Impoverishing experience: the problem of teacher education in England

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Impoverishing experience: the problem of teacher education in England

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Pre-service teacher education in England has been essentially school-based since 1992. The article offers a critique of this design from the perspective of a practitioner and researcher working in one of its most influential schemes. The fundamental problem described concerns an impoverished understanding of experience that underpins how beginning teachers are intended to learn in schools. The problem is not one of evaluating experience as adequate in terms of exemplary practices, but about the capacity within the teacher education system for critically examining the meaning of experience in order to develop professional knowledge. The article suggests that the ontological and epistemological dimensions of experience need to be brought into a dialogue if the potential of experiential learning for pre-service teachers is to be realised.

Keywords: experience; learning; knowledge; school-based teacher education

Introduction

We had the experience, but missed the meaning. (T.S. Eliot, ‘The Dry Salvages’ 1963)

The reforms of pre-service teacher education in England are sometimes held to be one of the New Labour government’s most successful policy interventions. Mandatory national specifications were simultaneously imposed and inspected and educationalists (and the wider public) almost completely marginalised (Furlong 2000; Mahony and Hextall 2000). Quite unlike reform movements in other parts of the world (Cochran-Smith and Fries 2001), there was very little debate before its introduction. However, from a policymaker’s perspective, the reforms were successful: they appeared to improve the competence of beginning teachers (the evidence from the inspection regime was good); they made teacher educators and the universities more accountable (competitively, to policymakers); they developed the career structure for classroom teachers (using elements of performance-related pay); and recruitment to the profession improved (nationally, there is currently no overall shortage of teachers, except in secondary mathematics and science) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2005). Furlong (2005) argued that teacher education is no longer important in educational reform; the ‘battle’, if indeed there was one, had been won and government, having got its way, had moved on.

Yet, for those of us who work in teacher education in England, our field now feels different. Although the grounds for dissatisfaction are sometimes referenced to a sense of diminishing individual, professional and academic autonomy, I want to argue that

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a fundamental problem with England’s design for pre-service teacher education is an impoverished version of ‘experience’ in school. Perhaps controversially, I argue that current designs for initial teacher education programmes, specifically the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), can actively work to impoverish experience as the ground for teachers’ learning. A key dimension of this process of diminution has been that, as a sector, we have been asked to take teachers’ learning much less seriously than we have children’s and young people’s. Thus, although one might expect an essentially school-based form of teacher education to be premised upon a participatory view of learning in the work-place and a socially systemic view of teachers’ knowledge, all too often designs for teacher education (as framed by policy) have instead relied on an acquisition view of learning and a view of knowledge as a thing that is transferred (experienced teacher to beginner) (Edwards 2009; Ellis 2007a). Experience in schools simply becomes an opportunity to receive or become acculturated to the existing practices of the setting with an emphasis on the reproduction of routinised behaviours and the development of bureaucratic virtues such as compliance and the collection of evidence. Learning to teach becomes ‘teaching by proxy’ (Edwards and Protheroe 2004) constrained by pervasive ‘delivery’ metaphors (Edwards, Gilroy, and Hartley 2002; Day 2004).

This article begins with a critique of graduate-level, school-based, pre-service teacher education in England from the perspective of a university-based practitioner and researcher who works in one of its most influential programmes. The critique is focused both on the prevailing policy and the accounts of teacher education practice that are publicly available in the literature. In referring in detail to the programme within which I work, my critique also refers to local, actual practices (my own and my programme’s) as well as more generalised accounts of practice that have relevance given my programme’s influence on the national model (Furlong 2000). My interest and focus is on teacher learning and teacher knowledge in relation to experience in schools and my analysis is informed by cultural–historical theories of learning and development (Vygotsky 1974, 1986; Cole 1996) and by complementary insights from feminist cultural studies (Britzman 2003; Probyn 1993). I draw specifically on my programme, the Oxford Internship Scheme (OIS), as an influential case and, through examining some contradictions in its conceptualisations of teacher knowledge and teacher learning, and referring briefly to recent participatory research, suggest ways in which the work of teacher education might allow for a richer and more transformative understanding of experience. My argument is that experience, as conceptualised within the existing design, is not enough if we wish to develop the kinds of teachers who are able to work with change and complexity in twenty-first century schools.

School-based teacher education in England: the OIS as an influential case

The OIS offers a one-year, graduate programme in seven curriculum areas leading to the simultaneous award of the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) from the University of Oxford and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS; the license to teach) from the government. It is a small course taking about 170 students (known as interns) each year and works in partnership with a small number of schools (around 23) in a tightly-defined geographical area (the county of Oxfordshire). Since 1987, two-thirds of the programme has been school-based (hence the concept of internship) and that part of it which is based at the university (mainly in the first term) is combined with weekly
‘school days’ for which learning activities are jointly planned by the university tutor and the school-based mentor teacher. The Scheme continues to be awarded the highest possible grades in extensive cycles of inspection by the government’s Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).¹

Along with pioneering work at Sussex and Leicester universities (Griffiths and Owen 1995), the early success of the OIS was highly influential in what Furlong (2000) has called the ‘national experiment’ of school-based teacher education in England. To some extent, the regulations for secondary teacher education laid down by government Circular in 1992 (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1992) corresponded to what had been operating at Oxford University’s Education Department since 1987: for graduate-level courses, student teachers were to learn from ‘school experience’ for 24 weeks of the 36 week course. Whereas the increased responsibilities on schools for initial teacher education (ITE) may have come as a surprise (or even an unwelcome shock) to some schools and universities elsewhere, within Oxford University’s Education Department, it was true to say that this way of organising ITE had already been established as a well-resourced move from within a real partnership between the schools, the local education authority and its Chief Officer Tim Brighouse, and the university department (see Benton [1990] for details). Given the relatively small scale of the experiment and the significant initial investment in it, this way of working was probably a good deal easier to resource at Oxford than it would have been in the large university departments of education and teacher training colleges, particularly those with undergraduate programmes. Compared with these organisations, the OIS has always been something of a ‘boutique’ operation.

Subject to minor modifications necessitated by government Circular 2/92 and the more profound Standards focus of Circular 4/98 (DES 1992; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE] 1998), the OIS has continued to operate the same overall design since its inception. However, as time has passed, education policy in the UK has become more interventionist and market-oriented (Jones 2003), and the demands for research-intensive universities to compete have increased (Eggins 2003), tensions and contradictions inherent in the original design of the scheme and of the partnership between the schools and the university have come to be felt more keenly. Many of these tensions, I will argue, arise out of contradictory conceptualisations of knowledge and learning in relation to experience in schools and these tensions have proved to be problematic for the OIS and for the often much less well-resourced programmes on which it has been so influential.

**Five tensions in conceptualisations of teacher knowledge and teacher learning in school-based ITE**

**Individual knowledge within a social situation of development**

The OIS, for example, proposes that by developing the capacity to ‘test hypotheses’, the beginning teacher (sometimes expressed as ‘novice’) gains in the kind of knowledge (often expressed as ‘professional craft knowledge’) more experienced teachers hold in their practice. This knowledge is often referred to as ‘expertise’ with the ultimate aim of teacher development becoming designation as ‘expert’. Experienced teachers’ knowledge is then described as depending on:
...the gradual development of their individual schemata and scripts, on gradually learning how to select and to prioritise, and on first learning effective and conscious decision-making and then gradually replacing it with more intuitive decision-making. (Hagger and McIntyre 2000, 487)

The interesting tension here is that teachers’ knowledge is presented as an entirely individual attribute that, even though ‘embedded’ in a teacher’s experience, is still described in narrowly cognitive terms (‘schemata and scripts’, ‘conscious decision-making’). There is no recognition that the settings (i.e. the schools and subject departments) in which secondary teachers learn to teach extend certain possibilities for participation and innovation to them and deny them others. Although emphasis is attached to learning to teach in the school setting, there is no sense that such learning may in fact be a potential of the relationships and interactions between the individual teacher and their social situations of development. Moreover, there is no sense that the development of knowledge is therefore likely to be associated with the capacity of beginning teachers to form relationships, to engage in joint work, to participate in a system of activity that is already in motion and has the potential to evolve and be changed. Instead, the individual beginning teacher seems to pass through the school setting (being influenced by it) rather than being constituted by acting on it and, indeed, in part shaping it. This individualistic conceptualisation of the development of teacher knowledge is a significant omission in theories of an experiential form of teacher education that is mainly located in schools.

**Linear stage schemes or complex trajectories of experience**

Second, while accepting that teacher learning is ‘situated’, and recognising inevitable variation in the knowledge developed by beginning teachers in different social situations, school-based teacher education has nevertheless conceptualised teacher learning as an essentially linear process that begins with an exploration of individual beginning teachers’ ‘preconceptions’, proceeds through developing the capacity for reflection-in/on-action (Schön 1983), ‘practical theorising’ (Hagger and McIntyre 2006) or, more specifically in the case of the OIS, the ‘testing of hypotheses’, to the problem of ‘accessing’ or ‘tapping into’ teachers’ ‘professional craft knowledge’ (Hagger 1997; Hagger and McIntyre 2006). In the OIS, there is the sense that if only interns’ preconceptions could be explored more openly, if only teachers’ professional craft knowledge could be accessed and if only interns could test those hypotheses more completely, then their trajectory from beginning to fully-fledged teacher would be complete. The model of beginning teacher learning implicit in the design of the Scheme can therefore be interpreted as an individual process of accommodation (albeit defined as a difficult, cognitive struggle) to the cultural practices of specific settings (i.e. two schools, usually consecutively) influenced by the work of a teacher mentor and university-based teacher educator (tutor) (see Figure 1).

This conceptualisation seems at best a partial account of teacher learning and one that ignores the important process that Lave (1988) described as the construction of setting (i.e. a personal trajectory of participation in culturally significant practices) in the complex process of teacher development. In other words, rather than simply accumulating knowledge as they accumulate experience, teachers reconstruct what they know and reconfigure their practices as they move across the different social worlds of classrooms and schools. Under the OIS model of teacher learning, teacher
development therefore appears to take on some of the simple, linear characteristics of stage schemes (Fuller and Bown 1975) rather than messy and ‘subterranean’ (Engeström 2007a) developmental trajectories across multiple settings for learning. This inherent tension has been exacerbated by subsequent policy initiatives such as the national entry Standards for teachers (QTS) and associated career-long benchmark Standards such as post-threshold (P), excellent (E) and advanced skills (A). (For further information about England’s Standards-defined professional development framework for teaching, see: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/professionalstandards/.)

**Barriers to dialogue when learning how to fit in**

Third, the OIS has never seriously addressed the issue of relative power among its participants. Not only is it difficult for beginning teachers individually to criticise observed practice in their schools or, indeed, to challenge the views of their university tutor because of obvious concerns about ‘potential conflict with those who have power over their success on the course’ (Davies 1997, 37; Poirier 1992), it is also very difficult for university-based teacher educators to have open and honest conversations with mentors over issues of, for example, equality and diversity (Menter 1989) or subject pedagogy. Within the OIS, Davies (1997) noted how difficult it was for interns, tutors and mentors to have discussions that questioned each other’s values and beliefs about the subject taught (both extremely important dimensions of any categorisation of teacher knowledge). Britzman (1986), after Williams (1977), referred to this questioning process as the articulation and interrogation of ‘structures of feeling’. Competency, as Britzman (2003, 7) put it, becomes ‘the absence of conflict’ and this version of competency has become institutionalised in school-based teacher education.
programmes like the OIS. This inherent tension has been compounded rather than introduced by policy interventions, however. Experience, as conceptualised in influential accounts, and in the actual practices, of school-based teacher education in England, can simply mean learning how to fit in, while ‘not disrupting the precarious equilibrium of existing classroom practices’ (Edwards 1997, 190; Schulz and Hall 2004). It is a strange kind of experience that allows no history and, therefore, no future.

Variation in experience requires a bureaucratic fix

Fourth, as Jubeh (1997) noted, variation in beginning teachers’ experiences within and between schools is wide and this variation has come to be regarded as a technical problem that is difficult to solve, but might be addressed by more training for mentors, and greater monitoring of the workings of partnerships, etc. An associated difficulty is that the university contribution (its ‘research-based knowledge and perspectives’) does not seem to transfer at all well from the university setting to the classroom. Moreover, although variation of experience was seen as a problem to be overcome in the original design of the OIS (hence its elaboration of ‘entitlements’ and ‘expectations’), variation has also since come to be seen more widely as a barrier to the implementation of educational reforms nationally: the policy imperative is for consistency of performance and a uniform entitlement to certain ‘Standard(s)’ experiences. In educational policy terms, within England there is considerable emphasis given to the right to access certain experiences, but never to act on and reconfigure them. Thus, the problem of variation is never seen as having enormous pedagogic potential in teacher learning if it is confronted and built into teacher education curricula as occasions for understanding and developing the rules for participation in the collective practices of diverse school settings. Consequently, more mentor training and increased monitoring are valid, pragmatic responses to variation of experience when it is perceived as a problem rather than as an opportunity to learn.

Beach (1999) referred to learners’ movements across the boundaries of multiple settings such as these as ‘consequential transitions’, shifts across sites of practice that also entail meaningful (‘consequential’) shifts in knowledge and identity for those learners. In terms of discourse, even though school-based teacher education might assert that it promotes a critical, even dissenting stance, among beginning teachers, when required to demonstrate compliance to Ofsted in order to receive funding from the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), it is difficult and time-consuming to promote contradiction and resistance as intrinsic to the processes of learning. Instead, variation becomes subject to the monitoring of national and local (both university and school) quality assurance regimes. This erasure of diverse perspectives and multi-vocality by the discursive uni-vocality of quality assurance regimes has become a significant problem for school-based, standards-driven teacher education. In consequence, bottom-up innovation from within the sector is no longer required. This is not to say that innovation does not happen but that, often, it seems to occur in spite of policy.

Standards as a means of auditing experience

Finally, government Circular 4/98 and the QTS Standards (DfEE 1998) made a fundamental challenge to the rationales for experiments in school-based teacher education
such as the OIS, challenges that persist more than 10 years later. QTS Standards are expressed as a series of performance statements that interns are obliged to ‘evidence’. Beginning teachers cannot be awarded QTS unless they demonstrate achievement against each one of the Standards and pass national skills tests in literacy, numeracy and the use of ICT. How does this (S)tandardised approach to teacher education with its expectations of uniform competence fit with the aims of situated ‘practical theorising’ and ‘hypothesis-testing’ proposed by the pioneers of school-based teacher education in England such as the OIS? How have the reforms to teacher education nationally meshed with an approach to teacher development that continues to ask student teachers to mediate the transitions between the multiple settings of learning for themselves?

The pragmatic response of the OIS to Circular 4/98, as with many programmes in England, was to develop its own set of ‘assessment descriptors’ that correspond to, yet ‘go beyond’, the QTS Standards. Strathern (2000) has identified this sort of process as an indication of the success of the audit culture in ensuring mechanisms for internal control within organisations that the state wishes to regulate. Thus, the important work of what Edwards (2009, 37) has described as ‘unpicking the conceptual muddle at the heart of school-based teacher education’, a muddle I am here arguing is concerned with how teachers’ learning is conceptualised in relation to experience in schools, does not seem to have taken place. The priority given to the acquisition of centrally-prescribed Standards skills through experience poses a fundamental challenge to the potential of work-place learning in schools. Standards simply become a means of restricting our interpretations and analysis of experience, from within.

So far, I have tried to indicate some of the difficult questions that can be asked of the successful school-based teacher education programmes in England, even of a very influential scheme such as the OIS. I now want to suggest that a key part of any answer must involve a re-conceptualisation of teacher knowledge and teacher learning informed by a richer, more complex understanding of experience.

Experiencing the future: creating spaces for teacher learning

Although school-based teacher education in England has prioritised experience and valued the expertise and ‘craft knowledge’ of school teachers, and although schemes such as the OIS were once truly radical, I have suggested that the conceptions of teacher knowledge and teacher learning involved were essentially acquisitive and individualistic and limited by an impoverished understanding of experience. One might argue that this understanding of experience has become dominant as it aligns so easily with commonsense and politically popular narratives of how teachers learn (i.e. ‘on the job’). I have been arguing, however, that school-based teacher education has not systematically addressed (both in accounts of practice and in the actual practices in which I have participated) how it might help beginning teachers mediate their learning in and between settings, nor has it confronted and exploited the differential experiential potentials these settings afford. Over time, the tensions inherent in the original design of an influential school-based teacher education scheme such as the OIS have come to be revealed more starkly as the contexts for ITE in England have come to be regulated more directly. Thus, as an example, the OIS’s proposition that teachers ‘make themselves’ through experience has been directly challenged by the requirements of national QTS Standards. The fundamental contradiction that this
policy challenge exacerbated was that teachers do not entirely ‘make themselves’ anyway (Britzman 1986): teachers learn to teach in particular settings and work with the professional genres that have developed historically within local cultures. This proposition is not deterministic, but one that says that, for example, in secondary schools the subject department is a key setting for learning to teach; one that both affords and constrains development. Rather than merely accepting that context influences development in one direction, however, school-based teacher education also needs to recognise and plan for the agency of beginning teachers in engaging with the social systems within which they are working. Fundamentally, this shift requires a reinterpretation of experience as a desire both to enter and to make sense of the social world, a desire that is future-oriented. It means deliberatively activating experience for teachers’ learning by bringing the ontological and epistemological dimensions of experience into a dialogue.

In using the terms ontological and epistemological, I am seeking to draw attention to processes by which knowledge is accessed and developed through experience, through an active engagement with being-in-the-world. Ontology is concerned with reality, existence, lived experience and the nature of being. Philosophically, ontology is the study of how certain categories of reality and existence are apprehended and defined. Epistemology is concerned with the study of knowledge and the ways through which we can subject experience and belief to reason and to arrive at a state of knowing where propositional statements are evaluated as justified and true.

I am not using these terms here in a strictly philosophical sense, but working with interpretations from the related traditions of cultural studies and cultural–historical theory. Probyn (1993), for example, from a feminist and cultural studies perspective, argues for the social and political process of making the ontological more epistemological – for ‘extending the reach of... momentary flashes’ of individual apprehension of the world and ‘stretch[ing] my experience beyond the merely personal’ (4). For Probyn, this movement is an extension of a feminist critique of categories of gender as ‘natural’. But from a Vygotskian perspective, the movement from spontaneous to scientific concepts (Vygotsky 1986) might also be described as a process of increasing abstraction and rationality from the immediate and local, as a process whereby the personal meanings of experience are subject to examination by more public meanings. Indeed, it is this very shift from the personal to the public meanings of learning to teach in classrooms that characterises Van Huizen, van Oers, and Wubbels’ (2005) Vygotskian stance on teacher education.

Finding meaning in experience: working on what might be by examining what is

In this final section, I will refer briefly to some recent work within the OIS that attempted to address some of the problems I have outlined. This work suggests what can happen when certain processes are set in train that allow participants to access and develop professional knowledge by examining experience, for example, by trying to open up potential barriers to dialogue and by confronting variation and contradiction within the social situation of teachers’ development.

Beginning in 2005, a pilot project within the English programme of the OIS attempted to exploit the ‘consequential transitions’ (Beach 1999) between the university and school settings as powerful opportunities for learning. The Developing
English Teaching and Internship Learning (DETAIL) project had a dual focus on changing relationships between school- and university-based teacher educators (teachers and lecturers) and on developing curriculum in both school and university settings. Framed as a variation of Developmental Work Research (DWR) (Engeström 1991), DETAIL was a participatory, interventionist research in which mentor teachers, the university teacher educator (myself) and interns worked with the conceptual tools of activity theory in order to understand how current practice had been shaped culturally and historically in order to work on positive change and development.

I have written in more detail about this project and its methodology elsewhere (Ellis 2008, 2010). Briefly, in the context of a series of ‘Change Laboratories’ (Engeström 2007b), mentor teachers and myself used Engeström’s familiar triangular representation of an activity system to analyse data that had been generated ethnographically by a research assistant in their school settings. The aim was that by coming to understand how existing practices had been shaped, the participants might reinterpret and expand their understandings of what they were working on (e.g. the teaching of writing) and subsequently reconfigure the systems in which these practices were occurring. In some respects, this approach to research and development builds on the tradition of working with teachers to understand the practices of the classroom in order to change them (Rudduck 1988).

Whether the activity theoretical framing of DETAIL, and the participatory use of its conceptual tools in the sessions framed by DWR, was essential to DETAIL’s purpose is open to question. In Vygotskian terms, the primary ‘tool’ that mediated participants’ learning was speech (specifically, dialogic or exploratory talk) and it would be misleading to suggest that this can only be contrived through the explicit use of DWR. Nevertheless, the combination of a focus on collaborative inquiry within the DWR framework did create significant opportunities to open out problems of practice for the kind of examination that would usually be difficult within the requirements of the traditional teacher education programme.

Moreover, activity theory’s attention to the rules for participation in a community of practice within which a division of labour has evolved requires a historical, multi-dimensional understanding of practice. Opening out problems of practice for examination can, in this way, also be understood as understanding experience on two levels, dimensions Dewey (1925) referred to as ‘primary experience’ and ‘secondary experience’, that Probyn (1993) later re-formulated as ‘ontological’ and ‘epistemological’ and that Van Huizen, van Oers, and Wubbels (2005), after Vygotsky, called personal and public meanings of experience. From this perspective, the goals of teacher education should be to examine the ‘immediacy of what is and what must be’ [my emphasis] (Probyn 1993, 5) and to analyse and articulate its relationship with what might be; in other words, to bring the two levels into a dialogue in order to access and develop professional knowledge.

In the following episode from a DETAIL Change Laboratory, a mentor teacher is explaining one outcome of her English department’s DWR-framed professional inquiry into a problem of practice: an examination of the use of writing frames (Lewis and Wray 1995), an approach that had come to dominate the teaching of writing in her department. The focus of this department’s inquiry had been prompted by the intern teachers’ initial experience of being asked to use writing frames with all pupils in examination classes (whether or not they were needed), a strategy they had simultaneously been encouraged to interpret as a misuse of writing frames in sessions taught...
at the university. In their effort to understand their host English department’s chosen focus on improving examination grades, the interns had generated data through lesson observations, interviews with pupils and teachers, and scrutiny of pupil writing. Their analysis suggested that pupils’ performance in examined written coursework was being limited by the universal application of the highly-specified plans the teachers referred to as ‘writing frames’. Subsequently, through an examination of these data in a sequence of Change Laboratories, the English department came to understand how and why the teaching of writing had come to be this way and they were able to take this understanding back into their classroom settings for action.

In the following segment of data, the mentor teacher from this department reflects on the change process and explores the reasons why the experience of teaching writing in her department had become sedimented (Laclau 1990), or unconsciously routinised, as what is. The mentor begins by explaining that the pupils, even though they had been provided with a writing frame, still didn’t know what or how to write a coursework assignment:

**Change Laboratory 7, Episode 1 (lines 658–721)**

Mentor: And what came out of it was that most of the students didn’t understand how to write it. Even though they had this writing frame, they didn’t understand how to write it [the coursework assignment]. Because they hadn’t gone through the process of actually thinking //

VE: Thinking //

Mentor: //what it was that they were going to write. And I think with [two of the intern teachers] in particular, with one piece of coursework with Year 10 [pupils aged 14–15 years], gave them the freedom to think and to plan… and they gave them time to talk to each other and questions beforehand, and the essays were much… well they started hitting the C [grade] criteria. I mean I think when I’d spoken to some of the students, they just… they didn’t take ownership of it because they hadn’t been there at that initial thinking and thought process stage…

VE: But how did that feel for you as teachers… the English department? Because that could be quite embarrassing couldn’t it?

Mentor: Oh absolutely.

VE: By saying your very helpful well intentioned plans//

Mentor: //Which you took ages over//

VE: //Which you took ages over are actually limiting what your students can do.

Mentor: You know I think for some people it was like well I want them to get this grade so I need to talk about this, and it wasn’t so much about the students independently gaining their own understanding of the text, or developing a skill, it was about some members of staff ‘these are my results’ you know ‘my performance management [a system of monitoring of teachers by their pupils’ examination results, with an element of performance-related pay] is going to be based on this, therefore I will give them everything they need to put in a piece of coursework’… and so be it. I think if a directive came from the LEA [the school district] ‘don’t use writing frames’… I think those certain teachers would go ‘Right, I don’t need to do it now’. Because some of them are very much… this is what the curriculum says, the literacy strategy says this, LEA says this – I must do that.

VE: So you make the link very strongly now with performance management.

Mentor: Mm.

VE: Was it that strong?

Mentor: Mm… Performance management and the data that the school holds on you and your classes is now… I mean it’s practically in your mark book. You
know you have all these children who are supposed to get all these levels, and then you get a nice little percentage where how many of them actually get... it is a nightmare.

In this interaction between the mentor teacher and myself as researcher (with the other teacher participants listening), a conscious understanding on the part of the mentor emerges, an understanding of the way in which the material conditions of her department’s work as teachers (the use of performance management tools and data-tracking, for example) had affected their practice of the teaching of writing, and specifically the ways in which they had appropriated the pedagogical tool of the writing frame. In other words, a contradiction had been surfaced, concerned with the use-value of the writing frame (it can help to scaffold less independent writers into unfamiliar genres) and its exchange value (it is perceived as a means of ensuring there are enough C grades in the class to satisfy performance management criteria).

In this brief extract, and the longer stretch of Change Laboratory dialogue from which it has been selected, it was possible to discern an important shift in the mentor’s (and, to an extent, her department’s) understanding of their experience of teaching writing, from the unquestionable immediacy of an absolute rule for participation in the practice (“this is how we teach writing here”) to a more complex understanding (socially and historically) of the object of the activity systems in which they were participating (“this is why things are as they are here”). Knowledge about the practice of teaching writing is being developed here, examining the personal and immediate meanings of the department’s experience against the more public meanings, ‘extending the reach’ of such ‘momentary flashes’ (Probyn 1993, 4).

This is not to present these data as an example of scales falling away from people’s eyes but as an instance of the participants developing a critical consciousness of the material conditions of their work, framed by the arena of policy and a culture of performance management, but also framed by a set of social relationships that were potentially (and, in this case, actually) open to learning. What became apparent over the first two years of the DETAIL intervention, and subsequently as aspects of the research have informed the development of the OIS’s English programme more generally, was a deceptively simple point: it is necessary for participants (beginning teachers, mentors and the university-based teacher educator) to find themselves in situations that allow them to ‘experience the future’ (Engeström 2007a, 37; emphasis in original), having come to knowledge about the present if the systems and organisations themselves are meant to learn.

Conclusion: learning to teach by experiencing the future

Most new teachers still have to spend a year or more training in higher education before getting a job. This is unattractive for those who do not want to make a long-term commitment to teaching. It also proves wasteful for trainees who find theoretical knowledge learnt in the seminar room to be of little practical use in the classroom. Donald McIntyre and Hazel Hagger were right when they wrote: ‘Classroom teaching expertise cannot in principle be derived from theoretical or idealised views of teaching’. (Freedman, Lipson, and Hargreaves 2008, 26)

If indeed it was the case that teacher education had fallen off the educational policy agenda in England, at the time of writing it has certainly come back on, and with some vigour. Whether it is a knee-jerk reaction to international comparative test data and the hasty emergence of a new master’s level initial qualification to be rolled out for
all teachers in England (TDA 2008); or ‘think-tank’ organisations from both the political left and right that suggest using psychometric testing as an admissions test for prospective teachers (Institute for Public Policy Research [IPPR] 2008) or ‘accelerating’ the move to an entirely school-based form of ‘training’ on a Teach First programme (the UK version of ‘Teach for America’) model (Freedman, Lipson, and Hargreaves 2008); or the requirement for ‘providers’ of teacher education to demonstrate year-on-year improvements in the ‘value’ they ‘add’ to their student teachers (Ofsted 2008), arguments about the purposes, design, location and funding of teacher education in England have once again grown in intensity.

In this climate, I have been suggesting, it is no longer good enough simply to assert that the advantages of learning from school experience for beginning teachers are ‘self-evident’ as that is ‘where the relevant action is’ (Hagger and McIntyre 2006, 44). Nor is it satisfactory to conceptualise the challenge of learning to teach as an individual’s struggle to ‘tap into’ the ‘craft knowledge’ of experienced teachers (Hagger and McIntyre 2006, 181). Such views strengthen the impoverished understanding of experience underpinning both designs for pre-service teacher education in England and in influential accounts of teacher education practice. Fundamentally, this perspective ignores what is being learned as well as the social situation of that learning.

Thus, learning to teach as ‘tapping into’ experienced teachers’ knowledge assumes that what is being tapped into is, at worst, benign. This relativistic view of teacher learning operates on the assumption that there are sufficient experienced teachers in all schools whose ‘craft knowledge’ is at least adequate in terms of young people’s learning. To refer back to the earlier example, this model of teacher education cannot address the issue of schools, departments and teachers whose ‘craft knowledge’ is problematic or, occasionally harmful (such as requiring every young person in a class to use a writing frame). Conceiving of university-based teacher educators’ roles as occasionally offering an alternative view of practice in the school setting is surely an unsustainable model of higher education’s involvement in teacher education when so much research convincingly demonstrates the overwhelming influence of the school as the key site for teacher learning (Bullough 1989; Cook et al. 2002; Zeichner and Tabachnik 1981). It is deeply ironic that some of the most eloquent advocates of teacher education partnerships with schools, while rejecting the ‘idealised’ views of teaching they associate with universities, simultaneously idealise schools and teachers.

In this article I have not been arguing for a form of school-based teacher education that only takes place in exemplary contexts, with exemplary teachers whose practice can be determined to be highly effective. Instead, I have proposed that we begin to view the experience from which beginning teachers learn in schools as the object of inquiry by student teachers, teachers and university-based teacher educators. Such a shift could be described in metaphorical terms as a shift from ‘tapping into’ an individual teacher’s experience to jointly understanding and then experiencing the future of the practices of teaching and learning in the school setting. In terms of an understanding of experience in school-based teacher education, it accepts what Probyn (1993, 5) called the ‘felt facticity of material being’ as crucial to the enterprise of learning to teach but requires much more: a careful examination of the relationship between the ‘articulated and the lived aspects of the social’ (Probyn 1993, 22); an understanding of how what is and what must be came to be so; a dialogue between the
immediacy of primary experience and the future of the activity designated by that experience.

In other words, the ontological ‘felt facticity’ is acknowledged as one starting point but not as a final destination and for teacher learning and that does indeed mean using experience as a means to develop an idealised vision of the future, a prospect, in other words, to learn. So, while experience describes the ‘way of life’, ‘it is also the key to analysing the relations that construct that reality’ (Probyn 1993, 18) and it is in this analytic space that school-based teacher education in England could do so much. This view of participatory, ‘expansive’ (Engeström 1991) learning in the work-place has been promoted for ‘experienced’ teachers in research from the UK Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2005). I have argued that it should be fundamental to the design of pre-service teacher education programmes and have suggested ways in which pre-service education might also have beneficial synergies with teachers’ continuing professional development (Tracey et al. 2008).

The implications for university-based teacher educators and universities of the change in position I have been suggesting are just as profound as they might be for schools. A focus on practice-developing research (of which the DWR work I have mentioned is one example) involves a focus on teacher learning and understanding practice that might well challenge the assumptions of university researchers who view themselves purely as experts in the learning of a school subject. But if teaching is truly to become a master’s-level profession in England, then learning teaching from experience needs to be thought through much more carefully and be organised around a rather different starting point which is that, as far as experience goes, ‘it ain’t necessarily so’.

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Note

1. Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) is a non-executive government agency in England, which grew out of reforms to Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of schools (HMI). In addition to inspecting schools, Ofsted also inspects teacher education in the university sector. On the basis of inspection results, the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA, formerly Teacher Training Agency [TTA]) allocates funding to teacher education programmes. Teacher education is therefore funded differently to the rest of the university sector in England.

References


