Learning teaching from experience: multiple perspectives and international contexts

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BOOK REVIEW


‘What do teachers learn “on the job”? And how, if at all do they learn from experience?’ (Ellis and Orchard, 1). In this way, on the first page, this book immediately foregrounds what the editors characterise as being ‘perhaps the central problem’ for contemporary policymakers and those involved in educating teachers. The first chapter sets the context for the whole book and provides a history of the move to valorise experience alongside the simultaneous erosion of the role of the academy in producing the teacher. The book then opens up into three related sections to deal more specifically with these core questions. The first section explores a range of different perspectives on learning how to teach from experience. The second section draws on international findings in the area and the third section concentrates on the teaching of English, Mathematics and Science. Ken Zeichner draws the book together in a powerful afterword entitled ‘The politics of Learning from Experience’.

Most readers of the Journal of Education for Teaching will need little reminding of the international policy moves that seek to increase the time spent on pre-service teacher education programmes in schools and classrooms. Most readers will be extremely familiar with the discourses of derision that have firmly ‘blamed’ university-led teacher education for a lack of relevancy at the very least and sometimes for even greater faults. What this collection of elegant essays does is to take hold of the need for a more sophisticated, informed approach that moves beyond approaches where ‘learning from experience is uncritically glorified or overly specified’ in order to forensically examine what is involved so that we really have, what Ken Zeichner calls, a greater understanding of ‘the meaning of experience in learning to teach than we have yet seen from either defenders or reformers’ (264).

In the first section, there is a collection of six essays exploring learning teaching from a really wide range of perspectives. I say ‘really wide’ because the chapters are imaginative and eschew the ‘obvious’. Daniel Muijis’ chapter explores Teach First in England, an exemplar of school-focused training and reports that in his empirical study, ‘the standard of teaching … was good but largely focused on whole-class interactive methods and somewhat conservative in nature’ (35). The chapter is followed by an account, by Anne Edwards, that raises critical questions about the dangers of being ‘stuck in a limited and impoverished version (of teacher education) … with little chance of engagement with powerful pedagogic concepts’ (55). Tom Are Trippestad’s work on the English White Paper, The Importance of Teaching (2010), is fascinating as he takes a rhetorical-analytical approach to this text. One key contribution of this chapter is to help those of us in the English context to return to a piece of core policy documentation with a new theoretical lens. The following chapter picks up the central matter of the teacher’s identity to argue that ‘the question of whether teachers learn best by teaching or by learning about teaching is a false debate’ (91). Brad Olsen argues that drawing more directly on what is known about teacher identity can help in bridging this gap and in the following chapter, Eli Ottesen suggests that supporting teachers to ‘tell their stories’ about teaching and learning to teach may help in identifying and sharing the grounded experiences that characterise coming to be a teacher. The final chapter in this first
section is a piece of inspirational writing by Madeleine Grumet which highlights the uncertainty and indeterminacy that is part of teaching and she writes, ‘let me start with a bad thought: after close to 40 years of teaching I am not sure what it means to learn from experience’ (110). Drawing on Deborah Britzman’s work, Madeleine Grumet writes, ‘the acknowledgement of not knowing, and the gift of uncertainty that invites attention, discernment and choice may be what experience has to offer us’ (119) – and here we have a richer, far more sophisticated and (dare I say) more useful connect with experience as more that being in one place rather than being in another place for a period of time.

I have spent some time detailing the contribution of each of the chapters in the first section because together they provide critical and conceptual clarity about the enterprise of the book. The second section draws on a range of different international contexts to explore learning teaching from experience in a series of illuminative case studies. Heidi Pitzer (US) deals with Teach for America and urban schooling and the problems inherent in this programme – something that is picked up by Ken Zeichner in the postscript in his work on urban teacher residency programmes. There is an engaging chapter on ‘Restoring higher education’s mission in teacher education’ from a Canadian perspective. This chapter, prepared by a team of seven teacher-educators led by Elizabeth Sloat, reflects some of the arguments put forward by Anne Edwards in the first section. (One of the neat contributions of this book is the way that chapters complement and extend one another). Paulo Sorzio’s work follows on in a short but detailed case study of teacher education in Italy and his conclusions reinforce the arguments being made in other chapters that ‘when teachers do not recognise reasons to question and reconsider shared presuppositions, experiences tend to be framed rather than transformed’ (172). The next chapter turns to a Norwegian case study written by Anne Line Wittek where portfolio writing is a core tactic in a one-year pre-service programme. Again, there are links with this work and Anne Edwards’ chapter in terms of a sociocultural perspective on becoming a teaching and learning from experience. There are obvious overlaps with teachers’ stories and teacher identities too. The focus in this piece is with supporting beginning teachers in exploring ‘the dynamics and tensions between different experiences’ (187) and this point – that trainee/student teachers have multiple experiences along the way – reflects the nuanced approach taken in this text towards the construction of ‘experience’, a matter frequently not addressed by policy-makers anywhere. The final chapter, by Torie L. Weiston-Sedan and Sheri Dorn-Giarmoleo, explores the branding and commodification that is taking place in initial teacher education programmes. The chapter explores work being undertaken in California and argues that there are grave dangers where corporate structures take over schools, mandate what sort of teachers are needed and move to produce them, an argument that is also raised by Tom Are Trippested in this collection. In a situation where corporations hollow out what is meant by schooling, the teacher becomes a creature of the system, and perhaps loses their soul. This chapter documents the resistance shown towards one such programme (Pearson TPA) at Massachusetts University and argues passionately for a politicised and reflexive form of teacher education that takes up experience in a way that understands identity and the dreams of teachers to transform their classrooms while resisting ‘damaging policy interventions’ such as standardization (201).

Practitioners and subject specialists will welcome the third section that explores learning to teach English, Mathematics and Science. Lauren Gatt’s chapter explores the teaching of English in an urban residency programme. Erik Jacobson’s work is also from the US and explores the teaching of Mathematics in a professional development programme and Shawn Michael Bullock’s work deals with the teaching of science and experiential learning in Canada. The argument is that if ‘teacher candidates come into pre-service programmes grounded in the cultural tradition of teaching as telling, and field experiences tend to be conservative forces, then the methods course may be one of the few places where a teacher-educator can help teacher candidates disrupt and challenge their prior assumptions about teaching and learning and to articulate what
they have learned from experience’ (252). While these are the words of Shawn Michael Bullock, in many ways they stand for the core arguments being made in the third section of this book.

This is an extremely useful book for three reasons: first, the coverage is wide (but what of the southern hemisphere?); second, the reading lists and indexing are invaluable to any student of teacher education and this aspect is sometimes not always well managed in edited collections; and third, all the writers have treated with their readers in a scholarly manner and have used strong theory and imaginative arguments from a wide range of sometimes unexpected sources with the consequence that each piece has a feeling of authenticity about it. A feeling of great respect for the readership is conveyed by this approach. This is also a timely book. It seems to me, working in the English context, that the stakes are high right now. Are we losing the ground that has been slowly won over time that has ensured teacher education a place in the academy? Are we getting too caught up in a ‘defend or reform’ binary as Ken Zeichner warns in this book? Could we seize this moment to get involved in ‘an authoritative argument for the meaning of experience in learning to teach’ (Ellis and Orchard, 15) in the ways outlined in this provocative, informative and scholarly collection.

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