INTRODUCTION

Recent times have seen a questioning of content-driven, discipline-based curricula in schools. There have been moves away from these approaches towards curricula based on the skills and strategies required in a changing world (ACDE, 2001). This has resulted in initiatives in several Australian States aimed at promoting ‘new learning’ approaches in schools. One of the Australian Council of Deans of Educations (ACDE 2001, 2004) ‘new learning’ and ‘new teaching’ propositions relates to the encouragement of ‘lifewide learning’, or learning ‘beyond the classroom’. This chapter describes how these ‘new learning’ propositions, and in particular, the concept of ‘lifewide learning’ can be utilised to shift pre-service teachers’ (PSTs) conceptualisations of teaching and learning.

During the past decade in particular, there has been much debate in education about the types of skills that school students will need to equip them for their future working lives (ACDE, 2001). In Australia, for example, new approaches to teaching and learning have included the New Basics program in Queensland, the Essential Learnings programs in South Australia and Tasmania, and the Essential Learnings framework in Victoria. These approaches call for an integrated approach to curricula to better adapt students to the requirements of a changing world so that they can become active and socially responsible citizens (DeLors, 1996). Such approaches involve the development of intellectually stimulating, ‘rich’ and ‘real life’ tasks, and a focus on skills such as independent learning and problem-solving.

One of the ‘new learning’ propositions upon which such curriculum development should be based, according to the ACDE (2001), is that learning should be lifelong and lifewide. Although the concept of lifelong learning is well established (Candy, 1991), the concept of lifewide learning is new and appears to be still relatively unexplored. The ACDE propositions hold much hope and scope for the development of new conceptualisations of teaching and learning but there appears to be little reporting of the results of their operationalisation.

Observations of classrooms that have adopted ‘new’ approaches to learning, under guises such as, for example, the ‘thinking curriculum’ and with the laudable aims of encouraging the development of deeper thinking skills amongst children, reveal that these approaches can still result in mechanistic and disengaged responses from children. Such approaches purport to be moving away from content-based, discipline specific curricula, towards more integrated and ‘real life’ or ‘authentic’ tasks.
Where ‘new’ aims and concepts are overlaid on existing understandings of teaching and learning, however, unless there is a reconceptualisation of teaching and learning, they run the risk of reversion to conventional approaches.

For PSTs, it is imperative that they embrace these new approaches to learning from the beginnings of their professional practice. As PSTs will have largely experienced conventional approaches to teaching and learning through their own schooling, they need to be encouraged to shift their understandings of teaching and learning. The ‘new learning’ propositions, and the concept of lifewide learning in particular, can be useful vehicles to effect this shift.

Bachelor of Education programs generally aim to encourage deeper learning amongst their pre-service teachers and deeper understandings of teaching and learning. PSTs need to be encouraged to explore their own approaches to teaching and learning, especially in the professional experience (or practicum) component of the course. They need to be encouraged to move away from preoccupations with technical assessments of their teaching practice during the professional experience and to focus upon the learning that occurs within it.

This chapter reports on how this was carried out in one program, using a re-conceptualised education studies unit based around the New Learning propositions. It explains how these were introduced into unit content and assessment tasks, and describes the resultant shift in the PSTs’ attitudes towards teaching and learning. The unit offered a platform and an opportunity to introduce new conceptualisations of teaching and learning. The concept of ‘lifewide learning’ was used as a vehicle, through the introduction in a new education studies unit in the second year of the course, to try to encourage this reconceptualisation. The unit not only encourages PSTs to embrace lifewide learning as part of their studies in the unit, but also requires them to introduce the concept in their professional experience work in schools. At the end of the first year of operation of the unit, PSTs were surveyed about their views on the unit to determine whether there had been significant shifts in their views on teaching and learning and the nature of these changes.

BACKGROUND

The Bachelor of Education course within which the unit is placed aims broadly to promote deeper understandings of teaching and learning amongst PSTs. It encompasses a new model for professional field experience aimed at changing the focus away from a ‘technical’, competency-based, assessment of the placement, to the learning that occurs within it by both PSTs and their students in schools.

According to Martinez et al. (2001), most of the literature on the teaching practicum does not focus on the teaching success experienced by teaching students during their practicum experiences. Instead, they argue, there is a focus on an outcomes-based approach to assessing students, where competencies and standards are used to measure student outcomes, or specific performance skills, rather than the effectiveness of the teaching undertaken by student teachers, or their own learning during the placement. Slee (1998) describes the impact in education of what Lyotard (1984) refers to as the ‘cult of performativity’, that is, the shift from ‘the