Building reflective relationships for and through the creation of educational knowledge

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Abstract

This project was initially aimed at establishing whether PGCE students on a primary programme can reflect more deeply during post-lesson dialogue with mentors whilst being assessed on school placement. Action research is the chosen methodology where the process of collecting evidence is analysed through a practitioner enquiry approach. Data has been gathered through various methods including personal diary entries, observations and interviews of students, discussions and meetings with colleagues. Findings do not answer the main question as the study is still in the reconnaissance phase. However, the findings do illuminate key issues that need addressing before the next phase of the research begins. This includes a review of the current PGCE primary curriculum, further scaffolding tools for students whilst on placement, and a more critical awareness of one's self as a reflective practitioner and the various roles one plays as Programme Leader of a PGCE programme.

Introduction

In 2005 the university in this study formed a working party to address a government-led shift to ensure that Post Graduate Certificate Education (PGCE) programmes incorporated Masters Level credits in addition to the traditional credits at Level Three. The primary PGCE route into teaching is established as a popular choice at this university for graduates from a range of backgrounds (evidenced by the ratio of applications to places which continues to stand at 4:1). The working party was tasked to ensure that the wide and diverse range of students would be catered for in the newly enhanced programmes.

During 2005 to 2007, both the secondary and primary PGCE programmes at the university were subjected to the revalidation process. The working party consisted of colleagues from the Education department in a range of roles. One of the key aims of the resultant programmes that demonstrated the shared values of the working party was, "To foster an enquiry-based approach to professional learning and the development of pedagogical awareness, subject knowledge and teaching skills." (York St John, 2007). This was considered imperative so that students on the programmes would develop a sense of enquiry and questioning that is integral to the reflective nature of educational practice. The revalidation presented a range of development opportunities for the team, including the contemprosising and enhancement of the programmes through the collaboration of new Heads of Programme with more long standing, experienced colleagues.

One of the essential qualities which the students are expected to demonstrate in becoming teachers includes that of reflection (Schön (1991), Furlong and Maynard (1995), Tomlinson (1995), Pollard (2005)). Since 1992, students have to meet government prescribed competence-based Standards in order to be recommended for qualified teacher status (QTS). One of the 2007 revised Standards (Training and Development Agency (TDA)) that students must meet is that where they 'reflect on and improve their practice, and take responsibility for identifying and meeting their early developing professional needs.' (TDA, 2007). This would seem to suggest that students are required to take responsibility for their own learning. Autonomy and self-direction of one's own learning are discussed by Faure (1972) and Boud (1981) who believe that these are preferable to traditional education which 'has been based on the premise that the central purpose is to produce knowledgeable persons' (Boud, 1981:4). Webb (2006) argues that 'the stranglehold of accountability insisted upon by the Labour government in recent years has reduced the potential for teacher creativity' and possibly a return to the delivery of what Boud (1981) calls traditional education. This has arguably resulted in students entering higher education having experienced learning in a passive or non-active way. Boud continues:

"...most people seeking higher education have learned only the skills of learning by being taught. They do not know how to diagnose their own needs for learning, for formulating their own learning objectives, identifying a variety of learning resources and planning strategies for taking the initiative in using those resources, assessing their own learning, and having their assessments validated." (1981:5)

Nearly twenty five years later, Jones et al (2005) suggest that the autonomy of the teaching profession continues to be threatened. So, are learners in higher education still expecting to be ‘taught'?
The move to school-based training

Prior to government intervention in teacher education pre 1990, students learnt to become teachers through study at institutions of higher education. Since the early 1990s, governments decided that there should also be an element of school-based training. This has been widely supported by students at the start of their QTS programmes: 84% of respondents were looking forward to ‘being in classrooms and interacting with pupils’ (Hobson & Malderez, 2005). This apprenticeship model has been adopted more fully through other routes solely based in schools, such as the Graduate Teacher Programme and school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT). The PGCE primary (full time) programme at this university, which takes 38 weeks to complete within one academic year, includes 97 days spent in school-based activities and assessed placements (the minimum set by the TDA is 90 days). This represents just over 50% of the programme overall. These two elements of the programme, one in school and one in university, must complement each other to facilitate students so that they can consistently and continually develop their skills in becoming a teacher. It is therefore essential that this partnership must share a clear understanding of how this is to be achieved.

The challenge at this university was how to enable students to follow an enquiry-based approach in order to meet the key programme aim. The university-based element is regularly reviewed through internal quality assurance procedures, which includes gathering feedback from students and tutors on individual modules. There was some recognition that the taught programme was ‘heavy’ in terms of input and repetitive of content at times. Tutors were therefore beginning to review the delivery and content of modules, which is an integral part of the development of the programme.

The real challenge was how to enable an enquiry-based approach during the time the students spent on placement. Support for students during school-based placements is predominantly through the mentorship role of an identified key member of the teaching staff. The role of the mentor can be uncertain and vague at times (Jones et al, 2005). Students at this university have reported inconsistencies in the level and type of support they received from schools and individual mentors. This experience was evidenced through school placement evaluations and academic tutorials.

My interest lay in exploring whether PGCE primary students could take more responsibility for their learning during time spent in school. Lofthouse and Wright (2007) have trialled the use of questioning as one way of engaging students in post-lesson discussions with mentors on a secondary PGCE programme. The role of the mentor on secondary programmes is very different to that on primary programmes. Secondary mentors are expected to spend significantly more time creating and building relationships with students compared to primary programmes. Mentors in primary schools can sometimes be involved in a sporadic way where they might only observe up to six lessons across a placement and conduct a short feedback session afterwards. The onus tends to be more on the class teacher to foster an effective working relationship with the student, as they spend more time with the student. Rice (2007) found that there are various factors which affect the behaviour of mentors, including context of the school, relationships with students and other staff, the time available to undertake their responsibilities and their own understanding of how students learn. This could possibly result in inconsistent practice and varying experiences for students. If students could be empowered to take the lead and be more proactive during the times they are in contact with mentors, this may facilitate their own reflective skills and enable them to be more responsible for their own learning.

Literature review

I was inspired to carry out this research through observations I had made of students and mentors in my Link Tutor role. The university expectation of a mentor is that of ‘an experienced teacher who will take major responsibility for the student during the school experience’ (York St John, 2006). Rice (2007) explains that the role of the mentor must be defined by the university or institution as the TDA does not offer a precise definition of the role.

The mentor role is clearly one with many administrative duties. Mentors are expected to ‘conduct appraisals of trainees using the approved framework and give oral and written feedback to the trainees including targets for improvement’ (York St John, 2006). It is interesting to observe the choice of language used, in that this statement seems to imply that the feedback process is done to the student by the mentor by using the verb ‘give’. It could be argued that hidden values in documentation may have some influence in behaviour and the resulting perceptions of the role of the mentor. The appraisal process involves the mentor observing the student teaching, then completing a lesson appraisal form to evidence performance, and ending with a feedback session after the lesson has ended. Mentors are required to complete a two day Foundation Training course within the university before they can act as a mentor. Mentors are expected to attend a refresher course three years later.
As Link Tutor, I make visits to schools to monitor the practice of the mentors for quality assurance purposes. I conduct shared appraisals with mentors where agreement is reached on decisions of judgement regarding the student. I also observe the feedback session following the lesson. During visits, I observed that mentors generally began the feedback with the question: ‘So how do you think the lesson went?’ which was then followed with their opinions of what they had noticed. Analysing the balance between mentor and student talk, it seemed that the mentors tended to dominate the session and the student’s role tended to be that of a passive ‘head-nodder’. In the mentor Foundation Training, mentors are introduced to some models of feedback, including the ‘sandwich’ model of ‘good points first, bad points then ways to improve’. Hobson & Malderez (2005) surmise that this model restricts the way in which a student can learn from their own practice. This may be because the students are not fully involved in the discussion as learners. After speaking to students, they displayed some dissatisfaction as they felt they had little opportunity to ask questions or influence the conversation towards key aspects of their practice. This highlighted that they would have liked to have had more opportunity to engage in professional dialogue with the mentor.

It is acknowledged that this data is limited and does not illustrate a wider perspective of mentor behaviour. Nevertheless, I felt dissatisfied with the ways in which some PGCE students were unable to contribute more fully to these discussions, as I agree with Boud (1981) that for effective learning to take place, the learner needs to be actively involved.

It became apparent during informal discussions and scheduled team meetings involving tutors teaching on the academic aspect of the PGCE programme, that there was some concern surrounding the ‘fullness’ of the programme. Tutors felt that the instructional design of the programme tended to focus on delivery of information: cramming every possible piece of research and teaching tips into sessions. Comments from individual students in module evaluations suggested that they did not enjoy, nor see the benefit of ‘sitting through a PowerPoint presentation when I can read it in my own time’. Palmer (2002) suggests that students involved in Masters programmes have different needs, experiences and abilities to that of undergraduates. This was the rationale for reviewing the changes to the curriculum and also for realising the aim of an enquiry-based approach. There seemed to be insufficient opportunities for active engagement on behalf of the learners in the way that taught sessions were delivered. Possible reasons for this may be due to the competence-based agenda for initial teacher training as set out by the government since the early 1990s (Rice, 2007, McPhee, 2002). Teaching has arguably become a standards-driven profession regulated by OfSTED, which has resulted in a teaching workforce forced into compliance through the structures presented by a raft of government initiatives. Tutors, similarly, may feel a pressurised professional accountability of the need to alert students to the ever-changing climate of primary education. This may have resulted in a less reflective approach towards their own practice and a sub-conscious return to traditional education. It may be argued that they are unaware of the hidden messages displayed through their own model of teaching. Indeed, Hobson & Malderez (2005) found that just under 50% of case study students felt that teaching methods in higher education institutions were not always appropriate: “students were expected to be knowledge-receivers rather than participate as active learners.” This is an issue for the ITE department at this university and possibly others.

As Hutchings (2006) states, enquiry-based learning is a term that describes any process of learning through enquiry. Enquiry by its very nature involves investigation through the asking of questions. If a learner can ask questions, it could be suggested that this would involve active participation, leading to a deeper level of understanding, as Stoner (2005) suggests:

‘... students who learn to ask significant questions and then pose answers to them move toward intellectual autonomy. They are freed from having to wait for someone else to set their learning agenda.’ (2005:12)

Not only, then, could students ask questions of their own practice, but they could also attempt to find the answers to these. The role of the mentor would need to be considered as that of a facilitator, or coach, rather than an experienced teacher who already has firm ideas about what is good learning and teaching. Might this result in a move away from ‘traditional mentoring’?

Higgs (1988) states that autonomous learning is characterised by independence and active decision making in learning activities, where the teacher is used as a resource. This is what is intended for the students in the PGCE programme. The programme aims for them to leave the course and enter the teaching profession as confident, independent and reflective learners, in agreement with Knowles (1984) who believes that adults need to be involved in the self-direction of their learning. Boud (1981) issues caution again, in that there is a difference in how students have experienced learning and teaching and the skills they bring to their own learning situation.

**Learning to become a teacher and mentoring**
Teaching has been described as a ‘messy’ activity (Tomlinson, 1995) involving lots of things going on at the same time. The demands of it as an activity are complex and often require teachers to ‘think on their feet’. Thus there is a sense of having to cope with the day to day situations involving managing a group of learners. The stages of learning to become a teacher (Calderhead, 1987, Guillaume and Rudney, 1993) suggest there is a linear process by which students develop as teachers, although Furlong and Maynard (1995) point out that it is not as straightforward as this. Tomlinson (1995) outlines overlapping phases that students experience during the acquisition of teaching skills: the cognitive phase involves becoming clear about what there is to do; the associative phase focuses on what works and what doesn’t and ‘getting it all together’; the final phase relates to autonomy, where things become easier. I was interested in identifying whether this understanding of how students learn was applicable to PGCE students.

Since the 1980s, reflective practice has been seen as an important element in the skills and qualities of teachers if they are to meet the diverse needs of pupils in their classes (Pedro, 2005). Pollard (2005) believes that reflection is a skill that is better realised towards the end of a students’ programme (within Tomlinson’s (1995) autonomous phase) and certainly more evident in their early career as a qualified teacher. Dewey (1997) might support this as he outlines the difficulty of learning to reflect:

“Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance.” (1997:13)

This skill of reflective thinking is arguably one that is essential for improving practice but may depend on an individual's personal confidence level.

However, if we recall Palmer (2002,) who identifies that Masters Level students have different needs, we could then question Pollard’s assumption of student teachers and their ability to reflect later rather than at the start of their programme. There is a paucity of literature surrounding how Masters students learn but it could be argued that they may bring prior experience, resulting in more of a readiness to learn for a purpose. Knowles (1984) describes this as andragogy, also concerned with self-direction.

As mentioned above, student confidence may need to be considered as part of this research. Hobson & Malderez (2005) identified four key themes they believe are central to the experience of becoming a teacher: relationships, identity, relevance and emotion. It could be argued that confidence may affect all of these themes and possibly the behaviour of students. Could it be assumed that PGCE students are more confident than undergraduate students, and is this what Palmer (2002) means?

Methodology

The study lends itself to an action research methodology. Action research is about change (McNiff, 2002) and can occur at micro level (Denscombe, 2007). Lewin (1946) first introduced the phrase ‘action research’ meaning the ‘process through which theory building and research on practical problems should be combined’ (Gray, 2009). Action research is a problem-solving activity that can lead to further questions as you continue through a spiral reflective process. This spiral involves planning, acting, observing, reflecting (Lewin, 1946) and then re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting (Cohen et al, 2000). Whitehead & McNiff (2006) see action research beginning with a concern, rather than a problem, as they emphasise the self as a central part of the process. The ‘concern’ I had related to maximising the potential for student learning whilst on placement: it did not appear to be a ‘problem’ as such. Although a hypothesis can drive action research, Koshy (2005) believes that the process of enquiry is just as important as the outcomes. This implies that the researcher has no choice but to reflect on themselves as part of the process.

Action research should start with a plan (Mumford, 2001). Whitehead & McNiff (2006) see a plan as more of a guide that can be followed but altered as the cycle of action research continues. I intended to work with a small sample of no more than ten primary PGCE students during their two assessed school placements. The placements occur at specific times in the year: a five week placement from January to February and a seven week placement from May to July. There is no flexibility with these timings because of institutional constraints and so a plan was important (Appendix 6). The model which the plan was based is taken from Elliott (1991) and is based on Lewin’s model of action research as interpreted by Kemmis (1980). As a novice researcher unfamiliar with action research as a methodology, this model seemed easier to understand and to apply to my area of concern. The ‘general idea’ or hypothesis was fixed in advance and refers to the situation I wished to improve: that of enabling PGCE students to be more involved in reflection. It was felt that the situation could be improved through the collaboration with others. Elliott (1991) suggests caution, however, as the general idea may
misdunderstand the real root of the problem, but through more information and data, further light may be shed on the situation.

Semi-structured interviews of students would be carried out and preferred to questionnaires as an interviewer can "follow up ideas, probe questions and investigate motives and feelings." (Bell, 1999). Detailed qualitative data could be collected from individual students. The advantage of conducting interviews may allow further light to be shed on any observations that had previously been made. Time for interviews would need to be factored in at various points in the study. The open and positive relationships I perceived I had already established with the students were not expected to be a barrier to successful interviews.

Findings

The main findings of the study are discussed briefly in this section. They do not address the original hypothesis but shed light on several issues not previously considered. These include:

- an overloaded curriculum for both students and tutors
- documentation focused more on administration for schools rather than provide support for students in understanding how they learnt to become teachers
- a lack of clear understanding of the expectations of where students might be in the stages of becoming a teacher, by students, tutors and possibly mentors
- a greater awareness of myself as a reflective practitioner and the varying roles I hold within my current position in higher education

The study was introduced to the new cohort of students during a briefing meeting about their imminent first school placement. This was found to be an inappropriate time to introduce the study as the students were more concerned with their preparation for the first visit to the placement school. As a result, seven students signed up with an interest in finding out more about the study. This may suggest evidence to confirm what Tomlinson (1995) describes as the cognitive phase of learning to become a teacher. Calderhead (1987) suggests the first phase is also about 'fitting in' and the second phase as 'passing the test'. If we view the imminent school placement as the second phase of passing the test, then this may explain that the students were prioritising their actions relating specifically to the placement. They may have seen this as being more important, therefore reflecting different values to that of mine. It is unclear whether this is the real reason, as there is insufficient evidence but it does raise a question for a reconnaissance stage of the action research cycle.

Six out of the seven students who signed up attended the meeting. After the first meeting, two of the six remaining students also emailed to withdraw from the study. Reasons given were associated with feelings of not being able to commit the time and preferring to prioritise 'getting through the placement'. This could be due to the already perceived 'fullness' of the taught aspect of the programme, as had already been identified by tutors through evaluations of the programme, as well as identifying with Tomlinson's (1995) cognitive phase. However, there may be other factors that need consideration.

Upon analysis, it was disappointing that only 5% of the cohort of students signed up and that only four who were interested felt they were prepared to continue. Reflecting on my practice indicated an ontological perspective I had not been fully aware of. My actions and thoughts reflected that of an outsider research viewpoint where I had naively assumed that the students would share my own values. I believed my research would be of benefit and interest to them because I thought so, and presumed the students would also see this. This may have been my assumption because of the role in which I saw myself: as Head of Programme who was responsible for the quality of the curriculum. I had presented to them a hypothesis that I expected them to learn in a deeper way during the study. The statement I made in the first meeting may have reflected hidden values that I myself was unaware of at the time. This may have legitimately raised the students' personal concern as to what may be the implications of not being able to evidence this hypothesis. This personal accountability may have been one reason for the withdrawal of two students, although this is a mere assumption, rather than a fact based on evidence.

Extracts from interviews with the two remaining students in the study

Student A had begun the placement with a self-perceived confidence and had not anticipated difficulties with managing the class. She did, however, have difficulties with her relationship with the mentor. Student A suggested that the reason for this was because the mentor had a heavy workload already within the school. It was also suggested that the mentor had too high an expectation of her as a student. When questioned about her
perceptions of the mentor role, Student A said she felt she had expected more guidance from the mentor about what she should be doing in order to make progress. Comparing these comments to her first perceptions of a mentor (November workshop), it would appear that these remain unchanged. She had listed attributes such as guide, role model, advisor and tutor. Tentative conclusions may be drawn here that the relationship was seen as difficult because the values of Student A were not shared through the behaviours of the mentor. When asked whether she had felt able to tackle the issue, Student A said that she felt ‘unqualified to argue with the mentor’. This comment suggests several issues. Confidence may be important when students compare themselves with experienced teachers. Student A may have felt that the situation would be confrontational rather than an open dialogue where concerns could be shared. This may have been due to the restricted time that the mentor seemed to have but this can only be surmised as it is on the basis of the student viewpoint only.

It emerged that the documentation for school placement, which is the same for both students and schools, is not seen by students as a tool to help them evaluate or reflect. The information presented in the Handbook is useful from an administration viewpoint towards supporting schools rather than supporting students in their evaluation and reflection. Student A did not consider using it to help focus her thoughts and actions.

Student B had recorded two discussions with the mentor. When questioned, Student B suggested that because she had settled into the placement, she had made good relationships with the mentor and felt more at ease and confident during the second recording. However, her actions did not evidence this confidence: she had not increased her participation although this was something she perceived she had done. This may be because she had been confident and remembered her perceived actions, rather than basing them on the evidence on the recorder. With further questioning to ascertain what might have helped her participate more, she suggested that she did not feel she could identify her own starting point for discussion after analysing the recording. One might suggest that this is because there were insufficient workshops prior to the placement, and possibly because she had only attended the second of the two. When asked whether she could have used the appraisal form as a starting point, she replied that ‘it was a scary form and there is too much to think about all at once’. This would concur with similar comments that Student A had made in the previous session, in that documentation was not ‘student-friendly’. Indeed, the appraisal form was written with the main purpose of providing an assessment framework for mentors.

Student B summarised by saying that in her opinion and for herself as a learner, it was important to have opportunities for talk. She said that students did this outside of lectures but did not do as much in lectures. When questioned why, the response was that tutors did not include opportunities for talk, although she appreciated that ‘there is a lot to get through in the programme and you have a lot to learn’. This would concur with similar feelings from tutorials which were raised at the start of this study; that the programme was too full and there was insufficient time for flexible or enquiry-based learning. It may also be an indication that Student B was more aware of how she learnt effectively: she further commented that the workshops had been helpful as she had been able to articulate more of her thoughts in a supportive environment. She felt, as a result of this, that she had gained in confidence because she had been able to think through and discuss her feelings and actions. She said, however, that during discussions with the mentor, she did not want to appear stupid by asking lots of questions. This seems to indicate that there continue to be issues of confidence in professional relationships with teachers in schools and may relate to Calderhead’s (1987) ‘passing the test’ stage.

Through critical discussions with colleagues, I have developed a more reflexive and structured approach to evaluating my actions. Through conducting this action research study, an important finding has been that of an improved understanding of myself as a reflective and reflexive practitioner. I believe that my ontological perspective has altered in a way that is beginning to allow me to realise the practice of my values (Whitehead, 1989). Although I feel there are still many uncertain issues relating to myself and my role as Head of Programme and researcher, I feel I am beginning to become more aware of these roles. Because of this heightened awareness, I know that I sometimes contradict my values and this causes frustration. Questions I ask of myself are: how can I work with my students as a learner and co-researcher when I am also responsible as Head of Programme? Can, and should, students share my own values with those they have of their own lives? These questions are difficult for me to answer at present and tools or monitoring strategies to help me judge myself through this practitioner enquiry process may prove to be useful.

Implications

The taught curriculum

During the last twelve months of this study, the ongoing monitoring of the action research process has been shared in programme team meetings with tutors. Tutors have agreed that they not always considered what is effective learning
for the students, on both postgraduate and undergraduate programmes. This shared realisation has instigated tutors to scrutinise and evaluate their models of delivery. Aspects of the programmes have therefore recently undergone considerable development; modules had been regrouped, teaching styles and delivery reviewed and more ‘space’ built into the timetable to encourage students to think for themselves. The professional modules in the PGCE programme have become less content-driven and been organised in a more flexible format. Although tutors express a nervous caution towards sessions not having a prescribed content, there is also a sense of excitement and renewed invigoration for learning. This has been an unanticipated yet vital shift of change for the programme. It is yet to be evaluated on its effectiveness by the next cohort of students, and therefore careful monitoring and evaluation will be essential. This will form part of the renewed action research cycle. Tutors on subject-based modules in the programme are also beginning to question their practice and seek to identify more effective opportunities to support student learning.

This has been possible because the vision of the original working party is shared in the values of colleagues in the ITE section. It has been realised in practice through positive collaboration with others. As manager and Head of Programme, I have led the team and developed our values in the way I have interacted with others, through the values of achievement and benevolence. This is a role I feel I have succeeded in and one which I need to continue to evaluate to identify the criteria for success. If these criteria can be transferred to relationships I have with students and school-based colleagues, this may help in understanding my practice.

**Documentation**

Current documentation supports schools in the delivery of administration of school placements. Students do not see this documentation in providing support for themselves whilst on placement. Students have commented that often they feel ‘on their own’ when faced with difficulties. It is suggested that a more structured set of ‘tools’ may be provided for students. This may include a student handbook for learning whilst on placement, with learning journals, mind maps and other pro formas that they could choose to record their reflections and evaluations on becoming a teacher. Tutors responsible for leading school placements will be invited to form a working party to develop this. The involvement of academic tutors may also prove important as they are a critical friend to help guide the students in increasing their understanding of themselves.

An issue that arose following the interviews of Student A and Student B that was identified was concerned with understanding how students learn during the programme. It was felt that tutors and also mentors are not clear about what they expect to see of students at certain points. This relates to the stages of learning to become a teacher as outlined by Calderhead (1987), Tomlinson (1995) and Fuller and Bown (1975). Fuller and Bown see three phases: survival, mastery and impact. At this stage of the action research study, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether students can reflect at earlier stages in their development as teachers. However, with a clearer understanding of the PGCE programme, a further reconnaissance stage can be planned. In collaboration with a colleague, we have drawn up a ‘continuum of learning’ based partially on Fuller and Bown (1975)’s framework but specifically related to the 38 week PGCE programme. Several strands encompass the ‘wholeness’ as we see it of learning to become a teacher and also the skills and experiences that Masters students bring to the programme. These are understanding teaching, understanding learning, personal skills and personal focus. Although this is still in draft form, it is intended to be shared with colleagues in both university and schools. This may enable professionals involved in supporting students to have a clearer understanding of the complexities of learning to become a teacher. More importantly, it is intended to be used as a tool for the students to analyse their own strengths and areas for development. It will form an ongoing dialogue with their academic tutor and potentially be evidence of meeting QTS Standard Q7: reflect on and improve their practice, and take responsibility for identifying and meeting their early developing professional needs (TDA, 2007).

This study has brought about change at a local level. It may be of interest to others in similar institutions. At an ITE conference recently, when outlining a summary of the changes being made to the PGCE programme at this university, colleagues expressed disbelief: “You mean, everyone was on board with your suggestions?” If evidence-informed practice can enable colleagues to challenge their own practice, then this study has been successful so far.

This framework of a continuum for learning on the PGCE programme may also be adapted and used as a starting point to evaluate others’ professional practice. In the many roles I undertake within higher education, there are strands that I can identify: Head of Programme, researcher, personal values. I feel I am more successful as Head of Programme than researcher and could locate myself at different points within each strand. This could be a helpful supporting tool for both experienced and new tutors in higher education.

This study has been an unplanned feasibility study that has supported my own personal improvement as a reflective practitioner. The original hypothesis, of whether students can reflect more deeply through feedback...
sessions with mentors, remains unproven at this present time, although an adaptation of the action research plan will continue to ask questions in order to bring about change and improvement of my practice and that of others.

My personal values lacked alignment with my actions at the start of this study: I did believe in certain values and thought I was living in harmony with these, but as a result of monitoring my behaviour and that of others, I have come to realise that is it not as straightforward as I thought. This might be suggested as a living theory (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). I have more questions as a result of this process, mainly concerning the relationships I wish build with students in the next cohort. I feel there is a dichotomy in being a leader of a programme and being a learner alongside students. Normative assumptions may be held by the students that have remained ignored and unchallenged at this present moment in time. The difficulty lies with the creation of an open-mindedness of both students and tutors on the programme. This is something that is not a challenge for me as an individual seeking to work more closely with the students but for the team across the programme. The taught sessions within the university element are beginning to be timetabled more flexibly, tutors are excited by the challenge of moving towards a reflexive approach to the curriculum and they are evaluating their own practice in a more overt manner. The real challenge remains, as stated at the beginning of this study, of working alongside students and school-based colleagues in order to realise a truly enquiry-based approach in learning to become a teacher.

References


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