"I'm finding it really difficult to teach that way": enabling teachers to implement independent learning
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**Review of Literature**

Teacher training institutions and schools seek to develop trainee and qualified teacher practice in order that effective teaching methods are employed, policy disseminated, new initiatives integrated, and pupils’ access to learning improved. This development may be approached through a range of training procedures - direct instruction, modelling, appraisal, self-evaluation, and so on – yet studies (Denscombe, 1982; Kennedy, 1997; Wells, 1999; Long, 2004; Dow, 2006) suggest that barriers exist that may prevent the targeted practitioners from effectively shifting practice. These barriers to shifting practice seem to fall into a number of distinct but interlinked categories.

Dow, in a study of science and technology teaching across Europe, notes that “the main barrier” to the introduction of “more effective and attractive teaching methods... was the reluctance of teachers at all levels to adopt and implement policy changes” (2006, pp.310-11). Significantly, this reluctance is not the preserve of the experienced teacher whose practice might have become embedded. Dow argues that it would be “optimistic” to assume that a new generation of “more energetic, motivated and dynamic” teachers will naturally shift to a more effective pedagogy (2006, p.312). It might be argued that this reluctance sits at a conscious level, where practitioners, for whatever reason, passively lack the drive to shift or actively refuse to do so.

One reason driving such reluctance might be the teacher’s belief that their own experience in a specific class provides the most accurate evidence for what effective teaching consists of. This chimes with Denscombe’s notion of a “hidden pedagogy”, in which classroom experience outweighs the content of teacher training programmes in terms of impact on newly qualified teacher practice (1982). The hidden pedagogy cannot simply be ignored because, as Denscombe argues, “trainees are already imbued with it...the moment they arrive back in school they are once more immersed in it” (1982, p.262). In this context, efforts to improve practice might be seen as at best impracticable, at worst ill-informed and irrelevant.

However, the roots of this reluctance may lie in prior experience that has sunk to an unconscious level. Kennedy, drawing on the notion that “teachers teach as they were taught” (1997, p.7), suggests that teachers, even where they are conscious of the differences between how they were taught and how they might choose to teach, base “their visions of their own practice...on an assumption that teaching and learning occur roughly as they always have in schools” (1997, p.8). A process akin to assimilation may occur: “all teaching materials and activities are necessarily interpreted by teachers in light of their prior conceptions of what teachers and students are supposed to do in classrooms”. The consequence might be that teachers’ “adaptations of educational innovations ultimately trivialize the content that is taught through these new devices” (1997, pp.11-12). So, for example, whilst a belief in the central role of participation in effective learning (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) might be shared by teacher and trainer, the transmission model might resurface and become the predominant teaching characteristic after a prescribed period of trial had elapsed.

Undoubtedly institutional factors may also directly block shift or may persuade practitioners that change is untenable. Pressures on schools to achieve target levels will filter down to individual teachers who may consequently shy away from innovative change or child-centred practice. Wells acknowledges this tension between the philosophy a teacher may hold and the perceptions the same teacher holds of external requirements (1999). Indeed, Wells notes that even where innovatory practice is adopted by individual teachers, institutions may be unsupportive, and this institutional reluctance to move from the status quo is echoed by Long (2004).

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<th>Barriers to change</th>
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<td>Individual</td>
<td>Reluctance to shift (Dow, 2006)</td>
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Dow presents a pessimistic view of the barriers facing innovation in teaching practice: “Through immersion in the existing system, today’s potential innovators simply become tomorrow’s subvertors of innovation and the whole cycle of resistance to change continues. As the older workforce retires, it is simply replaced by those who have become converts to the traditional transmission methods they have encountered during the early stages of their careers” (Dow, 2006, p.213).

But how might shift be approached in a way that might have an effective long-term impact? One of the factors that seems key is the way in which pupil performance is measured and how this relates to accountability. Dow argues that while assessment focuses “on performance and the reproduction of previously learned facts, the transmission model would prevail” (2006, p.313). Dow is referring to teaching and learning in science and technology, but similar concerns may be prevalent in other subject areas. Furthermore, if trainers also assume a research role, seeking to explore the impact of their own work with students and teachers by discussing achievement with pupils, this in turn may be perceived as a further level of accountability to be addressed by the developing teacher: rather than encouraging an innovative approach, developing teachers may be pushed towards established methods in order to provide perceived evidence of effective teaching. As Edwards et al. (2007, p.649) note, “university-based partners have found themselves assessing their research partners’ work rather than collaborating in the co-construction of knowledge in practice in ways which would mark a more equal research partnership”. Our research into developing school-based colleagues’ practice found us in the role of researcher/trainers, where such hierarchical pitfalls are more likely.

A more collaborative model is implied. According to CUREE (2005) coaching can offer opportunities for collaborative and specialist professional development. Collaborative co-coaching involves two or more professionals who are committed to “reciprocal learning and to providing non-judgemental support” (CUREE, 2005, p.3) the focus being on peer support. By comparison, the more hierarchical specialist coaching acknowledges the dual role of the expert to share their knowledge and expertise with colleagues in an empowering way thereby enabling them “to take control of their own learning” (2005, p.3). This seems to resonate with Hallam et al’s final report on supporting professional practice in Formative Assessment (2004) provides evidence that innovation can be achieved even where “relatively little understanding” is initially in place. Teacher ownership, a “bottom up” structure, and peer-mentoring led to effective changes in classroom practice; teachers involved demonstrated “overwhelming enthusiasm and commitment” (2004, p133).

Dow (2006, p.316) suggests that at times when policy innovation may be “perceived as [being] imposed from above, it is more likely to be rejected or absorbed into existing frameworks” in which case it could be argued that peer support and co-coaching would tend to support absorption rather than conceptual shifts. In these more intransient scenarios the trainer/researcher, perceived by teachers as separate from policy making and committed to the “distributed nature of expertise” (Edwards et al. 2007, p.655), may offer an alternative approach to enabling conceptual shifts. However, a true commitment to the “distributed nature of expertise” requires all those involved to mutually respect each other’s knowledge and skills ensuring that “specific expertise is valued and...each participant is a resource for the other” (2007, p.655).

In order to reach a successful conclusion it might be necessary to provide opportunities for students and teachers to be open about their own beliefs around effective teaching and, as Dow suggests (2006, p.318-19), for “educators of student teachers must also therefore explore their own implicit theories.

References:


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