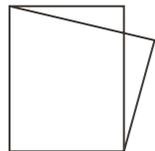


Mediating Profession and Discipline: new challenges for teacher education



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With increased focus on grade school teachers as subject professionals as background, this article articulates and explores some of the challenges and responsibilities that disciplinary scholars of school subjects in a teacher education context face. Using narrative and phenomenological approaches to document analysis as well as qualitative analysis of empirical data from 16 university teacher educators, this article explores ways in which conflict between two teacher education cultures, the old and the 'new', can be managed productively to the benefit of teacher students in this new professional paradigm. The article illuminates some of the key conflicts rising from the 'universitization' of teacher education (Hudson, 2017), and also some of the ways in which divergent university cultures can

support one another, within the context of teacher education in Norway but also with Nordic and international relevance.

Introduction

As a disciplinary scholar of English who found, after some initial frustration, a renewed purpose for my academic training within teacher education, I have observed that my situation is not unique, but increasingly reflective of numerous trends and movements within this professional domain. With increased focus on grade school teachers as subject professionals, and recently politically-mandated requirements for these newly-educated teachers to have and convey in-depth subject knowledge as background (NDET, 2019), this article articulates and explores some of the challenges and responsibilities that

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university teachers of school subjects in a teacher education context face as they learn effective strategies for mediation of their subjects' tradition against the professional realities their students will encounter, although they themselves are not part of this same tradition. The discussion draws on an ongoing debate about the 'universitization' of teacher education (Hudson, 2017), and explores the research question: *In what ways can conflict between two teacher education cultures, the old and the 'new', be managed in a productive way that benefits teacher students in this new professional paradigm?*

Contextual and Methodological Perspectives

This article uses a qualitative approach to research based on both narrative

and phenomenological analysis. It thus fits into the paradigm of "self-study research" (Grant and Butler, 2018; Lohran, 2004), which, in this context, explores the various personal, professional, and programmatic influences that a teacher educator encounters and passes forward to teacher students. Lunenberg and Samaras (2011) document a history of self-study in teacher education that recognizes its roots in action research and practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004; Whitehead, 1995), but further recognizes the empowerment, if not the mandate, of professionals to examine their practice as part of a system of accountability (Wilcox, Watson & Paterson, 2004). The idea of self-study has clearly been influential in teacher education, especially in Norway, where research groups

such as Body, Learning and Diversity at OsloMet, Teacher Education at a Time of Change at University of Tromsø, and Culture, Humanities and Education at Nord University) have used its principles to center their thinking and dissemination efforts.

A recent Norwegian self-study of teacher educators, while of similar sample size, focuses more on case-based teaching practices (Ulvik et al, 2020). Nevertheless, its emphasis on the importance of "collaborative reflection and learning" and the need to "open a space in which we could reflect upon our practice and learn from it" was important to developing my research approach. Recent Scandinavian studies also incorporate ideas from self-study (Rønnerman & Salo, 2019; Eklund, Asphors, & Hansén, 2019);

these additionally demonstrate the need for research into teacher education to be community-driven and practice critical. A recent Swedish doctoral study (Ese, 2016) examines an academic community of 25 scholars in the context of the conflict between the university and management structures, a subject also informing my outlook, especially as my results are concomitant with some of its findings. Above all, established self-study guidelines require that “findings add to the literature on a question of importance” (Lederman & Lederman, 2016) and for me, understanding how my experience fits into a larger paradigm is certainly such a question.

Likewise, the idea of narrative-based phenomenology has influenced my professional practice research. Here, my approach is informed by Paul Ricoeur’s outlook, developed throughout *Time and Narrative* (1984) and particularly as refined in “Narrative Identity” (Ricoeur, 1991), asking “who am I” in response to the functions of connectedness and story building. For Ricoeur, the written narrative provides an essential framework for opening up a story through praxis that might not have been accessible previously (Ricoeur, 1981: 170). If it is additionally true, as van Manen (1990) posits, that we “become the space we are in” (p. 102), then teacher educators, however they found their way to their profession, become the profession itself and ultimately define its meaning. An emphasis on self-reflection as essential to professional practice has led me to seeing my early frustration as part of a larger contextual framework and a legitimate interest area all on its own.

Systemic Changes

There have been changes to the university sector, both in Norway but also internationally, that have affected how teacher education is understood. One development has been the movement of teacher education into the universities. In previous Norwegian educational models, teacher education was largely the domain of separate institutions, with their own, localized emphases on teacher professionalism, praxis, and tradition. While subject knowledge was always essential of these models, it is now still more central to teacher education. Munthe et al (2011) document the various changes in Norwegian teacher education leading to reform in 2015; highlighting the difference between what teachers *do* and who they need to *be*, they conclude that the process leading to change has been “daring”, but still invites “innovat(ion) through local practices” and variation (p. 459).

The universitization process is also reflected in Norwegian educational policy when one considers the various national curricula for grade school education that have been in place. Pre-universitization, the national curricula (such as those of 1974, 1987, and 1994) feature less direct guidance about the subject contents, and more guidance about the overall pedagogical aims of the curriculum. Post-universitization curricula (as represented by national curricula from 1997, 2013, and 2019) provide far more specific direction about how the individual subjects are to be understood, and less guiding general pedagogy. This evolution not only increases the need for subject professionals to teach these subjects, as opposed to generalist educational practitioners, but, with the

2015 reform, teacher students must also become subject specialists themselves in a demanding new way, as their education now culminates in a masters degree in a school or school-relevant subject pedagogy (NOU, 2016). This turn, intended to raise the overall level of subject knowledge and critical thinking in schools, requires still more advanced subject teaching in teacher education.

These changes parallel other structural changes in the Norwegian higher education sector. As Jensvoll et al (2020) have charted, the universities and colleges in Norway are currently experiencing additional major structural changes, merging smaller institutions into larger, multi-campus universities – this because various stakeholders expect the organizations to become larger and more robust, i.e. internationally competitive (NOU, 2008). This process has not always been smooth, with teacher educators experiencing the merger process as distressing and demotivating, causing many to withdraw into their teaching and research rather than confront large-scale structural change (Jensvoll et al, 2020).

A picture of the status of disciplinary scholars in teacher education thus begins to form in two parts: a tale of two mergers. First, the ideological merger between the traditional universities and traditional teacher colleges risks alienating both disciplinary scholar and experienced practitioner, as both must attempt to find their place within a new, universitized teacher education paradigm. Second, the physical merger fusing universities and university colleges across large geographical areas further risks alienating the subject scholar-cum-teacher educator, as the battle lines of

the new mergers are between competing pedagogical traditions and traditions, not about emerging subject expertise. As this study indicates, these challenges can potentially be overcome through mutually respecting each other’s competence and devotion to quality in teacher education.

Analysis

The data collection itself took place in April 2020. 16 disciplinary teacher educators from 6 Norwegian universities and university colleges, representing various subjects, experience levels, and geographical placements, completed an online survey. To find respondents, I used my local network and also asked for their participant recommendations. While a sample size of 16 might not be

fully adequate, for example, to develop or prove new medical knowledge, for a contextual consideration of subject professionals entering teacher education, for which there is “scant empirical research,” “having some introspective data on what these individuals are thinking and how they are perceiving and reacting... would be significant and it would have the potential to transform the nature of our graduate programs” (Lederman & Lederman, 2016), further given the relatively smaller size of the typical teacher education program in Norway. Following the data collection, which followed appropriate data security measures and ethical codes, the survey results were encoded inductively, enabling key words and ideas to emerge.

Contextual Data

16 teacher educators (n=16) from 6 geographically diverse Norwegian universities and university colleges completed the survey, representing 6 general academic subjects, all fitting under the “liberal arts” umbrella as understood from a classical perspective, and most within the designation of “humanities” as well. Table 1 further illustrates their professional competence and experience.

From this information, we can infer that these scholars have relatively substantial background, experience, and informal qualifications for working in teacher education, despite having relatively fewer formal qualifications.

Table 1: Contextual data

Degree		
Terminal	14	(87%)
Acquiring a PhD	2	(13%)
Qualification		
Formal (60 + ECTS of grade-relevant training)	9	(53%)
Informal (relevant publication/teaching experience)	11	(67%) (respondents could choose both)
Years of relevant employment		
≥ 6 years	11	(67%)
4-6 years	3	(20%)
≤ 4 years	2	(13%)

Reflections on Experience and Outlook

The survey's second section asked a series of 7 questions surrounding the idea of disciplinary scholarship within the teacher education context. Thinking back to Ricoeur, and his understanding of narrative-building from *Time and Narrative* (1984), in which he develops an essential logical order of "time, therefore narrative" (*temps ét recit*), I sought to provide a reflective space through asking questions that would look back over the totality of a respondent's experience, but still remain grounded in their present circumstance. While our beginnings might

be ambiguous in meaning at the time, a narrative emerges through consideration of how they affect our circumstance, especially when taken in tandem. As one of the respondents put it, "Only when you study something really thoroughly over time you learn that there is a lot more to learn to be really educated in something. To be humble in the process of learning and gaining new knowledge is of utmost importance. My experience is that it is my disciplinary academic background that has provided this in my case". The questions were written in a neutral tone to encourage open-ended

response. The survey was conducted in English, a second language for many respondents but also the "contemporary lingua franca of academe" (Rostan, 2015). To ensure clarity, however, the questions were piloted with a non-native English user, and afterwards somewhat adjusted. As a result of this piloting, secondary explanations of questions were provided as subquestions for some questions that could have multiple interpretations. Table 2 lists the open-ended questions used in this study.

Table 2: Open-ended questions

1. Why did you enter into teacher education?
2. In your teaching practice, when and how much do you rely on your disciplinary subject background?
(subquestion) Another line of response might be to consider when and how much you rely on subject or general pedagogy in your teaching practice. In this case, please explain where your knowledge of this pedagogy comes from.
3. Was the transition from subject scholar to teacher educator challenging for you?
(subquestion) If so please explain in what specific ways, or if not please explain why this was not the case for you.
4. In what ways do you believe your background as a disciplinary scholar provides professional advantages?
(subquestion) An alternative line of response might be to consider in what ways your disciplinary background might hinder professional success (in the context of teacher education.)
5. In what ways have you learned about teacher education from people with a different background than you?
(subquestion) This 'different background' might be, for example, a different disciplinary background, different professional experience, or different pedagogical awarenesses.
6. In what ways do you observe potential for 'culture conflict' between teacher educators with disciplinary backgrounds and those with practitioner backgrounds (i.e. general education credentials and experience)?
(subquestion) If you observe this potential, please explain in what specific ways, or if not please explain why you believe this not to be the case.
7. If you observed potential for 'culture conflict', in what ways do you think this conflict might be avoided or mediated?

In many ways, one could detect **a clear sense of positivity and high motivation** for disciplinary scholars feeling included in teacher education.



To develop a sense of overall mood, I arranged the responses according to 3 broadly connotative categories: negative, positive, and neutral. In order to assess ideas about "universitization," as defined by Hudson (2017), I grouped responses that engaged ideas about the difference between, for example, disciplinary scholarship and subject didactics or general pedagogy, as well as learning practices such as when and how disciplinary scholars learn new pedagogical methods. In order to assess the idea of "motivation," which I understand as a mostly positively-charged term, I grouped responses that dealt with reasons for entering teacher education in the first place, as well as responses that focused on working to limit culture conflict between disciplinary scholars and practitioner teachers. In order to assess the idea of perceived "challenges," which has both positive and negative connotations, I grouped responses that dealt with respondents' transition from subject scholar to teacher educator, as well as those identifying culture

conflict as a part of their journey. Finally, I examined the data as one corpus, looking for repeating words, phrases, and ideas, as this alone can indicate a discourse beyond the words on the page. From these various analytical processes, a narrative became visible, although not always the one I expected to find.

Positivity and High Motivation

In many ways, one could detect a clear sense of positivity and high motivation for disciplinary scholars feeling included in teacher education. Like myself, most respondents did not intend to enter teacher education, but, having found themselves there nonetheless, now understand their significance within it. As one respondent noted, many value the opportunity to "drive innovation in the school curriculum as well as in teacher education". A surprising number of respondents reported that they had always intended to enter teacher education, even when choosing a disciplinary background, and very few see teacher education as a refuge of last resort.

On the whole, respondents have had to learn about general and subject pedagogy on the job, mostly from colleagues but also from individual research. They see their disciplinary backgrounds as providing advantages for evaluating which pedagogical ideas and tools would be helpful to them, with one respondent noting that their academic background allows them to "authoritatively shape a consistent and easily understood narrative from the seeming complexity of my field," itself illustrating a Ricoeurian perspective on the issue. Several respondents also noted their comfort interpreting policy documents to help them navigate the requirements of teacher education. While some found the transition from disciplinary scholarship to teacher education to be demanding, and experienced that their subject expertise was undervalued, or even "incidental" in the eyes of their other colleagues, they mainly understood their role as collaborative and in (occasionally uneasy) partnership with colleagues in subject pedagogy and general pedagogy,

and that they have found creative ways of working within teacher education that play to their strengths. There were, of course, some notable outliers for what this creative zeal could mean in practice (“a suggestion at our institution was that publication points should qualify for single offices. These kinds of suggestions nurture potential conflicts tremendously”), but overall, we seem to be an adaptable group.

For most, being able to rely “heavily” or “extensively” on their disciplinary background is positively understood, although some also recognize the need to inform their subject knowledge with more awareness of pedagogical techniques and knowledge of and experience with the (Norwegian) education system, and have used books, courses, and dialogue with specialists to gain such awareness. The expectation is high: as one respondent notes, “when I started teaching in teacher education, I realized that my colleagues expected me to be able to use different teaching techniques and activities,” which reflects a disconnect between training and practice, but this, many feel, can be met through interaction with colleagues with “diverse” backgrounds, or “interdisciplinary and multicultural academic and social communities”, as another respondent put it. The general mood of collaborative positivity can perhaps be characterized by one respondent’s conviction that “teacher education is (or should be) a collaboration between specialists in education, subject pedagogy, and subject specialists”. This ready division into three distinct expertise areas indicates that subject scholars should feel a sense of place and ownership in teacher education, as part of an ideal

balance between discipline and profession, but the telling parenthetical aside also reveals doubts about whether this is the case in practice.

Culture Conflicts

A clear mood shift becomes apparent as disciplinary scholars reflect on their experience dealing with the various hierarchical structures within teacher education. Here, a sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement becomes apparent, but this goes in two directions. In summarizing the nature of the conflict, one respondent notes that “this can, in the worst case, precipitate a factionalism where practitioners seek to subordinate the disciplines to pedagogy or discipline scholars develop research and teaching profiles that ignore the needs of teacher education”. While some feel reduced to research-producing automatons who serve this necessary but useless function in compensation for other colleagues who do not have this skill set (“one of our leaders remarked in a general meeting for staff that we Associate Professors and Professors should be grateful to our Assistant Professors for financing our research. Which made me think that...leaders think research is nonsense and should be dispensed with”), others observe that they are not encouraged to develop their individual research profile, but to get in line with a pre-existing agenda to which they had little input (“Teacher education has for several decades been dominated by practitioners with a strong identity as practitioners and, frequently, an expectation that teacher educators from other backgrounds adopt certain values and practices, whether these actually promote teacher education or not”). The conflict, as many respondents saw it,

can be summarized by one respondent’s reflection: “Beyond different perspectives about what constitutes ‘necessary’ training for educators, these groups disagree on what topics class time should be dedicated to. These conflicts are often undergirded by disagreements about the position and role of education, especially humanities education, in modern society”. Again, as several respondents also point to the importance of diversity in training and thinking as playing an essential role in the idea of teacher education, such conflicts are “inevitable”.

Several colleagues alluded to the various structural mergers as part of the problem, (“after all the merges in higher education this conflict is more a given than a potential. What society possibly gains in educating a corps of better qualified professionals, it very, very possibly loses in larger concerns of humanism, democracy and international solidarity,”), but some saw the mergers as an opportunity for field expansion, redefinition and “tolerance-building” among various newly-blended cultures. In fact, many respondents chose to reframe the discussion as a conflict less between disciplinary scholars and practitioners, as I originally hypothesized as the primary source of potential culture conflict, and more between those they observe as comfortable with “curiosity,” “divergence,” “difference”, or “(intellectual) diversity,” – words which, again, appeared frequently in references to culture conflict – and those who are not, a designation transcending pedagogical, administrative or even interdisciplinary boundaries and entering into larger, more existential debates.

The general sense is that nascent or even long-simmering culture conflicts, which most of us have experienced in one form or another, could be avoided by an academic culture, integrated from top to bottom, that acknowledges the value of both subject knowledge and pedagogical/subject-pedagogical orientation, and that allowed focus on both, in teaching as well as research, an area that could form the basis of heightened integration of discipline and practice. Suggestions for achieving this balance ranged widely (“dismiss all teachers of pedagogy and didactics and let disciplinary specialists within the school subjects define for themselves what is to be taught and how” being a notable but not singular outlier). Most responses alluded to more communication between disciplinary scholars and teacher practitioners, more organization among disciplinary scholars of diverse disciplines, or more opportunities for practitioners to develop their analytical and research skills (through, for example, acquisition of a PhD) as potential ways forward.

Conclusion

Through undertaking research based on both narrative and phenomenological analysis to inform my perceptions of the status of disciplinary scholars now situated in teacher education, I return

to my original research question, *In what ways can conflict between two teacher education cultures, the old and the ‘new’, be managed in a productive way to the benefit of teacher students in this new professional paradigm?* I have learned that, while there are many reasons for subject specialists to feel disadvantaged, or even resentful, as they navigate their role in teacher education, most of these are institutional and much bigger than the source of conflict that I originally envisioned, that between the subject specialist and the practitioner. The background of large-scale societal and institutional shifts has led to new and not always ideal circumstances for subject scholarship’s inclusion under the teacher education umbrella. Our sense of narrative, of *identity*, is in flux, and so it is difficult to find what Ricoeur called a “life story” in the midst of these changes. There is, however, cause for optimism: we have the mental flexibility, and the willingness to work hard, that motivates us to learn from our colleagues. Whereas I used to think and work solely in terms of my disciplinary tradition, my own recent research has sought to exploit the intersection of theoretical literary scholarship and middle grades English education, and I think more subject specialists ought to pursue similar aims as a way forward. We are, again invoking van Manen, becoming the space we are

in. Since we’re all by definition products of a university system, and used to working within established, and also uncharted, research and policy paradigms, we should be better at navigating our current situation and establishing a firm place for subject scholarship as a vital part of what it means to be a teacher today. This has to be a three-way meeting between subject scholar, subject pedagogy scholars, and general practitioners, and this meeting needs to be facilitated and supported by a welcoming and open-minded administrative structure. At its best, this awareness forms a new kind of synergy that empowers our students to think about how they understand the idea of teacher education in an inclusive and holistic way.

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