Informal Learning in Early Teacher Development*
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Still in preparation - comments welcome)

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Abstract
In the context of increasing expansion of a competence-based model of teacher
development, the counter-balance of a more articulate description and explanation of
informal learning is urgently required. Our first use of the term in the context of
professional learning emerged from preliminary theorising on the experience of learning
to teach from the narrative data of beginners. It was invoked to describe learning that
seemed to take place outside the formal structures and prescriptions of policy-derived
practice. Informality was characterised through relationships with colleagues and
children; it was about feelings of acceptance and belonging. What was actually learned
was not at all explicit. We had little more than a vague notion of spaces and places and
people, but a clear indication nonetheless that it was crucially important.

This paper continues the search for a deeper understanding of informal learning by
developing a map of how it may be construed in the early development of teachers. It
begins to build on the findings made by six teachers working as ethnographers of
practice in their own schools. The paper examines the spaces, situations and
relationships within which learning occurs and the nature of that learning. It explores
the connections and tensions that exist between the informal acquisition of tacit
knowledge, problematic in itself, and the espoused formal process of reference to
competence-based standards.

The paper also addresses the definitional issue by taking account of recent attempts to
define informal learning in relation to formal learning. Clearly, it can have different
meanings in different areas and contexts e.g. lifelong learning, workplace learning,
organisational learning, learning in other professions. There are indeed examples of
learning in contexts where it is acknowledged that the support of a formal structure is
superior to more informal experiences, in learning a language, for example. A new
critique of competence is also advanced in which the case for concepts of collective and
holistic competence is made. Together with an appreciation of informal learning, we
attempt to illuminate and expand our understanding of what becoming competent means.
Central to our conclusions is the need to avoid a potential misconstrual of informal
learning as some kind of casual and incidental, peripheral process.

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Our first use of the term 'informal learning', in relation to current research on 'Early Professional Learning' (EPL), was as part of our preliminary theorising on the beginning teacher’s experience of learning to teach (McNally, Cope, Inglis and Stronach 1994; 1997). It emerged as a concept, from our interviews with student teachers and first year probationer teachers, for learning that took place outside the formal structures of schools, but also for a kind of learning within these structures. It was outside in the sense that serendipitous contact with school staff without a formal responsibility for the beginner could prove to be fruitful, and was also outside the school itself in (the form of?) support from peers, friends and family. It was within the school structures in the sense that line managers, departmental colleagues and scheduled meetings could provide useful support too, but often in a manner which could be described as informal - friendly even.

In another sense the term was a direct challenge to the presumptions and prescriptions of policy-derived practice, to the belief that these could actually deliver the support needed by the novice in school. It was clear to us that structured lesson observations, competence-based agendas and 'next steps' for development, for example, did not guarantee feelings of being supported - or indeed of developing. Such possible reference points were absent from some accounts of 'good' experiences and experienced as obstructive in others. Our concept of informality was not opposed to structure and order per se - indeed some beginners sorely needed that - but represented a balance against the over-reliance on formal arrangements as the major or exclusive means of supporting early professional development. The inherent danger for beginning teachers was that these would provide only a partial support and miss some of their important, unvoiced needs. The voice we heard spoke in emotional language about relationships. There was little to identify that was specific or precise about what was being 'learned' during or from these early experiences (though we looked for such learning and will still seek to find it in the EPL project). The stories speak for themselves of course but, in translating them for papers such as this, the main theme could be voiced in terms of a warm, welcoming culture with a clear sense of purpose in the midst of a friendly, supportive chaos of unpredictable interactions.

Nor does policy as published, on early teacher development, recognise the problematic nature of a theory-practice dialectic or that the transition from student to teacher may be intrinsically disruptive in a personal and a professional sense. There is an assumption that all can be 'managed'. Yet the 'learning' experience we witnessed was characterised by relationships with colleagues and children, by feelings of acceptance and belonging. What was actually learned was, to re-iterate, not at all explicit. Prevalent in the narrative data were contacts in staff rooms and school clubs, and conversations with a range of significant others, often ad hoc rather than pre-arranged. Informal
learning in the early experience of teaching was, therefore, little more, perhaps, than a vague notion of the crucial importance of spaces, places and people.

Our original cause was to get at a deeper understanding of what and how beginning teachers learned. Though we did not arrive at a well-defined resolution, it was evident that there was much more going on in the experience of becoming a teacher than was being caught by a formal or formulaic approach. The vague screen of 'informal learning' served to open up a much wider sense of what that learning might be. It was a tentative term that served its purpose as an initial conceptual base and we wondered whether it had perhaps run its course. Yet as we return to research the area of early professional learning (EPL), it is becoming more sophisticated. We know that much of what teachers know and do is tacit. Much of it is simply not 'seen' by an observer and may not even be consciously acquired by the beginner. This may explain why it eludes the researcher.

The literature in recent years has begun to define and distinguish between formal, informal and non-formal learning. Informal refers to the lifelong process in which people learn from everyday experience whereas non-formal is seen as the organized educational activity outside formal systems. Our use of 'informal' included both the everyday and the organised and was certainly consistent with the notion of 'informal education' as interactions with friends, family and work colleagues. Our particular description of the early learning of teachers does not readily belong to any of the categorisations stemming from attempts to circumscribe and define what is informal and what is not. What has happened, though, in this attempt to impose some clarity of definition, is an increasing recognition that crucial learning takes place in ways which would not be described as formal.

Eraut's (2000) typology of non-formal learning distinguishes between implicit, reactive and deliberative learning. His work has helped to elevate the informal or non-formal in learning above its misconstrual as some kind of casual and incidental, peripheral process. As we are not yet clear on what is actually being learned informally by new teachers, it is too early to know whether Eraut's theorisation about types of learning can illuminate our own understanding. However, the updated review of informal education by Smith (2003) does suggest features that would find support from our earlier data: the range of opportunities for learning that arise in everyday settings; the importance of relationships, people’s experiences and feelings; and probably the central form of conversation. His review also indicates that the informality has a purpose: running through it is 'a concern to build the sorts of communities and relationships in which people can be happy and fulfilled'. This does rather capture the implicit purpose of what we would mean so far by the informal learning of new teachers.
Informal learning may of course have different meanings in different areas and contexts e.g. lifelong learning, workplace learning, organisational learning, other professions. Although our use of the term emerged in grounded theory as a counterpoint to the formal, there was no implication of a generalisation, or a claim for parity of status across all learning contexts. For example, in learning a language it is acknowledged that the support of a formal structure is superior to more informal experiences. Learning craft skills is another example. It may be that what is being learned is an important consideration in the balance of formality. Are there learning cultures and contexts in which the informal and formal are complementary and others in which they are in competition?

The concept of informal learning, we would claim, should be a major part of the theoretical basis for research on the experience of becoming a teacher or learning to teach. It has been neglected in official policy statements and standards in favour of more formal structures, just as it appears to have been in narrow definitions of learning present in the literature on lifelong learning in general (Gorard et al, 1999), to the exclusion of the valuable learning that has always gone on outside formal programmes of instruction. Of course one has to resist polarising formal and informal (and non-formal) learning as somehow fundamentally distinct, or of claiming superiority of one over the other (Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm, 2003). Our use of 'informal' emerged from our grounded data as a provisional term to describe a strong though elusive dimension of an experience as a whole, but the main point is that there is now a weight of research evidence and practitioner opinion supporting a strong informal, social dimension in the experience of becoming a teacher, which is neglected in policy. If the argument from research is, therefore, that policy ought to accept the centrality of this finding, then a major question concerns the ways in which significant relationships and communities influence the early professional learning of teachers and how these can be used to develop a clearer map of informal learning in a professional social context.

The informal dimension of the new teacher’s experience is likely to be more intimately linked with the concept of relationships which our studies so far suggest is central to early professional learning. We found strong evidence that ‘affective engagement with colleagues and classes taught was of paramount importance’ in their experience (McNally et al, 1994). More recent evidence (Lohman, 2000) suggests that an environment which hinders such engagement actually serves as an inhibitor to informal learning. It is a claim that finds further support if we take a step back to philosophical fundamentals: friendship and the formation of human bonds (e.g. Almond 1988; White 1990) are universally important, especially in new situations where we are individually more vulnerable. There is also strong support in Eraut’s extensive study of informal learning in the workplace (2004), in which he argues that ‘relationships play a critical role in workplace learning’. We developed the grounded concept of ‘relational conditions’ – for example ‘letting go’, ‘dropping in’, ‘always there’, ‘one
of the team’ - as a way of explaining the socio-professional context within which individual beginners lived the text of their own development between extremes of ‘total abandonment’ and ‘rigidly controlled, stifling support’ (McNally et al, 1997).

Eraut also argues that the ‘emotional dimension of professional work is much more significant than normally recognised’, a claim which finds strong support for teaching from Hargreaves (1998), who sees the emotions of teaching as ‘not just a sentimental adornment...but...fundamental in and of themselves’. These constitute a strong affirmation of our own earlier findings. The first reports from our teacher-researchers (TRs) contain fresh examples:

The probationers’ day the week before school started was when reality set in and she felt nervous, very nervous. Apparently others felt the same. On the in service day at school she felt more relaxed but on the pupils’ first day she had never been so nervous in all her life. She couldn’t stop it and the more she worried the more nervous she felt. By Thursday the feeling of physical sickness had gone and being here began to feel like her job.

Over the summer she thought about her classes a lot. What if they are really bad? What if I can’t control them? What if I feel horrible about myself? Can I handle classes?

Ann described her first week as a “roller coaster” and “bizarre” experience...Already she feels torn between the good pupils and the more challenging one. She can see she’s spending more time with a minority in some classes. She has been waking up at 2 or 3 in the morning thinking about the quieter pupils she hasn’t spoken to.

The extreme feelings can clearly take the form of anxious anticipation, before the job has even started. This arises mainly from what defines the job - the pupils in the classes actually taught by the new teacher - and whether it is being done well enough. The answer tends to lie in how the same pupils respond, both in and out of class:

She has been pleased at the pupils’ response to her lessons and she liked being recognised by them in the corridors.

For some this defining experience is associated with a sense of whether they will be able to do the job. So far, any such doubts have been resolved within the first week or two:

After the first day she felt like not coming back and thought to her self “What have I done?” but the week got better and better.
After her first observed lesson [on a Thursday] during which four boys had dominated the class Ann felt "pretty disheartened about the whole thing". By the following week she wasn't so totally disheartened because she realised there were lots of strategies to try. She now felt she had most of the class with her ... as if it wasn't "brick wall" and if she could turn round two pupils it would be a good class and she would be happier.

For one beginner, the doubt was gone, so it appears, on the first day:

(My concerns were) mostly dispelled, a positive first day. The pupils responded well to my personal style, which includes humour! When I met my classes they were friendly and respectful and I was able to have a laugh with them without them taking advantage. Some try tried it on a bit to see how the 'new teacher' would react but they were left in no doubt that I was in charge and they accepted that.

The emotional nature of the starting phase stems from the concern about whether a working relationship can be established in the classroom. This concern is not exclusively about controlling pupil behaviour. It is a more complex question of acceptance by them as their teacher and 'being recognised' as such. Nor is the situation totally informal. There is a formal structure in which the experience takes place and which necessarily requires learning to happen: timetable of classes, meetings and lesson planning, for example. The formal - informal distinction may not even be helpful in understanding what is happening. What is clear is that the experience is largely affective in nature and that explicit examples of learning - other than learning that one is becoming accepted - are absent. It can be assumed that certain tasks, for example planning and preparation for classes, are being done to this end but they are almost taken as givens and are rarely mentioned:

Going up to the staffroom at interval and lunchtime was a double-edged situation. She knew it was a good way of getting to know people and hearing about what was going on but she also felt the need to be ready for her classes and there was planning to do.

However the environment in which the new teacher works is important. This tends to be expressed in social terms and features immediate departmental colleagues:

I had been nervous and not sleeping well. The PT had given me his home phone number so I called him on Monday night. He put me completely at ease. I felt he was friendly and supportive. I still didn't sleep well but felt more relaxed about my first day.
Great atmosphere in the school dept and classroom - one teacher has taken me under her wing and is very supportive. At the end of the day I was relaxed and very positive about the future.

One big help had been that the department were friendly and helpful.

Here there is an indication of informality. Giving out your home telephone number and taking someone under your wing are felt as important by the beginner. There is no implication that anything in particular is learned; yet that feeling of having support at hand is of enormous importance. We have discovered this natural mentoring in previous work (McNally, 1994, McNally et al, 1997) and can only agree with Eraut (2004) that ‘informal support from people on the spot’ when help is needed tends to be more important for learning than that from formally designated helpers or mentors. This unplanned support can take the form of simple reassurance and can be from outwith the subject department:

She had been out for lunch with another probationer and some of this probationer’s department. It had been reassuring when they had said that they hadn’t heard her voice carrying into the corridor. She had worried about how she could meet people on the staff when she worked in a two-person department.

Occasionally physical factors matter. In many cases it is important to have your own room. Any teacher knows how frustrating it can be to have to teach in several rooms and this is felt more acutely by new teachers who have as yet no local knowledge of resources and procedures. The absence of their own teaching space prevents them from organising the classroom in their way and so makes it more difficult to establish themselves as teachers in the eyes of the children they teach.

Linda felt that being a probationer was totally different from being a student. One reason was having her own classroom. Another probationer didn’t have her classroom, her own place and space and Linda appreciated hers. She could have the desks and room set out as she wanted. She had changed the desks moving the desks into groups not rows with two boys and two girls at each. She also felt the realisation that this was it for 5 days a week for the coming year. This gave some security. She can decide how to label boxes, put things on the wall.

This need may also depend to an extent on the subject taught and the teaching methods and organisational approach of the department, as it was less of an issue for one new teacher of drama:
I don't have my own classroom, which I thought might have been a bit of a problem, because I'm jumping between the two of them, but actually it's OK, it's fine. I've got the same amount of space, I suppose, as anyone else and I'm welcome to display my work as much as possible so I don't need to feel as if it is PTs or teachers' classroom at all. It's our classrooms which is nice actually rather than just feeling like a student again I suppose I am welcomed like just like one of the department, so that's really good, plenty of facilities, plenty of resources. I'm welcome to rake and rummage and to do anything I want at all. It's OK so far so good; a good start, definitely a good solid start, plenty of support from both of them without a doubt.

Differences in teaching context extend to different towns and schools as well. New teachers themselves are aware of this and of how it could affect their acceptance, adjusting their teaching accordingly:

Rachael noticed that the pupils here are less streetwise than in Dundee and she found this refreshing. She is already adapting her lessons plans because the pupils have a wider use of language than she had been used to. She also noticed their topics of conversation were different i.e. horses not clubs.

I was worried about understanding the pupils' accents and vice versa as I am from Glasgow

I'm coming in comparing this school to the last one I was in and apart from the state of the building there is absolutely nothing to gripe about with this school. It's well resourced, my department is anyway, the kids couldn't be nicer so far and there is just such a nice atmosphere around the school. It's just beyond comparison with my last place... I don't mind coming in in the mornings, which is a nice feeling. So yes it's a really nice school and I'm glad it's working out well for me so far.

There are systemic factors outside the school that can make a significant impact on the new teacher.

She felt awkward about sitting down somewhere in the staffroom though part of this feeling came from warnings given on the authority inservice day for probationers prior to school starting.

In one interview, the experience was a 'rant' about the inflexibility of the induction scheme: disbelief at getting fifth choice location out of five; despair at having no choice but to take the post offered; financial problems incurred due to travel; not being able to understand how the probationers are allocated
to positions; the hassle of arranging all the transport and how this added to her feeling of nerves for the first day:

*I was walking down the other day, it was 8 o'clock in the morning I thought I've already been up and like at it for 2 hours and I've not got even to work yet*.

Although the project is in the very early stages of qualitative data collection, there is still little revealed by beginners in any explicit cognitive terms about what and how they are learning. It is perhaps unfair, before we pursue this further in interviews, to give the only example of explicit so far:

*I witnessed an experienced teacher dictating absolutely everything to the pupils, which they later regurgitated. The pupils had a poor learning experience and although he got good results the pupils did not enjoy the experience. This strategy was used partly to keep pupils quiet and under control and partly because he was lazy. This is one role model I have no intention of emulating*.

In parallel with the emerging literature is the expansion of the competence-based model of teacher development (SOED, 1997, SEED/GTCS 2001?). While this is surely an additional imperative for the clearer articulation of informal learning, it is equally a call for a new critique of competence. While we have been part of the body of past critique (Stronach et al, 1994?), we have considered other ways of conceptualising competence in an organisation such as a school. The concept of collective competence (Boreham, 2004) in the workplace, with its constituent sense of interdependency, offers a balance to the notion of competence as an individual's responsibility for performance. The school is the organisation that is the workplace context in which individual beginners learn. We have found that there is a dynamic relationship in which individual beginners are dependent to varying degrees on colleagues and others but it may be that this is a reliance that decreases with time and experience. Is there a shift from 'maximum social relatedness' (Valsiner, 1994) to greater independence of individuals, as Billet (2002) found in his study of workplace learning? In this perspective at least, Eraut's (2004) distinction between personal and interpersonal learning may be conceptually useful.

There is also a sense of a holistic competence that was apparent from talks about new teachers' competence with headteachers (McNally, 2001). This suggests a recognition and a warrant of professional informality and could illuminate and expand our understanding of what becoming competent (or meeting a benchmark) means in actual practice. The present standards for ITE and SFR in Scotland, for example, may well be received by practitioners and used in meaningful ways but, even if they are, we have as yet no theoretical sense of them. At this early stage of the project there is no reference to any
of the specific competences within the official standard. Yet we hope to
discover whether some are more important, more difficult, more stage-critical,
for example, and whether their acquisition or embodiment may be dependent on
professional informality?

Finally, the narrative data of our earlier research suggested that the strong
socio-emotional nature of the transition to teacherhood might actually conceal
subtler insights into the learning of beginners. Glimpses of 'theory' from their
programme of initial teacher education (ITE) appeared in their narratives, a
finding further explored by Drever and Cope (1999), who concluded that theory
use such as this is highly context-dependent and is explanatory rather than
predictive. It is all too easy to dismiss the more theoretical elements of higher
education in ITE. Empirical evidence is sparse and tends to reveal a prevalence
of practice-based knowledge in student accounts of their learning experience.
Yet it does seem that there is an elusive 'theory' component in early teaching
development and performance that our research should be sensitive to.

Conclusion

1) From both our own research and the literature, the main features
of the informal learning experience for new teachers appear to lie in
the needs, environment and conditions which constitute a context for
learning - even though what is being learned is not clear. In a word, IL is:

   Relational    Friendly    Spontaneous    Conversational    Affective    Empathic

2) Some unresolved questions:

   • What is being learned about teaching?

   • Is the experience dominated by a professional/personal belonging and
     the development of a professional/personal identity?

   • What kind of learning is taking place? (personal - interpersonal - situated
     - embedding etc.)

   • What situations facilitate and nurture this learning?

   • What do new teachers actually become competent at - and how?

   • Do different contexts produce or require different learning /
     competences / identities?
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