Chapter 12

Pre-Service Learning and the (Gentle) Disruption of Emerging Teaching Identity

Mia O’Brien  
The University of Queensland, Australia

Shelley Dole  
The University of Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT

The application of ‘identity’ to analyses of teaching is not new. However in this chapter, the authors propose that the construct has as yet unexploited potential to refresh current theories about teacher learning. They discuss how notions of identity, when integrated with social learning theory, might offer fresh insights for both research and practice. And the authors illustrate this proposition by drawing on data collected from our own pre-service teacher education students as they navigate initial encounters with numeracy (with Dole) and the arts (with O’Brien). In these courses, the authors are concerned with limiting views of self that pre-service teachers can bring to their learning of these two curriculum areas. Such views predominantly stem from pre-service teachers’ personal beliefs about the nature of these subjects, as well as confidence in their own ability ‘to do’ maths and/or art. Informed by Boler’s (1999) pedagogy of discomfort, the authors deliberately, but gently move to facilitate the ‘disruption’ of these beliefs, values, and theories about ‘self’ as teacher. Located in supportive communal spaces within courses related to each subject, they authors design “collectivized engagement” (p. 176), as well as scaffolded learning and assessment that seek to engage but soften fears about “losing personal and cultural identities” (p. 176). There is evidence to suggest that this gentle disruption of beliefs and negative self-concepts assists in the eventual renegotiation of the students’ emerging views of self-as-teacher.
INTRODUCTION

In teacher education who one is and who one becomes as a teacher is a highly valued yet often implicit aspect of pre-service teacher learning. Students come to teaching with naïve conceptions about the profession, drawn from comparatively limited personal life experience (Lortie, 1975). Learning to teach can thus entail a shift from an initially simplistic view of self as teacher to the relatively sophisticated ‘designated identity’ that authentic teaching practice requires (Sfard & Prusack, 2005, p. 14). This shift can prove challenging on many levels but particularly so as personal boundaries and existing views of ‘self’ are renegotiated (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Indeed it is suggested that learning to teach entails the ‘whole person’ (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) in negotiation of a professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Britzman, 2003; Korthagen 2004) within complex social settings through iterative stages of social interaction and personal reflection (Mayer, 1999; Walkington, 2005). The lens of teacher identity and its related constructs brings into view new and important ways of understanding teaching and learning to teach (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Interest in the theoretical value and analytical affordances of teacher identity in educational research has flourished in the past two decades. The term was initially employed to broaden competency-based views of teaching to include conceptions of teaching as being a ‘certain kind of person’ (Gee, 2001); and in turn to emphasize how it entails the construction of particular ideas about ‘how to be’ teacher (Sachs, 2005). The use of identity as a theoretical and analytical construct within the field has varied widely. Ethnomethodological perspectives describe identity in terms of the narratives that teachers create to describe their teaching lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) or the collections of stories and narratives about self that are in themselves identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). As a psychological construct, identity refers to the meanings, concepts and theories that people hold about themselves, which include conceptions of one’s attributes, qualities, beliefs, characteristics and abilities (Collis, 2001; Stets & Burke, 2003). The sociocultural view situates identity within the appropriation of knowledge and practices that enable participation in socially derived meaning systems, relationships and communal activities (such as teaching) - that in turn inform us how to act, how to understand, and how to be (Olsen, 2008; Sachs, 2005). It is the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of identity formation that are of the most interest to us in this discussion.

TEACHER IDENTITY AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHER LEARNING

The sociocultural perspective that we employ views learning as a process of socialization, the appropriation of socially and culturally valued practices (Lortie, 1975; Kumpulainen & Renshaw, 2007; Wenger, 1998). Here we are keen to maintain what Eraut (2010) describes as a productive ‘tension’ between individual and social perspectives. To achieve this we draw from psychology and social learning theory for our discussion of identity in the context of pre-service teacher education. In this view learning to teach may be considered a process of becoming a teacher - an experience of identity development and formation (Britzman, 2003; Danielewicz, 2001; Mayer, 1999; Olsen, 2008). This process reaches beyond knowledge and skills. It requires the cultivation of a sense of self-identity and purpose (Mayer, 1999). As such individuals seek to “define themselves and [be] viewed by others as teachers” (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 4); and to appropriate valid forms of communicative practices and meanings relevant to the teaching community (Forbes & Davies, 2008; Wenger, 1998). The notion of ‘self-in-practice’ has origins in sociology and symbolic interactionism and views social behaviour as a reciprocal