RESEARCH, PRACTICE, AND ACADEMIA IN NORTH AMERICA*

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Abstract

The self-study of teacher education practices has found its place on the teacher education landscape as a principled, scholarly practice that has begun to shift understandings about the nature and significance of teacher educators’ work and what counts as acceptable academic scholarship. Self-study scholars have brought their individual career histories and commitments to teacher education to bear on their academic roles within the context of the university and, in so doing, have taken up a challenge to shift status quo perspectives on the role and status of teacher education in the academy. Through individual and collective action self-study scholars have responded to criticisms levied against the place of teacher education in the academy, dilemmas presented by the nature of their work and roles, and challenges facing them in their professional and academic work. In this chapter we focus on the tenure system in North American universities and the role it plays in monitoring, mediating, and moderating the individual and collective practice of teacher educators. We offer a framework for reconsidering the norms of academic convention and the socializing forces that govern teacher educators’ work in the academy and a vision of what such a reorientation might mean in practice. We then draw on this framework to explore how the self-study of teacher education scholarship and practice, as a genre, has positioned itself to challenge the status quo of academic convention for schools, departments, and faculties of education.

Faculty members in schools, colleges, faculties, and departments of education have been variously described as: the most maligned of academics (Lasley, 1986);

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the least welcome guests at the educational lawn party of the establishment of higher education (Ducharme, 1986); and, marginal people at the periphery of the university (Ryan, 1975). While blanket generalizations about education faculties as a whole have limited validity, at least from a post-positivist standpoint, there are certain truisms about which there is little question and for which there is abundant empirical support. Regardless of institutional status (according to the Carnegie classification of universities), whether elite research universities or lower ranked colleges of education modeled after normal schools or ‘teacher training’ institutions of the early twentieth century, education schools, colleges, faculties or departments within those institutions are at the bottom of the heap (see for example Lanier & Little, 1986; Lucas, 1997). They have low prestige, minimal resources, and negligible institutional power and authority.

One of the most powerful systemic forces governing faculty practice or expression of knowledge in North American universities is the tenure system. In this chapter we focus on the tenure system and the role it plays in monitoring, mediating, and moderating the individual and collective practice of teacher educators. We offer a framework for reconsidering the norms of academic convention and the socializing forces that govern teacher educators’ work in the academy and a vision of what such a reorientation might mean in practice. We then draw on this framework to explore how the self-study of teacher education scholarship and practice, as a genre, has positioned itself to challenge the status quo of academic convention for schools, departments, and faculties of education.

As a starting point, we draw parallels between knowledge that is individually developed, held and expressed, and knowledge that defines a collection or community of individuals. We begin with the assumption that what individual teacher educators know and how they know is a reflection of who they are and where they have been. How they express their knowledge within academic institutions is marked by the intersection of lives and context. In other words, the knowledge that individual teacher educators bring to bear on their practice is multifarious and idiosyncratic, informed by experiences, conditions, and events over a life and career span. How that knowledge is articulated is a function of the relationship between who they are as individuals – what they stand for, believe in, strive toward – and the institutions and systemic structures within which they work. Similarly, as a community or professional body, teacher educators are defined by, and operate from, a collective (albeit diversely nuanced) knowledge base that differs and sets them apart from other professions and disciplines. The collective knowledge of teacher educators is mediated within and by the institutional contexts within which it is situated. This idiosyncratic collective knowledge is a reflection of what teacher education is, how and why it has developed, where it has been situated historically and its current location within the university.

What we intend to show in this chapter is how, as a collective, self-study scholars have brought their individual career histories and commitments to teacher education to bear on their academic roles within the context of the university and, in so doing, have taken up a challenge to shift status quo