out the amount of administrative work EAL teachers need to attend to and complete 'came as a surprise'. Deep into her practicum, Alice learned 'staff were under enormous pressure from budget cuts and top down requirements whilst working longer hours, with less resources but with higher expectations'. These expectations are both from quality assurance bodies and from the students themselves. As Brian indicated, 'there is a lot more to the job than simply teaching. The students require a lot of support'. The amount of administrative and pastoral care duties is growing in the TESOL industry in Australia due to the nature of compliance procedures introduced by accrediting bodies and the centres themselves.

### *Increasing self-confidence on practicum*

The practice teachers' reflective diaries detail their growth in self-confidence on practicum, and this was evident in the survey data. In preparation for the practicum, practice teachers were told they needed to indicate the insights gained in relation to TESOL and how these relate to their personal approaches to teaching. Rava values the 'reflective learning' experience: 'I have never had to think about my teaching so intensively ... So, I feel it was very valuable to me as a teacher'. The opportunity to reflect allows practice teachers access to critical moments when they felt their self-confidence increase. Carrie writes: 'I was forced to review the journey of my practicum very thoroughly ... It made me feel I have completed a major chapter in my life'. As Ulvik and Smith (2011, p. 522) commented: 'Systematic reflection in dialogues with peers, mentors and supervisors prepares student teachers for the real and complex classroom and provides future teachers with tools for developing confidence to act professionally in unique situations.'

Throughout the data, the practicum is described as 'a steep learning curve' (Maggie) and it forced Davi to consider and think about every aspect of his teaching in depth. Increased self-awareness of practice teachers' capacities as teachers and professionals resulted from their practicum experiences. Erma, for example, recalled having learned she was 'capable of juggling work and study, and achieving well in both'. She adds she 'rediscovered [her] interest in learning new skills and disciplines'. The joy of these challenges, she said,

made her a better teacher. Alice similarly stresses her persistence and commitment to being and becoming a better teacher: 'I also have an innate yearning to improve my skills and understanding so that I can be better at what I do and undertake'. Learning to enjoy the work of the teacher also helps build Hillary's sense of *habitus*: 'A practicum is an opportunity. The success and enjoyment a student teacher will have is dependent on the relationships developed (student-teacher and teacher-supervisor) and overall effectiveness of communication'. The constructivist context of the practicum brings value and enhances confidence. Mina stressed that it was only when she started her practicum at AMES that she began to feel that she belonged to the teaching profession. Realisation of their potential, strengths and weaknesses makes the practicum experience invaluable for practice teachers.

The theme of cooperation between practice teachers and their supervising or mentor teachers speaks to the theme of enhanced confidence. What students report they learned from mentors contributes strongly to their developing a sense of self-reliance. Hillary used the practicum as an opportunity to question her mentors and draw on their experience to improve her own practice. Erma wrote: 'My supervising teacher was strongly committed to helping me become a better teacher'. Mary, too, learned from supervisory interactions and she recalls a critical incident:

I also found myself in some situations where I was unable to answer a student's question and therefore needed to ask my supervising teacher or find out the information and get back to the student. These were challenges, but also learning opportunities.

Participating in an apprenticeship of observation, itself a simulacrum of the real world, builds confidence. Lester reports getting 'to see how my supervising teacher handled all kinds of small but very real-world everyday problems in an EAL class in Australia'. For Bella, the practicum broadened her vision of the world, allowing her to access 'different kinds of interaction with different people who understand the importance of feeling included'.

The practicum is seen, too, as opening doors onto the variety of workplaces possible for MTESOL graduates. Carrie and Jenny pointed out that seeking a site for practicum was like a rehearsal for looking for work, but the process opened possibilities:

The wide range of EAL industry will provide me varied opportunities to work with a diverse range of students.

The practicum experience has really clarified for me that my choice to study TESOL was right and that this is the area into which I will further my teaching career.

The practicum is traditionally undertaken by TESOL students in their last semester of studies. It utilises their previous theoretical and volunteer experiences with their readiness to embark on their new career opportunities.

### *Teacher identity: contributing to their growth as educators and individuals*

Practicums enable practice teachers to create visions of themselves as agents within many pedagogical settings. Through reflection, such students as Mary begin to crystallise a sense of who they are as teachers.

The practicum has made me more aware that I have not reached my full capacity as an educator. I feel I have more to learn with a solid foundation to build on the learning and experience I have gained so far. The practicum provided me with opportunities to express my current capacity as an educator and also gave me confidence to increase that capacity through further learning and applying that learning.

Alice also wrote about new experiences during her practicum: 'I also feel that I developed personally by being out of my normal conform zone; by having to interact with new staff and people whom I admired for their care of their students'. Davi, reflecting on the features of a good language teacher, wrote: 'I identified the following personal strengths as a TESOL teacher: Confidence ... Preparation ... Flexibility ... Cultural knowledge.' Erma evaluated: 'Basically the practicum allowed me to see what kind of teacher I am and what kind of teacher I would ultimately become.' Jack appraised himself retrospectively, and just wished his practicum could have continued indefinitely because he 'embraced the learning opportunity'.

There is a sense of being assured about their capacity for 'becoming' and being a language teacher. 'I am keener than ever to teach EAL', says Maggie. Jack also realises 'how much I had actually achieved and learned during my teaching practicum and actually how well I had done'. Bella comments: 'I have a great disposition to learn, to explore new ways of doing things, design material, and most important, learn from my mistakes'. 'I am ready to teach', evaluates Maggie. 'I have the confidence, and based on my supervising teacher, I have the knowledge and experience'.

### *Towards conclusions*

We asked *what forms of learning gained on practicum do postgraduate practice teachers value?* and considered how these valued forms of learning contributed to the developing of individual language teacher identities, related to the Bourdieusian concept of *habitus*. We have reported on practice teachers' realisations of their

emerging agency and capacity as practitioners, their perceptions of their increased professional confidence and competence and the value of applying theoretical learning from the classroom to their professional practice. We have witnessed individuals developing pedagogically through their engagement in the practicum, becoming aware of their shortcomings in teaching, for instance, grammar or phonology and continuing work on intercultural awareness and the management of strategic work required in language teaching, including the literacy aspects of planning, sequencing and using technology. We have described the practicum's capacity for embodying both a Wengerian community of practice and a Deweyan laboratory for performing teacher identities and discovering the components of individual ways of being and becoming, or developing an awareness of one's TESOL teacher *habitus*.

Our study points, too, to a range of conclusions about teaching and learning via the practicum.

Firstly, we have emphasised that the value of the real world consists in its housing possibilities for practice teachers becoming apprentices to 'teacherly' and institutional discourses, literacy practices and actions (Gee, 1991) and witnesses to such sociocultural phenomena as embodied multiculturalism and diversity. It allows participants to discover for themselves such features as the administrative load of teachers, the cultures of specific organisations and the market possibilities for TESOL educators. Crucially, the role of the mentor as an authentic performer of 'Discourses' (ways of being in the world) is central. So, too, is the role of the practicum as an authentic site for realising theoretical understanding via observation and action (Oprandy, 2015). Many narratives commented on how it offers 'real' and 'realistic' examples not available in classrooms or textbooks.

Secondly, we argue that reflective assessments such as the self-evaluation survey from which much of our data emerges are appropriate for practicums because of their capacity to embody identities in flux and to contribute to the narrating of personal stories about being and becoming language teachers. The pedagogical use of self-reported reflections in practice teacher work supports 'student teachers in constructing personally meaningful knowledge of pedagogical theory and research' (Velikova, 2013) and leads to a personalised longitudinal album of literacy performances, evaluations and, more instrumentally, analysed reports of demonstrated outputs within the final portfolio, where students retrospectively make sense of the whole practicum experience.

Thirdly, we emphasise the need to teach practice teachers to reflect, something we improved from cohort

to cohort, allowing them to create texts that valuably capture their trajectories. Rodgers and Scott (2008, p. 237) write that ‘identities form and develop as a result of interactions, but not necessarily as a result of awareness’ suggesting the need for reflection to crystallise that awareness.

Fourthly, we believe in the importance of setting up the practicum to encourage agency, and this applies to language teachers involved in bringing the real world into their practicums in any institution, including mainstream ones. Prior to embarking on practicums, TESOL lecturers might consider the following factors and incorporate them into classroom discussions:

- The fact that each individual will behave and learn differently on practicum; that there is no single way of being and becoming through practicum-based learning; that individuals will discover strengths and shortcomings as teachers;
- The need to encourage appropriate matches between student and supervising teachers and to discuss in advance how and what students might expect and learn from observations and supervisors;
- The development of the skill of reflection, so that self-critical data about one’s own performance accompanies that of the performances of mentor teachers and students and the functioning of the practice teacher within pedagogical contexts;
- Ways of applying individuals’ theoretical findings, methodological techniques and beliefs about teaching to the context of experiential learning;
- The learning that results from observing peers as an apprenticeship for learning from supervising teachers;
- The idea that a lesson plan might be a roadmap for a lesson, but that there will likely be the need to discover alternative ways;
- The necessity of teaching reflective writing as an authentic awareness-building and professional development tool, not merely as a means of recording incidents;
- The value of considering individuals’ expectations of how they will act and what they hope to learn on their practicum journeys.

Finally, the practicum develops agency in the ways Gee (1991) suggested: ‘Educators must know how to act in relation to context, situation and participants’ (Mattsson, Rorrison & Eilertsen, 2011, p. 232). More ontologically speaking, and beyond the mere claim that the practicum develops identities, it develops *agency*: the capacity to act with initiative in the real world, but many more empirical and narrative studies identifying how practice teachers use their agency for student

advocacy in practice teachers’ contexts are necessary to bear this out.

### *Limitations and suggestions for further research*

Using data grounded in self-report from a relatively small sample always makes it vulnerable even when triangulated by acknowledging the incorporation of two researcher-teachers’ experiences within the analysis and presentation stages. In future studies this personal data can be triangulated by supervisors’ reports and reflections on videotaped lessons to give practice teachers (and researchers of their learning) more of a 360-degree view of their trajectories. The hidden data in the spoken feedback between a supervising teacher and practice teacher needs to be captured by incorporating further reflective tasks into the lesson planning tasks. Based purely upon the scope of this small-scale intervention, we suggest the following questions for our future endeavours:

- What actions do practice teachers take as a result of reflectivity?
- In what ways does the *habitus* of practicum stay with practice teachers in their professional lives?

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## Appendix

Table of participants

Pseudonym	Native speaker	Years of experience	Gender	Age
Maggie	NS	NE	F	62
Lester	NS	5 years	M	42
Garvin	NS	NE	M	55
Erma	NS	5 years	F	32
Foster	NS	NE	M	55
Jenny	NS	NE	F	53
Melina	NS	NE	F	38
Sunny	NNS	5 years	F	41
Esther	NS	8 years	F	34
Allen	NNS	2 years	F	25
Rava	NNS	NE	M	45
Sue	NS	NE	F	53
Bella	NNS	4 years	F	36
Anita	NS	15 years	F	58
Davi	NNS	NE	M	49
Sarah	NS	NE	F	59
Joanna	NNS	NE	F	46
Angel	NS	2 years	F	47
Jack	NS	NE	M	56
Carrie	NS	NE	F	47
Brian	NS	NE	M	32
Donald	NS	2 years	M	30
Eva	NS	NE	F	30
Maya	NS	30 years	F	60
Hillary	NS	NE	F	50
Ryan	NS	NE	M	32
Alex	NNS	NE	M	49
Mina	NNS	30 years	F	63
Alice	NS	NE	F	63
Mary	NS	2 years	F	38

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