EMPATHY AND IDENTITY: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION IN TEACHER TRAINING

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This paper reports research into music teacher trainee's experiences of reflecting on their growing identity as teachers. The characteristics of a more effective trainee teacher and one who is making slower progress are considered. The paper's focus reflects the authors belief in the changing nature of teaching and the increasing need for a more creative approach in trainee's reflective practices, that take into account that teachers of tomorrow will need to be ever open to change. My argument here suggests that the idea of the 'reflective practitioner' has never been more necessary than now. The two aspects that I am focussing on are 'Empathy with learners' and on the students' developing 'identity as beginner teachers'. References to their own feelings and emotions are encouraged. The role of reflection is evaluated in enabling trainee teachers to become effective teachers.

Background and research questions

Teacher trainers, experienced teachers and NQTs reported that reflection and evaluation of lessons taught is an essential skill. Trainee teachers only rarely see the value of all that paperwork. They see it as repetitive and yet another burdensome task to complete to please their tutor! Some do it - some don't! Is reflection really valuable?

Today's teachers have to be more flexible, more creative in their thinking and open to change. Ken Robinson's book, 'Out of our minds' (2001) highlights this clearly. One of the ways he suggests of promoting a culture and climate that facilitates creativity is synthesis between areas or disciplines and this idea has been also put forward by Howard Gardner in his

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influential book 'Five Minds for the Future'.(2006). Some schools already value core skills and thinking skills and are finding new ways to deliver the curriculum. Anna Craft (2006) sees the creative teacher as, successful in stimulating children's creativity and able to develop children's motivation to be creative. Arts teachers, of course expect to be developing children's creativity in a musical way but when faced with a large group of mixed ability children in the average comprehensive school, this ideal may seem difficult to achieve and involves far more than simply encouraging artistic creativity.

These initial comments merely provide a rationale for what I am going to present here: that teachers of tomorrow will need to be ever open to change. My argument here suggests that the idea of the 'reflective practitioner' has never been more necessary than now. I am reporting on 'reflection as learning' within a post-graduate music teacher training course in the UK. The two aspects that I am focussing on are 'Empathy with learners' and on the students' developing 'identity as beginner teachers'. Affective aspects of reflection (feelings and emotions) are also encouraged. The role of reflection is evaluated in encouraging trainee teachers to become effective teachers.

Reflection for me is the main element of learning on a teacher training course. Schon's notion of 'reflection-in-action' (1983) and Dewey's idea that problematic situations require reflection in order to move forward support this view. Working with trainee teachers on a secondary music post-graduate course (PGCE) in SW London, the author encourages trainees to engage in a reflective process which involves them in thinking about their feelings and empathising with learners. Teacher trainees are encouraged to develop their own view of what teaching is about; that is their developing identity as a teacher. A number of factors impact on the nature
of reflection. The first of these is the importance of being part of a 'community' or to engage in collective dialogue (Day, 1993; Solomon, 1997; Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

A second factor is the importance of feelings or the impact of using emotions when thinking back on lessons taught. Dewey’s views of reflection perhaps surprisingly, involved intuition, emotion and passion. He sees reflection as a "holistic way of meeting and responding to problems, a way of being as a teacher...Reflection action is also a process which involves...intuition, emotion, and passion" (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Some researchers view reflection as an emotional process and affective aspects are highlighted by Shoffner (2009) when trainee teachers used weblogs to record their reflections. She believes that reflection and the affective domain are closely linked especially when trainee teachers are required to analyse complex situations in the classroom, which often involve personal feelings. Gibb’s cycle of learning (1999) (Table 1), is helpful here as a model of reflection because it includes a consideration of feelings.

![Gibbs' reflective cycle](image)

Table 1
Research on Teacher Identity highlights the importance of metacognition or Biggs' term (1985) 'metalearning'. Linda Rolfe (2009) in her research with trainee teachers using learning journals values the way that metacognitive skills enable them to develop opinions and beliefs about teaching which will form part of their professional journey.

To summarise then, the purpose of this paper is: a) to identify the nature of the reflective process in a music post-graduate teacher training course; b) to evaluate their use of emotion and feelings when trainee teachers face problematic situations; and c) to evaluate how trainees view their passage into 'becoming a teacher'.

Methodology

A pilot study with an earlier cohort highlighted the problems of getting busy students to maintain diaries or journals during specific periods of the course. As a result, for this study, the researcher employed a number of different strategies for collecting reflective writing.

- Optional weekly reflections of progress/feelings/problems to be shared with the tutor by email and requiring a response.

- Whole cohort reflective writing opportunities during review points when attending University for the purpose of reviewing progress in school e.g. Easter review and the end of the course.
A questionnaire was given to all students half-way through their second and final placement about their reflecting activity after lessons. This was sent by email to 20 students (9 male, 11 female).

Reflection, in the first two of these cases, was seen to be naturalistic, that is, something which already exists and is a "naturally occurring phenomenon" (Yin, quoted by Denscombe, 2007:38) Students were aware that the tutor was conducting research into their reflective practices but the questions were posed as an extension of other reflective and evaluative activities during the University sessions and the data was used also to monitor trainees' progress. Denscombe suggests that the case study approach allows for explanations of an issue in depth and accommodates, "the complexity and subtlety of real life situations" (2007:38). Here the purpose of the case study is to explore key issues which affect those engaged in the real life situation but also that it relates to a particular theory, which is here applied to a real life setting. The theoretical model is that of Gibbs' reflective cycle. Using a similar approach to research by Lebler (2008, MER: 10:2), into aspects of learning on a popular music programme, here it is intended to evaluate the effectiveness of learning through reflection. This research takes from Lebler principles put forward by McWilliam and Taylor (Lebler:198) that the practitioner research should be mobilised by a desire to know something about practice that is not already known; the knowledge should be shared with others and it should allow systematic inquiry that is documented and conducted with and for its participants who should have a stake in the outcomes.

The questionnaire required trainees to reflect on ways of becoming an effective teacher, ways in which they recognised their developing identity as a teacher and also their awareness of
whether they consider the learner's perspective when they are planning lessons. 13 students returned the questionnaire with only 12 completing the requirement for table 2 (see next page). Students were asked to put in priority order (1-9) the aspects listed in the value they gave each factor in their developing ability to be an effective teacher.

Analysis

Analysis of the reflections was 'interpretivist' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) where the social world is seen to be produced and reproduced on a daily basis by people going about their lives. In order for understanding and meaning to be generated, observation and interpretation is the method by which the research evaluates the outcomes. This view accepts that people construct their own meanings and is consistent with the theory of knowledge put forward which suggests, that through reflection people will understand more about the situation and also more about themselves. In ontological terms, such methodology can be viewed as 'elaborate fictions' used to explain and justify our behaviours to both ourselves and others. An ontological-relational view of knowledge was chosen, where an understanding of oneself is considered in the context of others in a similar social situation. This supports the type of knowledge or learning that students here were experiencing. The self-examination and self-reflection in dialogue with others encouraged them to develop their identity as a teacher through engagement with other 'model' teachers, and also their empathy with learners in improving lesson planning.
Findings

The Questionnaire [see table 2 at end of paper]

Most trainees viewed the ‘discussion with the mentor after the lesson’ or ‘regular feedback from the mentor’ to be the most effective way of developing their understanding of how to teach. Only three trainees (a quarter) rated regular lesson evaluations (written) as effective ways of learning to teach. In an investigation into the characteristics of excellent tertiary teachers Kane et al, (2004) suggested that, “a common characteristic that became apparent was that these excellent university teachers engaged in regular, purposeful reflection on their teaching practice”(p300). All of the three trainees who rated written evaluations highly were graded as outstanding by their mentors at the end of the course. The two lowest rated categories were ‘reflecting in assignments’ and ‘thinking about teaching as a result of a university session’. Only one, highly able trainee rated one of these as the highest priority and most were either not rated at all or were rated as a low priority. Three trainees rated the optional weekly reflections on progress as priority 1 or 2 in helping them to become effective teachers. Of these, two are female and one male. From the findings of the questionnaire two contrasting trainees were identified as useful case studies.

Case study 1:

Female student A (in table 2), rated regular lesson evaluations as the most important priority, with discussion with her mentor as the next most effective way of learning to become a teacher together with discussions with her mentor in meetings. Student A was judged to be excellent half way through her second placement. This is a very high judgement at this stage but reflects the impact that she has had on the mentor’s judgement of her teaching. Tutor observations confirmed this high achievement. Her paperwork is detailed, written evaluations evaluate the extent to which her pupils have learnt what she had planned for learning in the lesson and she is critical and evaluative of her teaching in her written reflections. She writes, “I think discussion with my mentor has been an integral part of developing my understanding of ‘being a teacher’. Through the discussions I have been able to focus on different strategies at one time, and make sure I secure these in my teaching practice using the mentor’s knowledge and experience to correct or advise on any difficulties”. She has respect for her mentor’s
experience and knowledge about teaching. In relation to her view of the pupil learning experience, she imagines what the pupils will experience when she is planning (empathy). She writes, “not all the pupils will understand the same things the same way, so you need to adapt your teaching strategies for certain classes or even for certain pupils. This way, hopefully, everyone will understand…and enjoy! Enjoyment is also very important, especially in a music lesson….I believe you need to make the lessons enjoyable and accessible to all pupils, otherwise their engagement in the subject is lost”. This trainee empathises with pupils sufficiently to realise that they need to enjoy to learn. In respect of feeling like a teacher and taking on the identity of a teacher, she reveals that she began to feel more like a teacher when her pupils addressed her with respect and staff treated her like a member of staff. She also writes, “I am more confident at relying on my ability to see where the lesson takes us rather than look at my plan. I am really enjoying that feeling”. Student A thinks that being evaluative is essential while in training and that it is more beneficial if it occurs straight after the lesson as it allows you to really reflect on how you feel the lesson went. Student A hand writes reflections on her lesson as soon as she is able. She also comments that she is often too critical but this helps as “I can write appropriate targets that are realistic for me to achieve by the next lesson”.

Case Study 2:
In contrast female Student E (table 2) is a less effective teacher. She has struggled to develop a natural stance as a teacher in the classroom. Her communication to pupils still sounds as if she has rehearsed what she is going to say. She was not seen to be satisfactory at the end of the first placement but in a second placement, with a strong mentor, she has made significant progress and is now achieving success. Significantly, her achievements in her academic reflective written assignments at university have improved with her greater understanding of the teaching process. Student E does not rate written evaluations at all in the questionnaire. She does however, highly rate the feedback she gets from her mentor or class teacher after a lesson. She writes, “after every lesson, my mentor tells me the areas that I need to work on. I find this useful because the lesson is fresh in my memory and I can understand his point of view”. Here is a trainee who needs others to tell her how to progress. She does not appear to take ownership of reflecting on the lesson. When asked if she is empathising or thinking about what the pupils are experiencing when she plans a lesson, she answers, “No, but I think it would help me in the future if I did”.

Trainees’ developing sense of identity as a teacher
During their training their sense of being ‘a teacher’ was articulated through their perceptions of the way pupils made them feel respected as teachers, or accepted in the school. This occurred when pupils came up to them at break with questions about the work, when they felt part of the pastoral tutor team, when being asked to make announcements in assembly and when pupils talked to them in the playground. One trainee began to feel more like a teacher when his mentor was absent for a week and he began to relax and interact more effectively with the pupils without feeling the pressure of being judged by another adult. Another
perceptive trainee wrote that he felt more like a teacher, “when I stopped thinking about what I was doing all the time”. Shoffner considers all reflection as contributing to trainee’s development as teachers. A male trainee (F) wrote of the role of reflection in helping to become an effective teacher, as something which allows you to,

“really isolate problems and once over the awkwardness of talking about yourself in that highly critical manner, the professional side of your nature comes through and you can change yourself for the better, to become a stronger teacher”.

This trainee clearly sees reflection as part of the process of his developing identity of ‘becoming a teacher’. The data suggests that trainee teachers are not certain in this stage of their developing identity, what it means ‘to be a teacher’ and more research is needed in a longitudinal study which explores how their identity changes during their early career.

**Empathy with learners**

Visualisation of the lesson is highlighted by one trainee who thinks about how the pupils will experience the activities and what they will learn from this. One male trainee said he was not sure whether he thought about the lesson from the pupil’s perspective but when asked to give further comments wrote, “evaluating encourages me to consider the lessons from a pupil’s perspective and try new things that might better fit their changing/developing needs and interests; it means I respond to pupils rather than trying to make them respond to me”. This latter comment sums up what empathy and seeing lesson planning from the pupils’ point of view. All other trainees who responded in a negative way to thinking about learners when planning, were the weaker students. Does this mean that if during training some focus is made on getting students to reflect on the student perspective, they might improve their
planning for teaching and learning? A number of trainees highlighted ‘fun’ and ‘enjoyment’ as important things to assess when empathising with the pupil perspective on a lesson.

**Reflecting affectively**

Trainee teachers often say that they learn more about themselves during their training and because it is a personal challenge, often the first time some have found themselves struggling to achieve, it is important that they reflect on that journey. Trainees write about trying to balance work with life issues and often these types of reflections look back and try to reflect on things which are frustrating and the realisation of the tough nature of what they are doing. Daily lesson evaluations include feelings when things go wrong. In one evaluation, a trainee used the words ‘traumatic’, ‘guilty’, ‘horror’ and the admission of bad planning and the impact that this had on a disastrous lesson. Weekly or summative reflections discuss relationships with mentors, problems which they have to overcome, struggles in overcoming barriers to learning or to providing a sense of achievement in what they are doing. Ovens and Tinning(2009) used memory reflections with groups of trainee teachers who reported that reflection for them was thinking on their feet and solving problems in lessons but they did not see reflection as having links with wider issues or useful for other purposes. In contrast to this, I have found that trainee teachers, relate strongly to affective concerns which show their own personal development and struggles to come to terms with issues in their teaching and their reflections on how this was achieved. One trainee wrote:

It seems that my reflections are very clear representations of my character and I feel like I’m really beginning to know myself and my issues very well. Especially the things that keep recurring i.e. perfectionism and being too
hard on myself. I do think doing this more often will be helpful to me. I had never thought of going back and reading over my reflections but it really does put it into perspective. Something that seemed so major at the time now seems quite trivial and it will do me good to remember that next time I’m worrying unnecessarily about something. I already feel as though I’m starting to let things go a little. Whenever I catch myself trying to do something perfectly and deliberating over something I just force myself to make a decision and let it go.

An explanation for this variance in the nature of reflecting might be related to context and timing. Looking back at the end of the course may produce different viewpoints than when sharing concerns and frustrations with a tutor mid-way through a placement. Burnard (2009:3) viewed time and retrospection as important when previous actions and thoughts are, "recovered, reviewed, revised, re-evaluated, reordered and embodied in time's containment".

What is evident from the findings of this small case-study is that different types of reflections have a variety of purposes. It may point to the need for different opportunities to suit different needs.

**Discussion of Findings and Conclusions**

In addressing the research questions, the findings identify the multi-faceted and complex nature of reflecting or evaluating as learning in teacher training courses. Trainee’s earliest attempts at lesson reflection tends to focus on how to manage behaviour, how to improve aspects of teaching and they focus very much on the practical day to day concerns. Formats for reflecting provided for trainee lesson evaluations often require them to evaluate the success of their lesson or show how they could do things differently and often require them to assess whether pupils learnt what they set out as learning objectives for the lesson.

Reflections such as these are valuable in helping trainees to learn the cyclical processes of planning, and linking monitoring and assessing to activities set for pupils to achieve in the lesson. Gibbs' reflective cycle help both these types of reflection. While working with
trainees during this research it became evident that these kinds of reflections become less useful as trainee teachers become more experienced at evaluating lessons. At this point, trainees need something more challenging to focus on and it is here that empathy with learners might provide a new and valuable focus for reflection. It was clear from the findings that weaker trainees tend not to visualise the lesson from the pupil’s point of view while others do this instinctively. Findings from the questionnaire however suggested that collaborative reflection on the lesson was far more valuable in discussion with mentors and in getting alternative perspectives. Research has highlighted the importance of collaborative reflections. Hatton and Smith (1995) highlighted the importance of the ‘critical friend’ (37) and Jay and Johnson (2002) highlight the pitfalls of reflecting alone and the benefits of reflecting with others (84).

Longer-term reflecting either electronically or, as in this research, at review points during the training year, allows students to assess their overall progress in where they are in achieving their goal of ‘becoming a teacher’. This type of reflection does involve some looking back and it is here where trainees appear to engage in more personal reflection which allows them to articulate their frustrations, passions or other kinds of affective concerns. Shoffner (2008) has termed the weblog kind of reflecting as informal reflection (124), reflection which bridges the divide between university-structured and individually-initiated reflection. Learning through reflection places responsibility on the trainee teacher. Future research will look at their developing identity as a teacher during the induction year and beyond. Future work with trainee teachers will explore the use of audio recording to capture dialogue with a selection of mentors immediately following a taught lesson or during their weekly meeting.
Priorities for research is to value the role of evaluation and reflection as the way trainee teachers learn to adapt and to operate as a professional and to learn to be effective teachers. More research is needed to evaluate more clearly what aspects of reflection are essential to weaker students to enable them to improve and to take on the persona of an effective, ‘thinking-on-your-feet’ professional. Empathising with learners is clearly one factor which needs further exploration in this respect.

References:


Table 2: Results of questionnaire: Student views on types of reflecting - identified and prioritised

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