

UNIVERSITY-SCHOOLS COLLABORATION THROUGH THE TEACHING PRACTICUM

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Este artículo da cuenta de la experiencia de las autoras con la práctica docente en inglés, llevada a cabo en varios colegios públicos de Medellín. Esta práctica, la cual se inserta en un programa de pregrado para la formación de profesores, se basa en los principios de la investigación-acción participativa y busca mejorar la calidad de la educación básica. La práctica es un contexto muy provechoso para todos los participantes puesto que tienen la oportunidad de desarrollar conocimiento teórico y práctico acerca de su quehacer cotidiano como profesores de inglés; además, se benefician con las nuevas ideas e influyen en los futuros cambios curriculares.

Palabras claves: investigación-acción en educación, formación de profesores, desarrollo profesional, enseñanza del inglés

Cet article présente l'expérience d'un stage d'enseignement de l'anglais menée par ses auteurs dans différents lycées de Medellín. Ce stage, étape finale du programme de licence en didactique des langues étrangères, est conçu à partir des principes de la recherche-action participative. Son objet est d'améliorer l'éducation au niveau des lycées. Ce stage permet à tous ses participants de développer leurs connaissances théoriques et pratiques, de partager leur savoir-faire quotidien et de repenser les programmes scolaires liés à leur domaine: la didactique de l'anglais.

Mots-clés: recherche-action en éducation, formation de professeurs, développement professionnel, enseignement de l'anglais.

This article addresses the authors' experience carrying out their teaching practice of English in a group of public schools in Medellín. This teaching practice which is part of an undergraduate language teaching program, is based on principles of collaborative action research. It seeks to enhance the quality of basic education. Since all participants have the chance to develop knowledge, discuss new ideas and feed curricular changes, the practicum is a fruitful learning context.

Key words: action research in education, teacher training, professional development, English language teaching.



INTRODUCTION

Professional practice has not received the attention it deserves in tertiary education. We believe this has been due to various facts, especially to the fact that knowledge has traditionally been viewed as superior to practice and more difficult to be learned than skills. Practice has been conceived as mindless doing and not as an integration between knowledge and know how (Hager, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the fact that professional practice is a rich context where trainees, school teachers, and university teachers can learn collaboratively. For the trainees the teaching practicum constitutes their first approach to this context; for school teachers and university teachers it is an opportunity to realize the wealth of knowledge that underlies their everyday activities and which has not been made explicit. In doing so, they can accomplish the university's mission of contributing to the quality of education and of furthering less privileged sectors of our society.

In the first section, we will describe briefly the undergraduate language

teaching program which offers the practicum, the students of the program and the way the practicum is organized. In the second section we will present the philosophy underlying the design of this practicum. In the third and fourth sections, we will narrate the particular experience Cristina, as a supervisor, and Angela, as a trainee, had in the practicum. We will focus our attention on the collaborative dialogue among the participants - trainees, cooperating teachers (CTs), and supervisor - and on the project trainees designed and carried out in order to develop professionally and to improve the teaching and learning processes in the schools where they carried out their practicum. In the final section, we will present our reflection on trying to implement change in schools.

THE NEW LICENCIATURA PROGRAM

The Licenciatura en Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras is a new undergraduate foreign language teaching program delivered by the School of Languages and the School of Education of the University of

Antioquia, the first cohort of which graduated in 1997. The program includes a three-semester cycle in which the students acquire the basic knowledge of English and French. In the following five semesters, the syllabus has a content based approach to language learning, thus students continue developing their command of the languages in courses such as Phonetics, Grammar and Literature, and in the Applied Linguistics strand, which includes courses such as Psycholinguistics, Methods, Techniques, and Testing. This strand and the Pedagogy strand prepare students for their role as future teachers. In the seventh and eighth semester, students take Practicum I: Classroom Observation and Practicum II: Teaching Practice, respectively. Most students choose this program because they want to study languages, not because they want to teach. They gradually get used to the idea of teaching but in institutions where the teaching circumstances are easier to deal with, for example, where the groups are small, where students are very motivated, and where the paper work is few. Since the students of the first cohort showed a quite good command of the foreign languages,

many of them wanted to teach at the university or in private language institutes, and shunned the idea of teaching children or teenagers in a school. These are precisely the institutions where the university had planned their practicum. Being a public university, its mission states that it should support less privileged groups in society and help promote quality in education.

The places where trainees do their practicum are chosen by the Practicum Coordinator after she visits several public high schools and talks to the teachers or academic coordinators. The main criterion to select these schools is that teachers be willing to cooperate, and be receptive and open-minded. Adequate physical conditions such as safe and easy-to-access neighborhood and fairly good educational resources is a requirement that cannot always be fulfilled.

One of the roles of the supervisors is to explain to the CTs the design of the practicum. In Practicum I: Classroom Observation, the trainees are supposed to observe what happens in a teaching situation with a specific group of students, reflect on their observations, and discuss with the CT and the supervisor the process of



teaching and learning they have observed. Trainees then devise a project which they can develop with the same group over the next semester - Practicum II: Teaching Practice - with the aim of tackling the problem(s) they have detected. During their teaching practice and through different means - portfolio, diary, and questionnaires - the trainees keep on observing, reflecting on and evaluating the actions they have taken in the classroom. The trainees are observed by the CT and supervisor who give them feedback on their performance.

It is noteworthy that this design for the practicum is an innovation in our context. Traditionally, the CT lets the trainee take over one of his/her courses for one semester, without having had the chance to know the school and the learners. Reflective dialogue between trainee and CT is not emphasized and the trainee is observed by and receives feedback mainly from the supervisor.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE PRACTICUM

We have often heard high-school English teachers complain that what

they are taught at the university does not apply to their teaching practice. This has been corroborated by Murphy in a study undertaken in order to investigate the introduction of new ELT methodology in secondary schools in Colombia:

There's a conflict between what we preach and the real classroom situation... Teachers want up-to-date models, they're not satisfied with what they're doing, and want ways to motivate and interest students... (The Licenciatura curriculum is overloaded, it doesn't integrate components... courses are theoretical, all over-theoretical. (interview Z94) (1996a:328)

Traditionally, professional preparation of teachers has been based on what Schön (1983) calls 'technical rationality' and Wallace (1991) the 'applied science model'. According to this model, professionals acquire first in a formal setting a body of knowledge, which they later apply in their daily practice. However, since the apprentice is presented with ready-made problems, he/she has difficulty identifying and solving problems when they occur in real professional life. Therefore, Schön proposes that

professional education should be as close as possible to actual workplace practice in order to tackle the conflict between theory and practice.

Bearing this idea in mind, the School of Languages has adopted an action research approach to the practicum (Crookes, 1993, 1994; Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 1993; Richards and Lockhart, 1994; Doff, 1988; Wallace, 1991). This practicum intends to fill the gap between theories developed by the research bodies at universities, and the practice experienced by teachers and students in the real classroom. We expect the

practicum to be the place where new approaches can be tried out by trainees under the assistance of the CT and the supervisor, and CTs can benefit professionally by discovering the «theory [which is] implicit in everyday life» (Schratz and Walker, 1995:112) and which supports their practice. In other words, we want trainees and school teachers not only to apply and/or adapt the theoretical findings of others but to develop their own theories based on practice (van Lier, 1994). Besides, the conflict that may arise between different views, the ones held by the university through the trainees and supervisors, and the ones held by the school teachers is precisely what is needed in order to sharpen ideas. «Interaction itself acts as a destabilizing influence helping better strategies come to light» (van Lier, 1994:8).

Each group of students, each school, each social setting has its own reality; therefore, teachers and trainees cannot be given 'the solution' to their problems. Allwright and Bailey say that «in order to help our learners it is not 'the latest method' that we need, but rather a fuller understanding of the language classroom and what goes on there» (1991, xviii). That is

Mur avec inscriptions (1945)
J. Dubuffet



why helping trainees and teachers reflect on their practice is much more effective than prescribing what they should do.

Through mutual collaboration between the university and the schools, the practicum can help high-school teachers who might have become routinized to up-date themselves and develop professionally. Through the dialogue established with the trainee, the CT starts reflecting on his teaching and acquires «self-awareness - the ability to reflect on one's own teaching and so gradually improve and develop one's skill as a teacher» (Doff, 1988:278). At least two of the conditions mentioned by Doff in order to develop self-awareness are included in our design of the practicum: providing feedback and re-reflecting on practice. In Practicum I, trainees observe their CT's classes, and both CT and trainee reflect together on what actually took place. This process is reversed in Practicum II where the CT is the observer and the trainee the teacher. Having to give feedback to the

trainees in order to help them develop their skills as teachers, CTs have to reflect on how the lesson went and this in turn develops their awareness.

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For teachers who have spent years teaching the same curriculum, teaching may have become routine and unproblematic (Chastko, 1993). However, in the process of working with trainees, [CTs] may be forced to focus on aspects of everyday practice which are clearly problematic for the trainees. This may cause the [CTs] to look at practice in a new light. (Moon, 1994:351)

The idea of using an action research approach for the practicum is also based on our belief that there is not 'One Best Way' or 'One Truth' (Alderson, 1992). It is for the participants in the teaching process to find the most appropriate way in their specific circumstances. To summarize, we think that action research provides an appropriate framework for the teaching practice because of the contribution it makes to :

1. the professional development of individual teachers who improve their practical theories and competence in action through reflection and action;
 2. curriculum development and improvements in the practical situation under research by developing the quality of teaching and learning through new and successful action strategies;
 3. the collective development of the profession by means of opening up individual practice to scrutiny and discussion and thus broadening the knowledge base of the profession;
 4. the advancement of educational research
- (Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 1993:207)

OUR EXPERIENCE

In the following sections we will present the experience the first cohort of the Licenciatura had with the Practicum. First, we will describe the aims and the methodology of Practicum I, and the practicum projects trainees had to design for Practicum II. Then we will relate and analyse the dialogue established among the triad - CT, trainee and supervisor - as trainees took over full responsibility for a class.

PRACTICUM I: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

One of the aims of Practicum I was to develop a positive attitude in trainees towards the CTs and their future profession. Another aim was to understand the complex nature of the teacher's job, which involves the social, psychological and educational aspects of the learning and teaching processes. Regarding university-schools collaboration, two specific objectives were set: to share trainees' reflections with their peers, CTs, and educational community, and to collaborate with the school in planning activities and designing teaching materials.

Three processes were included in the development of Practicum I: seminar sessions, school and classroom observations, and dialogue with CTs. Trainees met once a week with the supervisor in the seminar sessions where trainees reflected on issues ranging from their purpose in life to particular teaching skills, and what they had seen in their last observation task. They started their practicum by getting familiarized with the school in which they were going to do their practicum. They did this by analyzing



documents such as the school's institutional educational project (PEI), the norms of the school, and the English language syllabus. They also observed the routines of the school and interviewed pupils and staff. Then, they were assigned or had to choose tasks from Wajnryb (1992) focusing on different issues, for example, classroom management, roles of teachers and learners, and the lesson. The information gathered during their observations fed the discussions in the seminar sessions. After each discussion session, trainees wrote a report on what they had found, which included a description of and a comment on what they had observed. For example, trainees wrote their thoughts about classroom management strategies used by the CT, and their ideas about what aspects were worth changing in the class observed to have better results.

The Practicum I: Classroom Observation seminar sessions was also the setting where trainees were given input on topics Cristina felt had not been developed fully in previous courses, such as planning lessons and units, and designing tasks. We used Doff (1988) and Gower and Walters



Les constructeurs (1950)
Fernand Léger

(1983) to organize workshops on lesson plans and Nunan (1991) on task design.

A main activity in the practicum was the promotion of the dialogue between trainees and CTs. However, especially during Practicum I, there were difficulties in establishing this dialogue due to several reasons. As was stated before, since trainees were not very motivated towards teaching in highschools, some were extremely critical towards what they observed in the school and in the classroom.

Another reason for the limited dialogue was the trainees' and CT's lack of time. Trainees were taking seven subjects simultaneously, so it was not easy for them to stay after the class they had observed and coincide with the CT's few free hours. This lack of time also contributed to the difficulty to develop the rapport which is so necessary in this kind of relationship. A lot of discussion in the seminar sessions aimed at trainees' being more understanding towards school teachers, learning more about teachers' working conditions and trying to create empathy between trainee and CT. Specific activities taken from Woodward (1992) were used in order to prepare trainees to give and receive feedback.

At the end of Practicum I, and based on the information they had collected during their observation period, trainees had to present a project to be carried out during their Practicum II: Teaching Practice. This project had to be consistent with the school's philosophy and plans - as stated in the Institutional Educational Project (PEI) - and the English syllabus. However, there were times when the PEI was not consistent either with the syllabus, or with the textbook the

teachers had chosen as a guide. Therefore, the projects sometimes involved changes in the syllabus which had to be supported to the CT. This was not an easy task for those trainees whose CTs insisted on sticking to the syllabus or the textbook other teachers in the same grade level were following, so that their pupils would be in similar conditions when the practicum had finished.

Before handing in the project to the supervisor, trainees had to discuss it with their CTs in order to see if it was feasible according to the school conditions. It seems that, since teachers were used to seeing things on paper which are not put into practice, they did not pay much attention to the projects. When trainees started doing what they had planned, CTs realized that the project was meant to come true. In cases where the trainees were not able to support strongly enough what they had planned, some CTs were able to influence them into «following the book». Trainees who had clear objectives and had designed action strategies which were consistent with them, were welcomed to carry out their project and the book was used as a complement, if at all.

The following experience narrated by



Hugo gives a general picture of how the projects were planned and developed.

Since Alejandro and I were teaching in the same grade level in the same school, we worked as a team and designed a unified practicum project. Our project was conceived after having:

- known the school and analyzed its PEI,
- observed the English class,
- compared what happened in the classroom to the PEI's requirements,
- analyzed the data provided by observation,
- analyzed questionnaires about pupils' preferences and feelings towards English and the English class,
- analyzed questionnaires with school teachers' opinions about the importance of English and its integration to other subjects.

The first thing we rescued from the PEI was the importance of improving communication. Students had difficulties solving their problems - intolerance, misconceptions about sex, poor use of information - because they did not know how to solve them. The PEI stressed that the best tool to reach solutions is through communication.

The school's language department also had its own project which saw communication as a tool that helps students to value their culture and to evaluate objectively the information received. In other words, to develop students' ability to solve their problems, we have to develop communication too. Concerning English, the school's syllabus requires to develop reading comprehension due to the fact that many students will go to university and will have to read written material in English.

However, when we observed classes, we noticed that there were no strategies to improve communication, classes were teacher-centered and communication and reflection of personal and current issues were not involved. Besides, readings and textbooks were used to teach grammar and translation, but not communication. We wanted to try out other things that could fit better the PEI's demands.

Since students' interests were neglected in the syllabus, activities in the classroom did not satisfy their expectations. There was no relation between what they liked and what they did in the classroom. That was supported by

a questionnaire about their preferences and feelings towards English and the English class.

As a conclusion, we felt that some goals of the PEI were not being achieved, and we wanted students to achieve them because we shared its philosophy. Our project aimed to develop reading comprehension strategies that allowed students to understand suitable readings. We also wanted to go beyond the classroom in order to make English a real language and integrate it to other subjects. To do this, we encouraged students to participate in extra-curricular activities through English.

Although our project was concerned with language goals, there were educational goals implied, such as teaching students to communicate. Students had to make short reports and reflections in their native language based on the content of a reading and the topics developed in class, and to share and exchange ideas, thoughts, and feelings related to them.

Our classes were planned according to our goals. Each lesson plan implied reflection about our students' needs, likes and learning strategies as well as

our principles and beliefs about teaching and learning. Of course, all these aspects helped me figure out my philosophy of teaching. After teaching the lesson, I had a dialogue with myself about the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson. This dialogue made me improve other lesson plans and so the quality of the teaching improved as well as did my self-esteem. Last but not least, the students benefited from all this. (Hugo)

After having gone through this experience Angela saw how important it was to have a project to guide her actions and reflections.

While getting to know the school and its PEI - which shows the man/woman the school wants to educate, the obligations it has with society based on certain needs taken from society itself, and the way it is going to achieve the results that are going to benefit society in the future - we [the trainees] were observing and reflecting on our cooperating teachers' classes. At the end we chose a problem we could work on in our teaching practicum. With a specific problem and the support of the PEI, we could already start the process of the project design.



The project described the problem selected and supported the reasons why we thought such a project had to be developed in the school. Then we specified the objectives, which had to show that the project was really going to address students' needs. To have a clearer idea of how the project was going to be carried out, we devised a chronogram where we planned roughly the issues to work in each class. This chronogram may have been unrealistic, but at

least it gave an idea of the amount of time each objective would take to be reached. The last step in the design of the project was writing out a sample lesson plan to show how the idea of the project could be worked out.

Once we had our project and lesson plan ready, we had to carry it out with the students. This period of implementing the project and seeing the real results and problems demanded reflection and analysis. These reflections and analysis let us evaluate the project

and also change and implement other actions that were not planned at the beginning.

Having a project not only helps the teacher to organize and systematize the process in order to arrive at solutions, but also begins to change the teacher's role. A teacher who develops a project based on certain needs and who reflects about his/her actions in class, is a teacher who is approaching research.

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This teacher is no longer an individual who is unaware of the complexity of his/her role towards a process. He/she starts developing professionally, creating and adapting

knowledge to her/his own reality. (Angela)

PRACTICUM II : TEACHING PRACTICE

As we were getting ready for Practicum II, the provincial and municipal educational authorities (SEDUCA and EDUCAME) and the University of Antioquia were joining

efforts in order to improve basic education. University authorities had had conversations with some highschool principals who wanted to participate in this project (Programa de Mejoramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Básica). Two of the schools we had chosen for our practicum were on the list of participants in the meeting where they had agreed to have the best university students work with the school teachers to improve education. Since we felt that the principles behind our practicum design fit very well with the aims of this program, we presented a project which included the effort of educational authorities. This project, along with Moon's article (1994) which described an experience similar to the one we wanted to promote, was presented to the CTs in order to show them the relevance we were giving to their role in the practicum.

While trainees were carrying out their projects in schools, the supervisor was coordinating collaborative work among trainees, CTs and herself. A key element in order to achieve collaboration was the dialogue between trainee and CT, trainee and supervi-

sor, and CT and supervisor.

During Practicum II: Teaching Practice, the CT observed the trainee's performance and gave him/her feedback. We expected the CT to pose questions that would help the trainee reflect on his/her teaching, to comment on the procedures and techniques followed by the trainee, to provide alternative ways to carry out activities in class and to manage the group. In other words, the way we wanted cooperating teachers to give feedback ranged between the alternative and collaborative models of supervision proposed by Gebhard (1984). In this way both the CT and the trainee could develop professionally. The trainee could experiment new trends of teaching English learned at the university, and the CT could contribute his/her experience, especially with classroom management. That is to say, this dialogue between trainee and CT was intended to facilitate a better lesson plan implementation, a further understanding of classroom dynamics, and the improvement of trainee's performance in the classroom. Thereby, more than fault-finders, CTs would become the support trainees needed to improve their teaching skills.

According to our experience the most



remarkable qualities of CTs are open-mindedness and the ability to encourage reflection. If the CT is an open-minded person, he/she will motivate trainees to explore and try out new ideas in the classroom, understand trainees' concerns, and look for different ways to solve their performance problems (Moon, 1994). The CT should be able to make trainees be aware of the suitability of the lesson, the materials to be used, the strategies to carry out, as well as the events occurred during the lesson in order to improve trainees' lesson plans.

In the experience reported here, some trainees were supported by CTs who possess this profile and with whom effective dialogue took place. A trainee describes her CT:

From the very beginning, my cooperating teacher caused me a very good impression. One thing that struck me from him was that he was an open-minded person and eager to change. He had been teaching for twenty years, though. He shared his experiences, thoughts and beliefs; and he wanted me to share too. He said he wanted to learn new things from people like me, he accepted my project and liked it a

lot. During the teaching practicum, he was always in class. He said that he could learn more from me if he observed my classes. We talked before and after class about the lesson, we discussed problems and came to agreements, he suggested and gave advice, and after that he wrote everything down in my portfolio. My supervisor had to talk to him and asked him to leave me alone during the lesson I was in charge to teach, because he always wanted to be there. He helped a lot to control discipline. That group was very tough (drugs, alcohol, violence, sex abuse, intolerance). I learned a lot from him in this aspect. I only have one word to describe my relationship with my cooperating teacher: excellent. (Marina)

However, some trainees complained about the quality of this dialogue because their CTs were not successful at encouraging reflection around the trainee's performance. Trainees thought that the reasons for this dialogue failure were the scarce time CTs devoted to trainees and the fear some trainees showed to ask their CTs for more critical remarks about their performance.

At school, our cooperating teachers were very nice. Since our first visit,

they were very kind and expressed they were very glad to have trainees in their classes. I thought our relationship was going to be too formal and vertical: the experienced high-school English teacher and the fresh teacher; he was going to be a fault-finder and I was to do all he wanted me to do. On the contrary, he was friendly and gave me a lot of freedom. Before planning the project, he trusted me so much that I could plan whatever I wanted. He told me I was responsible and could manage classroom situations well. He accepted I could offer new things in terms of approaches, methodologies, techniques and materials. He was very collaborative when I had discipline problems. He saw discipline problems as a normal thing in any high school situation. He said that experience teaches to handle those kinds of problems, although experience is not enough. Regarding discipline and autonomy, I think he did a good job. However, there were other things I particularly did not like. He did not observe my classes very often; only once in a blue moon! Someone might think this is good because being observed by someone who is monitoring one's job disturbs and pushed the teacher to make mistakes. But I like

being observed, in order to improve and implement new things and profit from others points of view. Anyway, he did not go to my classes. I know he is a busy teacher with other concerns at school, but I still think he could have been in class at least 20 or 30 minutes a week. When he observed my classes, he gave me no critical feedback. For him everything went right, I did not have any difficulties. (Hugo)

The dialogue between the trainee and the supervisor was facilitated mainly through three means: seminar sessions, journals, and individual conferences. In the seminar sessions a group of trainees and their supervisor met regularly to share experiences lived in the practicum, and to discuss alternative ways to tackle the problems encountered. To find guidelines to solve these problems, the supervisor provided trainees with supporting literature to profit from what other people suggest. For example, to tackle the problem of using English for classroom management, Cristina suggested Willis (1985) and to design communicative tasks Nunan (1991). The trainees also kept a journal in which they described noteworthy events in their teaching practicum,



wrote comments and reflections made after each lesson or dialogue with the CT, and their doubts, fears, and concerns about the teaching practicum. The supervisor read this journal regularly and gave written feedback to the trainee. This feedback included questions to encourage reflection, suggested readings to find out a solution to the problems encountered, and stimulating comments for successful decisions or procedures. The supervisor and the trainee also had individual conferences. These were held whenever there were issues that trainees felt were too delicate or particular to be discussed during the seminar sessions. Trainees could share openly their concerns and the supervisor gave useful feedback.

The dialogue between supervisor and trainee was a fruitful source of reflection not only on the trainee's performance in the classroom, but also on how his/her role went beyond methods and techniques to learn a foreign language. Instead of teaching

just the language, trainees were preparing students for life. This represents one of the most important teachings from the practicum experience, as Angela reports:

Besides being English teachers, we became educators. We started to consider how to teach values like tolerance, honesty, and sharing through English. Thus, we were not just teaching teenagers a foreign language, but also educating them to become better human beings.

At the time we

started our teaching practicum, we wondered how to apply all the techniques and methods learned through several years of studies. This purpose encouraged our eagerness to find out the

"best" way to approach teenagers to learning English, which has always been an objective schools rarely achieve. We used all our creativity and devoted time and efforts on the design of the project. But the reality we faced during our teaching practice did not seem to let our dream come true. The students were not motivated, they did not want to learn English, and besides, we noticed a lack of collaboration and organization among school administrators and teachers. These circumstances made us feel disappointed to teach in high schools and many - if not all of us - suffered a big demotivation towards our future profession. But it was not until we realized - through the dia-

logue with our supervisor and cooperating teacher, and our own reflection - that these experiences at school went far beyond methods and techniques to learn a language that we changed our minds. Besides being English teachers, we became educators. We started to consider how to teach values like tolerance, honesty, and sharing through English. Thus, we were not just teaching teenagers a foreign language, but also educating them to become better human beings. (Angela)

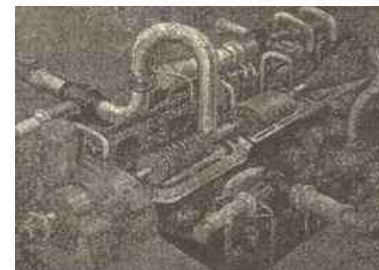
Littlejohn (1998) addresses this issue when he states that we should prepare

our students for the future. This implies teaching English while providing the students with significant and coherent content. Our class should also require them to draw upon their cognitive abilities, make decisions and help them gain wider culture understanding, for example, by comparing our values with those of other cultures.

Meetings between supervisor and CTs were not always easy to schedule since teachers are busy people and their collaboration in the practicum was something they did on top of all their other responsibilities. Besides time limitations, the supervisor also had to take into account the CTs' beliefs regarding teaching English. Sometimes their beliefs were in contradiction with the university's program (Hoover et

al, 1988). For example, some CTs believed that students have to learn first the basic grammar before they can start developing their reading skills. In order to do this, they use a book with a commu-

nicative approach, but focus their teaching on the grammar exercises. In some cases Cristina could promote open discussion around the topic of reading as communication and the possibility of learning grammar in the context of the reading activities rather than teaching it per se. At other times meetings were rather stilted because CTs and Cristina were unwilling to



Máquinas-Suspenseo (1983)
Lucy Tejada.



talk about these differences for fear the relationship might break down, or each one stated their point of view without really listening to each other. Besides meeting separately with CTs and with trainees, the supervisors also organized meetings with all trainees and CTs in each school. The first meeting was rather brief and had as its aim to introduce trainees and CTs to each other, talk about trainees' responsibilities, and organize their schedule at school. In the second meeting, which was held midway in the semester, the triad discussed trainees' ongoing progress and problems and established by consensus the criteria according to which their teaching performance would be assessed. These discussions were crucial in helping make implicit knowledge about what constitutes good teaching explicit. At the end of the semester the triad met in order to assess trainees' performance. First, each trainee self-assessed each aspect of his/her teaching. Second, the CT gave his/her opinion, and finally the supervisor proposed a grade which generally took into account everybody's points of view. There was one school, however, in which the supervisors had difficulty meeting with all CTs and trainees simul-

taneously. In this case, each triad met separately.

During Practicum II, trainees recorded their experiences in the minutes of the seminar sessions for which attendants took turns to register the discussion about the teaching practicum. Trainees also kept a portfolio with the written history of their teaching practicum. It included the practicum project, the lesson plans, tests and teaching materials used in classes such as readings, tasks, and games. In addition to this, the trainees had to provide a self-evaluative report of the teaching practicum, in which they analyzed the achievements and failures during the whole process. The trainees' journals and questionnaires administered to their students in order to monitor their performance were also included in the portfolio.

IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

As Fullan states "all *real* change involves loss, anxiety and struggle" (1991 his emphasis, cited by Murphy, 1996b:14). In our case, participants reacted to this innovative practicum in different ways. There was one school where the CT was very open-minded and helpful, but the principal did not show much interest in the trainees' projects. In another school, which

was part of the Programa de Mejoramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Básica, trainees were welcomed by the principal and academic coordinator.

Even though the CTs showed a positive attitude to trainees' and supervisor's ideas and suggestions, they were a little fearful of letting go control

of their courses and wanted trainees to follow the textbook as closely as possible. However, the rapport that was established in the triad and the trainees' performance was so good that the trainees' performance served as a basis for future cohorts. This school still receives trainees from the Licenciatura program, and CTs have become much more willing to try out trainees' ideas in their courses regarding ways to develop communicative classes and collaborative group work, for example. Our experience in this last school demonstrates that change should be implemented both top down and bottom up, since attitudes and beliefs are not altered by regulations. Using top-down and bottom-up strategies simultaneously guaran-

tees that all participants are involved, which is a prerequisite for effective innovation (Pacek, 1996). This school is a clear example of a 'learning organization', an organization where

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openly and fully with each." (Murphy, 1996b:19).

The difficulties we encountered in this first experience showed us how important effective communication is among members of the triad. Communication is crucial if we want to involve CTs and the school's administrative staff in the innovations we want to introduce through the practicum. Moreover, trainees, CTs and supervisors need to become aware of this and receive explicit training in social and communication skills in order to develop the positive relationships necessary for collaborative work.

Some CTs' poor involvement in the practicum may also have been due to the lack of incentives for them (Moon, 1994). We feel that providing CTs with some previous training on how



to supervise and offering them the possibility to attend courses at the university at no cost could increase their commitment with the teaching practicum. However, we feel that a more structured scheme, in which school teachers are given credit by educational authorities for their work as CTs, should be promoted. Improving the quality of basic education implies changing not only in-service teachers' beliefs and behavior but also pre-service courses. The supervisors have contributed with suggestions about curricular changes on the Licenciatura program based on their experience in schools. They have suggested, for example, including a more structured research component, restructuring courses to prepare trainees to work in difficult circumstances, introducing classroom observation in different local institutions from earlier semesters, and adjusting the Applied Linguistics strand to meet the needs of the schools. These suggestions have fed the discussions held among the staff and are very important for the curricular reform that is being planned.

CONCLUSIONS

We think that the practicum constitutes a learning context for all par-

ticipants. School teachers may learn more from their participation in the practicum than from taking formal courses. Discussions with trainees and supervisors help them become more articulate by making their tacit 'personal knowledge' explicit, and contribute to changing their beliefs and assumptions by facing them with non-routine circumstances (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978, cited by Hager, 1996). Trainees also gain from being immersed in "the complexity of actual workplace performance (which requires the integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and accumulated learning from experience" (Hager, 1996: 244). And last but not least, by being in touch with a wider range of teaching contexts university teachers are able to find out the strengths and weaknesses in their students' formal preparation prior to the practicum, and can promote curricular changes that will benefit all levels of education.

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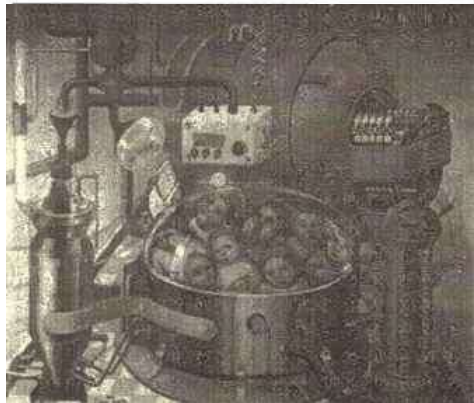


NOTAS SOBRE LAS AUTORAS

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1. This paper started as a presentation by the authors and Hugo Areiza - a trainee - of our experience with the practicum at the VIII ELT Conference in Medellín, Colombia. Since the authors held different roles - Cristina was a supervisor and Angela a trainee - and had varied experiences and perspectives, in order to maintain the individuality of the particular contributions they are formatted as quotes.



Máquinas -Burujas (1982)
Lucy Tejada

