Developing Students' Professional Learning Identities: Early Findings from an AVID-focused Site-based Teacher Education Model

Abstract
The Victoria University (VU) College of Education (CoEd) Site-Based Pre-Service Teacher Education (SBPTE) model was developed to heighten University-school partnerships and increase participant learning. The model involves pre-service teachers undertaking both coursework and an experiential learning project at a partnership school where they are supported by a collaborative team of VU academic and school staff. Recently, the Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning in partnership with the CoEd has developed an enhanced partnership model that is based around the AVID system of learning. AVID is a rigorous, evidence-based program of skill-building and support for ‘missing middle’ students that develops them as critically engaged learners. AVID also represents the basis of a systemic, holistic and sustainable system of teacher and pre-service teacher professional learning that provides a critical learning identity for all stakeholders and enables each to work both collaboratively and interdependently in exploring teaching and learning effectiveness and student achievement. This paper will outline the model by which VU has incorporated the AVID system into the Bachelor of Education and how it serves to develop the learning and teaching identity of pre-service teachers. Data will be presented from a qualitative survey conducted VU pre-service teachers, who had participated in a formal role as AVID tutors at Victoria University Secondary College. This paper will also discuss the implications of the survey findings for the developing learning identities of pre-service teachers.

Introduction
Much of the recent literature on teacher education highlights the importance of the construction of a professional teacher identity through identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice (see, for example Varghese et al. 2005). The importance of developing the self as a teacher has become central to the development of a pre-service teacher’s professional identity (Chong, Ling & Chuan, 2011; Danielewicz, 2001; Schempp et al., 1999), and has major implications for teacher educators and pre-service teacher practicum design (Trent, 2010).

What is apparent in this literature, however, is that the process of constructing pre-service teachers’ identity as learners within the context of pre-service teacher education is widely assumed rather than being treated as a discrete area of a teacher’s identity to be explicitly developed. This represents an important area for investigation as the extent to which teachers and pre-service teachers are able to use pedagogical knowledge and effectively develop their self as teacher in the classroom depends on the extent to which they have internalised learning as a set of values and dispositions; that is, the extent to which they developed a learning identity of their own. This article will outline the approach taken by the Victoria University College of Education to facilitate the construction of a clear learning identity amongst pre-service teachers.

The VU approach was developed to better prepare graduate teachers to recognize and contextualize the factors that are critical in shaping their own professional identity as teachers, namely the social and professional discourses that are encountered in schools. New graduate teachers learn what it is to be a teacher from experiencing an often
competing combination of personal, professional and institutional discourses from within one or multiple professional contexts (Roberts, 2000). Millar Marsh’s research, for example, highlights the case of two teachers being shaped in contrasting ways by their professional contexts.

“at any given time, multiple discourses compete for our allegiance and unless we are aware of our ability to choose to move between and among these discourses as we shape our social worlds, we cannot disrupt to power that they hold over us” (Millar Marsh, 2002, p.461.).

While the construction of a professional teacher identity is of great importance, their ‘critical becoming’ as learners as well as teachers is central to developing the capacity of the pre-service / graduate teacher to negotiate the contextual influences in schools. It is also important in developing in their professional role as the learning identity is central to a teacher’s professional role. That is, the practice of teaching, student learning, assessment for, as and of learning are all key parts of teacher discourse and what teachers ‘do’ as a professionals. The extent to which teachers take ownership of the meaning of learning and have a clear understanding of how and why they learn including what is means to be a learner themselves, is critical to their practice.

A recent evaluation of an Australian Smarter Schools National Partnerships (SSNP) program (Ling, Usher, Eckersley, 2012) provides an example of the prevailing practice in Australia with regard to teacher professional learning. The project, which involved 14 schools engaging with professional learning across strategies for effective literacy and numeracy pedagogies and whole school approaches for improvement in a low-socio-economic context, highlighted that developing teachers’ identity as learners was not seen as being a priority for the schools (or teachers) involved. As a part of the evaluation, schools completed a self assessment survey which asked them to comment on their experiences and actions associated with their participation in the SSNP. Of 53 separate comments that dealt specifically with professional learning, none mentioned the notion of developing the learning dispositions and identity of teachers. Instead, teachers commented on the importance of assessment practices, strategic partnerships, and knowledge and skills (Ling, et al., p.168).

The fact that teachers and schools, such as those surveyed in the SSNP evaluation, do not articulate the need to develop learning identities is not surprising as teacher accrediting bodies in Australia do not identify the development and demonstration of teacher learning identities (positive personal attitudes, values and dispositions towards learning) as a critical element of practice. The set of standards, published by the Victorian Institute of Teacher Education (Figure 1), for example, is comprised of three domains; Professional Knowledge; Professional Practice; and Professional Engagement. Importantly, while the standards make numerous references to learning, they place the teacher to the side of the learning, as coaches or as facilitators of their students development as learners; there are no explicit references made to pre-service teachers having developed or demonstrating their own critical learning identity.

Figure 1.
Outline of the Victorian Institute of Teaching, Standards for Graduating Teachers
In terms of teacher education, the assessment of pre-service teachers follow the VIT domains with judgements being made of their knowledge and effectiveness in classroom practice. Practicum models in Australia follow an orthodoxy that does not actively facilitate the pre-service teacher’s ‘becoming’ as learners. Common assessment forms that practicum units adopt involve pre-service teachers undertaking reflective journaling and action research projects in addition to the actual teaching practice. These forms are most commonly assessed against praxis criteria; that is, the extent to which the student is able to recognise how pedagogical theory and teaching practice converge and the extent to which the student is able to demonstrate this. Importantly, however, this instrument relies on assessment of the pre-service teacher’s knowledge and actions in an educational context and not on the extent to which the experience has developed the student as a (lifelong) learner themselves. For this to occur, an assessment would be made of the extent to which the unit developed the students’ meta-ability to develop and adapt learning, be curious about learning, make meaning from experiences, be creative, act interdependently, be able to strategically manage their learning process and to be resilient (Deakin Crick, 2008).

The importance then of developing quality practica for pre-service teachers is critical to the development of effective teachers; central to the development of teachers who can critically distinguish between contextual professional discourse and themselves as learners. The design and practice of the practica, though, have largely remained static and can be characterized as following a behaviouristic model, similar to other forms of pre-professional learning for professions such as law, nursing and psychology. The fundamental structure and desired outcomes of the majority of such programs are consistent with other professional training programs developed as work integrated learning (WIL), an area that emerged to meet the needs of production orientated organisations after World War II (Engstrom, 2001). In the orthodox model, all students participating in practica have an experience, that directly align with the VIT competences but without having their ‘becoming’ as teacher learners scaffolded. There is a need, then, to go beyond this to understand teacher education through a meta-competence lens to take account of the affective elements that are essential to quality learning and teaching.

**Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)**

From within the structure of the VU SBPTE model, an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) approach was
adopted. AVID is a whole-school supported teaching and learning approach whose primary aim is to develop both the learning capacity and the learning achievement of all students. It has specific teaching and learning models that are designed for the individual stages of schooling; pre-primary, primary, middle years, secondary and post-secondary. The secondary program emphasizes supporting the ‘missing middle’ students who characteristically underachieve by applying the same level of academic rigour and challenge as the high achieving students but while also providing the critical academic support structure that enables it.

In practice, the AVID approach in a secondary context consists of students choosing to take AVID as an elective subject. In the elective class, AVID students receive explicit support in the areas of writing, methods of inquiry, facilitated collaborative practice, organization techniques and critical reading that is aimed at building both learning independence and interdependence. The AVID elective class also involves staging regular discipline-focused tutorials that are facilitated by pre-service teachers as AVID Tutors. The tutorials, consisting of 6-7 students, support student presenters to articulate a point of confusion from their subject classes that they are experiencing and to engage in a learning dialogue with their peers to help them overcome their confusion. Further, by using a Socratic form, the tutorials are designed to benefit all student participants by scaffolding meta-cognition through higher levels of thinking and questioning.

VU Site Based Pre-service Teacher Education (SBTE) Model – theory in practice
To better facilitate the critical learning ‘becoming’ of pre-service teachers the VU College of Education - over the past two decades - has developed a teacher education program based upon establishing close relationships with schools. The site-based model is a mode that does not merely replicate what already happens at university but sets out to expressly create a different set of conditions for expanded, more creative teaching and learning in a school setting (Eckersley, Davies, Arnold, Edwards, Hooley, Williams and Taylor, 2011). It has an epistemological focus, which concentrates on establishing new frames of learning for all concerned rather than repeating what already exists. The key difference between this and the traditional model is that the university unit is taught at the school itself, at once building a bridge between not only pre-service teachers to both school student and teachers but, critically, the university lecturer to both pre-service teacher and teachers.

The partnership enabler in the present context was the application of the AVID approach to the Applied Curriculum Project (ACP). The ACP involved pre-service teachers undertaking the role of AVID Tutor which provided a scaffold for pre-service teachers to actively engage with the school community more broadly and aim to make strong connections between the theories explored in core coursework and teaching and learning practices in schools. The role of tutor both developed the pre-service teacher as a learner, while they scaffolded the same process with the students. Importantly, in the case of the AVID approach, it is of very real strategic value to the school which has served to create an authentic learning and teaching environment for the pre-service teachers. In this way, the AVID focused SBTE challenges the traditional notion of the passive pre-service teacher, merely experiencing the placement and gathering knowledge (Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, and Cherednichenko, 2009) and validates and develops the notion that a quality teacher’s identity should be as both teacher and learner. Indeed, the data presented below highlights the
success of this model as the pre-service teachers articulate how they have internalised learning as values and dispositions and have taken on a real identity as a learner and as a part of a learning community.

**Methodology**

This article considers the experience of 15 pre-service teachers who participated in the Victoria University site-based teacher education program at Victoria University Secondary College and who took the role of AVID tutor as a part of their Applied Curriculum Project. It considered a qualitative data set and discuss and make conclusions on (a) the value of the AVID approach on the experience and (b) the implications of the AVID approach to the experience

A. the impact of the Site-Based AVID program on you as a learner;  
B. the impact of the Site-Based AVID program on your teaching practice; 
C. your perceptions of the effect that you, as pre-service teachers and AVID tutors, have had on the learning characteristics of the VUSC AVID students

The online survey, completed by 15 pre-service teachers during their final tutorial, asked them to reflect on their experience in terms of its impact on them as learners. Specifically, the survey focussed on seven key learning dimensions that have been identified in the Essential Lifelong Learning Inventory: changing and learning; critical curiosity; meaning making; creativity; learning relationships; strategic awareness; resilience, (Deakin Crick, R., Broadfoot, P., & Claxton, G., 2004). The analysis followed an inductive data reduction model, which reduced the responses from their original form, firstly into constructs, secondly into concepts and finally they were coded by theme. The analysis indicated that the pre-service teachers identified strongly with all characteristics of lifelong learners.

The participants were also asked to respond to questions that enquired as to the impact of their AVID experience on their thinking and values as teachers. The data, indicate that the pre-service teachers had transferred the importance of scaffolding learning dimensions from their own context to the students’. That is, they recognised that recognising and developing learning skills in students was valuable in the role of a teacher and indicated that the AVID SBTE model had made a significant impact on their thinking as a result. Further, the pre-service teachers indicated that, as a result of the impact on them of their experience in the AVID SBPTE model, their perception was that the VUSC AVID students experienced a positive impact on their learning behaviours.

**The impact of the Site-Based AVID program on the pre-service teachers as learners.**

Consistent with the literature which has highlighted the importance of teachers forming a clear learning identity as individuals and as professionals, (Varghese, 2005; Millar Marsh, 2002) the experiences of the pre-service teachers was that this was something that they valued most; the pre-service teachers comments indicate that they developed a very clear sense of community and a real and new identity as a learner. The positivity on which the pre-service teachers comments began with an AVID Tutor training seminar over two days, at which the positivist AVID ethos,
practice and mission was introduced. The positivity, manifest in a sense of positive mission, a sense of creativity and an urgency in search of deep meaning was palpable throughout and highlighted in the following responses:

This year learning has been more enjoyable than usual due to the fact that we have had the chance to be collaborative and learn things such as seminar and questioning skills.

This semester, following on from first semester, our lecturer has been encouraging in creating dialogue amongst students, both in expressing our thoughts about learning and challenging us also. Reflection has been a large part of the learning of this year, and its importance is unquestionable.

I believe that without making mistakes we will not learn or increase our ability to be resilient. Learning from mistakes and refining successful methodology is key to success.

The pre-service teachers found that the pedagogies and routines that were demonstrated as a part of their university class, held at the school, created a safe environment in which to collaborate and develop a positive interdependence with their classmates.

I am a more independent learner because of AVID and I am able to work through my issues on my own rather than always asking for teacher help. Also collaborating with other students to solve problems (ZPD)

I believe it is important to be able to learn dependently and independently. It is important to collaborate with others (ZPD) as others ideas will broaden your knowledge of a subject and it helps the students that are assisting the other students to learn through teaching. I also believe however that individual learning is very important because learners can be intrapersonal and they benefit from working on their own, so activities must me created to cater for all of the learning types.

I believe that you cannot learn without the help of others, but the expansion on the things you have learnt depends on your interpretation, and the elements of the information you choose to use.

Traditionally an independent learner, learning through the AVID Program has showed me the benefits of collaborative learning. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development lends itself to this program.

Pre-service teachers were also conscious that the sense of safety and interdependence that they felt with their peers had given them a greater confidence to treat their learning seriously and as something to be crafted; it was a confidence to wear their learning identity publically.

I have become more confident in independent and group learning, which has improved my overall learning outcomes throughout the year.

I am more confident in speaking to others and working with people. I was more of an intrapersonal learner before but all of the collaboration and group work during tutorials has showed me that it is beneficial to have the ideas and opinions of others.

The interdependence is clearly identified in:
AVID has if anything clearly defined that we are all individuals, with our own thoughts, ideas and thinking processes. It is not necessary to have the same thoughts of my peers, and what I think is important and valuable to class discussion. I have become more confident with sharing my ideas.

Comments indicate that the conscious sense of interdependence, confidence and collaboration was a causal link to the development of a heightened sense of critical curiosity to what the pre-service teachers had experienced previously. Their comments suggest students for whom the notion of ‘truth’ in learning mattered. They suggest that the students were not satisfied with static answers, information and/or experiences but rather in learning experiences that led them to explore and test for themselves.

Completing assignments I still address individual criteria but look at through first finding deeper meaning then ensuring individual criteria is met.

AVID has taught me that deeper learning is very important to get to a real understanding of the content.

Critically curious, the pre-service teachers developed a heightened desire to discover a more complex and, in their eyes, a more valuable meaning to their practice, their context, and the education theory that was an intrinsic part of their student experience. Making connections between theory and practice was something that they had experienced before, however constructing and reconstructing evidence to create a single ‘story’ was central to them gaining a richer personal meaning; this was something that the pre-service teachers valued.

Being able to link the information I know and the new information/facts which we are learning has been one of the best learning tools that helped me with learning this year. Knowledge and facts are often discovered fragmented but through linking information together an organised spider web of knowledge which will be useful accessing in the future is hopefully created.

Piecing together information gathered through discussion of journal articles and conversation aided in joining the pieces together. By utilising prior knowledge and theory we were able to develop a deeper understanding of how knowledge fits together to create a single story.

AVID has given me the ability to view information in a different way, and the questioning has allowed connections that were not visible at the beginning.

I believe that all parts of knowledge and facts are intertwined and should be taught and applied as one “story”.

Lastly but most importantly, the pre-service teachers, having been situated in a positive learning environment that fostered collaboration and learning interdependence and who found themselves more critically curious and willing to delve to find deeper meaning, began to see themselves as being ‘learners’. Their identity was conscious and it was purposeful and, curiously for them, quite distinct from their previous identity as ‘students’.

During the year, through conversation and discussion of journal articles, identifying ourselves as learners and learning how to learn has been invaluable. Understanding that learning is a lifelong process which takes effort and knowing that learning is boundless.
AVID has defined that learning is possible in the right environment with the right elements that are aimed to foster motivated learners. It does away with excuses and focus’ on actual learning.

At the beginning of the year I originally thought that my learning was limited to my ability but throughout the processes of avid I have found that my learning can be expanded through the ZPD.

This year has taught me the importance of learning and professional development throughout my career and life in general.

The impact of the Site-Based AVID program on the pre-service teachers’ teaching practice

The importance of the learning identity for the pre-service teachers is central in their articulation of their own priorities as teacher practitioners. The notion of ‘becoming’ as a learner and a personal sense of that metamorphosis is present in their practice and imagined future practice. Not surprisingly, the pre-service teachers recognised the critical factors of collaboration and of the development of curiosity as being priorities that could be scaffolded and could be scaffolded with the AVID-style pedagogies that they had experienced. Comments were made on the importance of the resilience and desire of the individual students to this process.

Students have to find learning learnable because if they believe a task is too difficult they get disheartened and think they cannot do it and don’t even try.

Learning isn’t always easy and there are battles, which we face to get through it, but hanging in and giving it ago are strong mindsets which will help students get through it. Everyone learns through making mistakes not only at school but throughout life but students need to be made aware that learning occurs through mistakes and they should be taught to analyse their mistakes to help them learn from it.

Student self-esteem is a major issue in schools today we can help this be built but it is important for them to know that it is ultimately up to them to build on their own self esteem for example by setting and achieving their own personal goals.

The desire to consciously develop their students’ own desire to find meaning, individually and collaboratively, too, is a reflection of the pre-service teachers’ own learning in the program during the year.

The collaboration with students was huge in the sense you can see the effectiveness of discussion and sharing ideas and see how this positively impacted on their learning.

I believe it is important for students for have a desire to find things out. This will enhance student engagement and classroom participation. Being unwilling to accept the teachers opinion as fact is a good thing students need to understand that teachers do not know everything (even though some think they do), I think this will also encourage students self inquiry to seek their own conclusions about things.

I will encourage my students to be deeper learners through providing them with activities which require deeper thinking and questioning.

I believe it is important for students to find a holistic meaning to something rather than to address the criteria but unfortunately most assessment is not designed this way.
Also reflected in the pre-service teachers’ view of themselves as teachers was the AVID-style pedagogies and classroom practices that they had been exposed to as students and what they were exposed to in the role as AVID tutors. The references to safety and rules highlight the importance of interdependence to the AVID system and emphasises.

**i have been able to use AVID in teaching of general classrooms and method areas**

Visual cues have always been a big part of my teaching since I began. However, now I understand the underlying values of the visuals more, as I just enjoyed making the visuals in the beginning. Students and teachers feeling safe in the classroom enhances and supports learning, and the norms in the AVID classroom made the environment great to learn in

Creating rules that were relevant to students and rules about issues that were important to their learning was very beneficial to the day to day classes and the collaboration of students to follow their classroom rules that promoted learning in their class.

Watching the rules be established in the AVID classes demonstrated how rules are important and how well the students adhered to them.

Vygotsky’s theory of learning associates ‘the zone of proximal development’. I found this useful in some AVID classes as less capable students who had trouble grasping concepts, were prompted with questioning and comments from more capable peers. I also used Costa’s level of questioning to group students, so each group had high and lower order thinking skills.

The priorities that the pre-service teachers created based on them reflecting on their own learning are also evident when they talk about their future students.

**if we want students to find meaning we need to structure assessment which better allows them opportunity to do this.**

there must be an element of safety in the task set for the student to be able to take risks without getting to far out of control.

The skills which we require students to learn are important and can and should be taught to students to enhance their learning and development.

The effect that the respondents, as pre-service teachers and AVID tutors, perceived that they has had on the learning characteristics of the VUSC AVID students

When asked to comment on the effect that they had had as pre-service teachers and AVID tutors, there was a strong feeling that there had been both a noticeable impact and that it had been positive. What was also clear from the pre-service teachers was that the areas of impact mirrored that of their own learning growth, emphasising collaboration, interdependence, curiosity under an overarching learning identity umbrella. This point serves to highlight the impact of the pre-service teachers ‘becoming’ as learners; their view of themselves, their pedagogies practices and student
outcomes have all been positively impacted as a result. For the pre-service teachers, the students that they tutored had become learners over the course of the year.

The AVID students are definitely more motivated and more interested in learning, they care about themselves and are interested in learning.

I think AVID has given the students the ability to think that knowing how to learn effectively will give them the skill to continue to learn throughout their adult life and will have exponential value.

I found that in AVID students gained a more in depth knowledge when looking into concepts and information themselves, and taking ownership of their own learning.

the benefits [to the students’ self esteem] are evident, both amongst secondary students and tertiary students.

The perception of the pre-service teachers was that they had created a positive collaborative space, in which students increasingly collaborated and saw each other as being and important part of their identity as learners.

AVID does address both intra- and interpersonal learners. Interpersonal - collaborating with others during the tutorials. Intrapersonal - working on TRF’s at home to try and solve problems.

Collaboration positively impacted on their learning.

Once they grasped the learning techniques they were able to find the support they needed when they got stuck or felt they were unable to do something, therefore overcoming the challenge with the support they had access to.

Further, the pre-service teachers indicated that the collaboration of the students, like themselves, had developed a stronger desire to access deeper meaning in their work. They found that the students, emboldened by their new identity as learners were more purposeful in their enquiry.

AVID has given the student to explore their learning and question the information their teachers have given them through the ability to explore the subject deep through self inquiry.

Students accessing prior knowledge makes strong links to their new learning. The ability to make connections between problems deepens and improves learning.

With the knowledge of questioning AVID students aim to think a lot more and come to conclusions on their own. They are much more independent in their thinking.

There is high value in students seeking links between prior knowledge and new information to create their bigger picture, however I don’t believe many students do it, or if they do it’s unconsciously which is not necessarily a bad thing.

Conclusion
The challenges facing pre-service teachers during their practicum placements and in their early graduate years are numerous. They are exposed to a variety of professional contexts and an even greater number of influences from mentor teachers and professional colleagues. The extent to which pre-service and graduate teachers are able to
develop effective professional behaviours and practices will depend on the identity that they adopt or construct. However, while the discourse on teacher professional identity is of great value for teacher educators, the discrete learning element in this identity appears to be an important part still to be explored, identified and measured. Future research should explore the notion of a teacher’s learning identity and its impact on their practice and the teacher education that supports its development. A contribution of this study is to examine how pre-service teachers responded to the notion of learning as teaching within the AVID site-based teacher education practicum model. The study found that the Essential Lifelong Learning Inventory learning dimensions were an important set of values to both develop learning experiences around and to measure, as was the AVID system. Early indications from this research are that the pre-service teachers identified with the learning dimensions and with the AVID system in developing their learning and practice but also, and most importantly, their learning identities.
References:


