

# Connecting Does Not Necessarily Mean Learning: Course Handbooks as Mediating Tools in School–University Partnerships

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## Abstract

Partnerships between schools and universities in England use course handbooks to guide student teacher learning during long field experiences. Using data from a yearlong ethnographic study of a postgraduate certificate of education programme in one English university, the function of course handbooks in mediating learning in two high school subject departments (history and modern foreign languages) is analyzed. Informed by Cultural Historical Activity Theory, the analysis focuses on the handbooks as mediating tools in the school-based teacher education activity systems. Qualitative differences in the mediating functions of the handbooks-in-use are examined and this leads to a consideration of the potential of such tools for teacher learning in school–university partnerships. Following Zeichner’s call for rethinking the relationships between schools and universities, the article argues that strong structural connections between different institutional sites do not necessarily enhance student teacher learning.

## Keywords

teacher education, student teacher learning, handbooks, mediation, cultural historical activity theory

The relationship between the different institutional sites of teacher learning, their functions, and their potential for coherence has been of enduring interest to curriculum designers and researchers of teacher education. In a recent issue of this journal, Zeichner (2010) argued for a rethinking of the connections between “campus courses” and “field experiences,” on the grounds that “more closely connect[ing]” these social spaces might enhance the learning of student teachers and “better prepare them to be successful” in 21st-century classrooms (p. 89). We wish to contribute to this process of rethinking by suggesting that enhanced structural connections, of the sort alluded to by Darling-Hammond (2009) and many others, need not necessarily lead to enhanced teacher learning and inevitably better outcomes. We do so by referring to the situation in England, where school-based, university-partnered teacher education has been mandatory for 18 years and where the kinds of “idiosyncratic” or “loosely selected placements with little guidance . . . and little connection to university work” described by Darling-Hammond (2009, p. 11) are, generally speaking, no longer the pressing issue.

Increased responsibility for the training of teachers has been given to schools in England for both professional and political reasons. School-based training is intended to emphasize the skills element in learning to teach and thereby, highlights the apparent relevance in student teacher education course content to the task of teaching in schools (Blake, Hanley, Jennings, & Lloyd, 1995). A series of government directives has centralized control by prescribing student

teacher education requirements to establish a national model of student teacher education (Circular 3/84) with a stronger emphasis on the professional development of teachers rather than an academic study of education. Three themes have been identified in the government changes: a reduction in higher education’s contribution to teacher education, attempts to control the form of this input, and the monitoring of compliance (Wilkin, 1999).

The mandated shift to school-based teacher education in England (Department of Education and Science, 1992) arose out of a small number of earlier experiments (see Benton, 1990; Griffiths & Owen, 1995), where close partnerships were developed between university departments of education and enthusiastic school districts. However, in 1992, the school–university partnership model of preservice teacher education was made statutory by central government and implemented in very different situations than those in which the partnership experiments had arisen. Nationally, university departments of teacher education had to implement the partnership model, and different interpretations of partnership have emerged as political priorities have changed (Furlong,

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McNamara, Campbell, Howson, & Lewis, 2008). However, whatever the impetus, teacher education partnerships are now firmly established, with strong structural connections between universities and schools, funded and regulated by central government, and built on contractual and financial arrangements between universities and head teachers (principals).

Since 1992, therefore, universities in England have had to seek ways in which to support and guide their students' learning while placed in schools for long periods of time. One way of achieving this aim has been the preparation and distribution of course handbooks—texts that address both the student teacher and the school-based mentor (the cooperating or supervising teacher). In this article, we focus on these handbooks as tools in the process of learning to teach and we report on research, informed by cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) that investigated how such tools were picked up and used in the activity of school-based teacher education.

### **Different Perspectives on Learning to Teach in England**

Arguments for different types of higher education contribution—and consequently different ways that schools should work with student teachers—have been outlined in the English teacher education research for many years (Barker, 1996; Blake et al., 1995; Ellis, Edwards, & Smagorinsky, 2010; Pring, 1996). Those advancing a more technicist view refer to initial teacher training rather than education and have conceptualized learning to teach as a matter of simply acquiring competence “on the job” (Furlong & Smith, 1996). This viewpoint is disputed from a range of perspectives, including those that privilege teachers' tacit or “craft” knowledge (e.g., Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). Forms of distributed expertise found in the school context have been increasingly identified as key to student teacher learning (e.g., Edwards, Gilroy, & Hartley, 2002). Benefits from school-based learning are therefore seen to arise not only from increasing participation in teaching practices but also in the critical examination of those practices by participants (Ellis, 2010).

However, examining difference and promoting debate and inquiry can be difficult when working in teacher education partnerships (Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004), even though “in a truly effective collaborative relationship, dissimilarities between partners can in fact fuel the kind of intellectual discourse that interrupts traditional thinking and fosters the development of the teacher as knower” (Schulz & Hall, 2004, p. 267). Overly concentrating on prescribed teaching standards limits the opportunities for student teachers to learn, as “a standards-based technicized approach is unlikely to be responsive either to social contexts or to individual needs” (Menter, 2009, p. 226).

A participatory approach to preservice teacher education leads to questions about why good teachers work in the way that they do. This does not view learning simply as a way of understanding “what works,” but recognizes the need to understand why particular strategies work in specific classroom situations. In this school-based approach, one of the mentor teachers' aims is to help student teachers understand the local setting and its practices. Therefore, experienced teachers help student teachers interpret and respond to events by sharing their expertise and local knowledge. Such a socio-cultural pedagogy aims at assisting learners' participation in school communities where knowledge is used and constructed (Edwards et al., 2002; Ellis et al., 2010) and therefore highlights the importance of field experiences (known in England as “school placements”) in teacher preparation. We can identify no research that investigates the function of course handbooks in teacher education in England. Although they are not mandatory in the policy framework, they are commonly seen as one way of guiding school activities for student teachers and school mentors and act as a means of communication between schools and the higher education institution running the teacher education course. In England, course handbooks may therefore be considered as one of a range of tools that participants in school-based teacher education may pick up and use in their joint work on teacher learning.

### **Designing the Research**

Against the historical background of strong structural connections between schools and universities in England, the question that guided the research reported here asked whether and how preservice teacher education course handbooks mediate the learning of student teachers during long field experiences. We offer an analysis of how such handbooks are used by mentors and students to support student teachers' learning during a one-year postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) programme in England (the PGCE is the equivalent of the Master of Arts in Teaching [MAT]). We look specifically at the handbooks-in-use in two subject departments in one high school; we are not seeking to understand everything the student teachers were learning, how and where. Our focus is exclusively on the mediation of the student teachers' learning by the material and symbolic tool of the PGCE course handbook, one manifestation of these strong connections that exist between English schools and universities.

The data derive from a yearlong ethnographic study (2006-2007) exploring school-based teacher education work with 15 student teachers in four subject departments (geography, history, modern foreign languages [MFL], and science; Douglas, 2009). All of the student teachers were taking secondary PGCEs and came from one university's programme (which we will call Downtown University). Downtown University's teacher education programmes were highly

successful by any of the available measures—government inspection reports; student evaluation outcomes; the annual, national government survey of newly qualified teachers; the number of graduating students securing first teaching posts; and the “health” of the partnership in terms of the number of schools wishing to participate. The school in which the student teachers were placed (which we will refer to as Britley High School) was a successful coeducational high school situated in a small market town that had been part of Downtown University’s teacher education partnership for more than 15 years.

The data for this study were generated in response to two research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What are the opportunities for student teacher learning in different subject departments in one high school?

*Research Question 2:* How are course handbooks used in the activity of school-based teacher education?

These questions were addressed through participant observation of 62 meetings between student teachers and their mentors; 27 meetings between university tutors, mentors, and student teachers; 60 semistructured interviews with mentors, teachers, student teachers, and university tutors; and numerous occasions observing social interaction in subject department “team rooms.” The data set comprises extensive field notes written in situ and transcripts of recordings of formal meetings such as interviews. The four department mentors were each interviewed twice, once at the start of the field experience and once at the end. The mentors in the history and MFL departments were both experienced teachers and had worked at Britley High School for more than 10 years. However, the MFL mentor had worked with student teachers for five years and the history mentor for just two years. The other mentors from the science and geography departments had also mentored for just two years and were less experienced teachers, both in their fourth year of teaching.

Data were initially generated iteratively to be open to the situation. Gaining familiarity with the field guided initial data generation noting all aspects that seemed relevant to the learning opportunities of student teachers. The four school departments had important atypical features, relationships, and situations, but they were mainly chosen opportunistically as they were the only departments at Britley High School that took part in Downtown’s PGCE course. Familiarization with the data was partly influenced by an interactive approach outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Initial coding was done on the use of course handbooks. Qualitative data analysis software was used to label the transcribed field notes and interview transcripts. Interpretations of how the course handbooks were used were developed in analytic memos with longer papers produced comparing and contrasting different activities in different departments. Consequently, general procedures adopted for analyzing

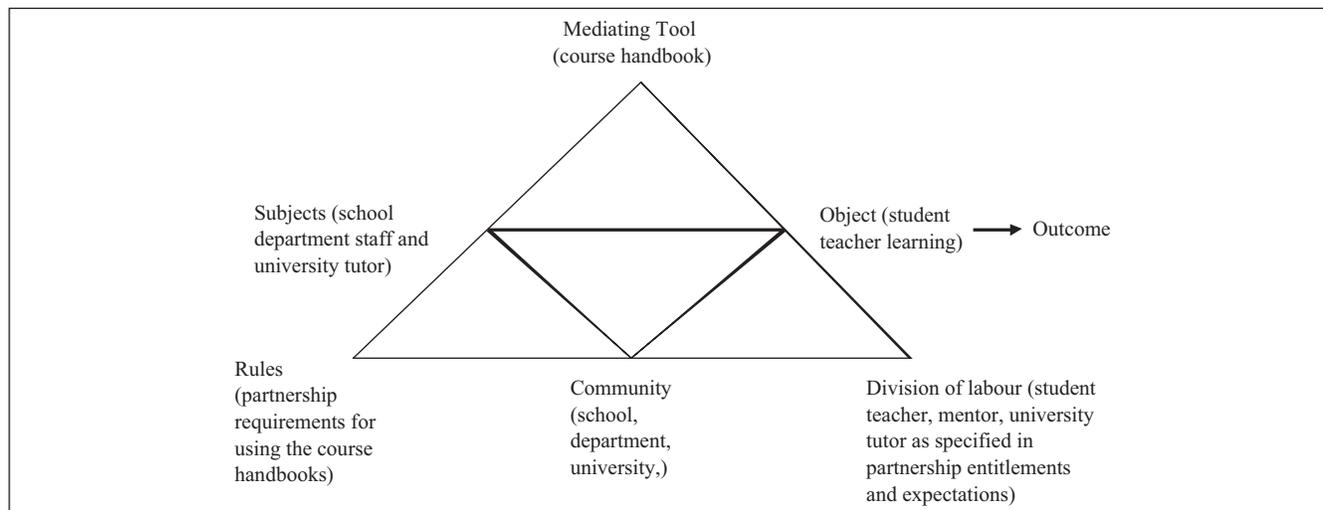
data were by immersion in the data with the aim of generating areas for collation and comparison. A CHAT analytical lens was then applied to the initial iterative data analysis to identify the handbooks as tools in the activity (see Douglas, 2010, for examples of how the data were analyzed).

For the purposes of this article, we are focusing on data generated during the first (long) field experience, beginning in September and ending as a full-time placement the following April. The data, although highly selective for our purpose here, are nonetheless representative of those throughout the research. Our reason for selecting history and MFL department data for discussion is that they represent two quite distinctive occasions for analyzing the mediating function of handbooks in student teacher learning and are also illustrative of broader differences in ways of working on teacher learning in school.

In seeking to understand how the Downtown University course handbooks are used by mentors and student teachers in promoting and supporting learning in the history and MFL departments in Britley High School, our analysis is informed by CHAT, in particular the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Leont’ev (1981), Cole (1996), Wertsch (2007), and Engeström (1987, 1999). The potential strength of a CHAT analysis in trying to address this question is that it focuses attention on learning as a social phenomenon, a process that takes place within social systems that have evolved culturally and historically and that offer participants in those systems certain physical or psychological tools with which to work on a shared object or societally significant goal. It is to these relevant concepts in our CHAT analytical framework that we turn in the next section.

## Analyzing Teacher Learning in Practice: A CHAT Perspective

Vygotsky (1986) proposed a relationship between the human subject and their environment that was mediated by *tools* that had developed over time within specific cultures. From a CHAT perspective, tools can be broadly material (or practical) or psychological. The prime example of a mediating psychological tool for Vygotsky was spoken language (Vygotsky, 1986), where speech is regarded as being in a reciprocal relationship with the development of thinking. Tools develop historically and are therefore regarded as distinctively “human creations [that] include norms of cognition and imply ways of action” (Miettinen, 2005, p. 299). For Wertsch (2007), this mediating function of tools also demonstrated the “foundation for another of Vygotsky’s theoretical goals, namely building a link between social and historical processes, on the one hand, and individuals’ mental processes, on the other” (p. 178). In other words, tool use reveals something about the cultures within which the tools have developed as well as the thinking of those who work with them and, further, highlights the relationship between these two, social and historical, processes.



**Figure 1.** A potential teacher education activity system in relation to the use of course handbooks

In conceptualizing the action of human subjects on their social worlds as *activity*, CHAT emphasizes the importance of the volitional, object-oriented, collective nature of the action (Cole, 1996). *Object*, in a CHAT analysis, is understood as the potentially shared problem or societally significant goal that humans are working on. Leont'ev (1981) described the object of activity as “its true motive” (p. 59) and one of the insights that a CHAT perspective affords is the analysis of multiple motives working on the same object and distinguishing a diversity of motives among those (collectively) in the subject position. A way of thinking about the links of what people do and why is offered by the concept of *activity systems*: “historically conditioned systems of relations among individuals and their proximal, culturally organized environments” (Cole & Engeström, 1997, p. 12). As participants in activity systems rarely talk in terms of how they construct and interpret the object of their activity, it is nonetheless possible for researchers to understand how the object is being construed by analyzing how the participants use the available tools (Stetsenko, 2005).

Our interest in this article is in how material and symbolic tools are used in the activity of learning to teach, specifically the use of PGCE course handbooks. The central methodological concept is therefore that of *mediation*. Wertsch (2007) distinguished between what he saw as Vygotsky’s “two perspectives on mediation” (p. 179). Explicit mediation is defined as when tools are “purposefully introduced into human action” (Wertsch, 2007, p. 181). This form of mediation is also explicit in that “the materiality of the stimulus means, or signs involved, tends to be obvious and non-transitory” (Wertsch, 2007, p. 180). Wertsch turns to Vygotsky’s discussions of the role of language in mediating human consciousness to supply an example of implicit mediation. Implicit mediation is much more difficult to discern and to trace. Wertsch attributes qualities such as “ephemeral” and “fleeting” to the process of

implicit mediation and notes that “implicit mediation typically does not need to be artificially or intentionally introduced into ongoing action” (Wertsch, 2007, p.180), seeing it instead as part of an “ongoing communicative stream” or series of social exchanges.

Although our focus is on course handbooks as tools that mediate student teachers’ learning, we also draw in part on Engeström’s (1987, 1999) second generation of activity theory (see Figure 1 for an adaptation of Engeström’s prototypical activity system in relation to the use of course handbooks). Engeström’s elaboration of the bottom line of the triangular representation of the activity system (*rules, community, and division of labor*) is intended to help researchers understand how the process of mediation may be related to the structures of power within particular social systems, how they have developed, and how they play out in practice. Activity systems, Engeström (1993) noted, are not “homogenous entities” and learning is not necessarily linear or vertical but complex, “horizontal” (Engeström, 1996), and “subterranean” (Engeström, 2007; see also Ellis, 2007a, 2007b with specific reference to teacher education).

In this article, our focus is on how PGCE course handbooks mediate student teachers’ learning in what is an essentially school-based form of teacher education. As such we will focus on how these tools are used, specifically in relation to the object of the activity systems in which mentors, university tutors, and student teachers are participating. In seeking to understand the process of mediation in relation to the question of the object of activity, we have followed Kaptelinin and Miettinen (2005) in focusing on the evolution of the tool (the PGCE course handbook), the negotiation of its meaning among those who participate in the processes of mediation, and the social structures that afford and constrain these negotiations.

## Handbooks-in-Use: Mediating Tools and Social Exchanges

### *The Handbooks as Material Tools: Description and Evolution*

Subject handbooks were perceived to be important in the Downtown teacher education partnership, both within the university and in the schools. All the handbooks contained details of the course assignments, the university and school-based programmes, and assessment information. In the four curriculum subjects that were part of the larger study, they were presented in plasticized binders, ranging in length from 148 to 238 pages. They were also supplemented with other information (e.g., separate guidance leaflets for mentors). The handbooks were divided into separate sections and, although the organization of these differed between the subjects, the design of the binder (including physical size, color scheme, layout, and font) suggested a consistent, corporate “brand” across the different subject areas. Handbooks are introduced to student teachers at the start of the course and used as a resource to explain the structure and purpose of the teacher education programme. Similarly, mentors receive the handbook at their first meeting in the university before the school placements begin. Amendments and developments in relation to the school field experience requirements are discussed each year in these meetings with the university faculty being responsible for producing the handbooks. Although not used specifically for lesson content or to replace the schemes of work produced in schools for subject lessons, the handbooks give guidance on lesson planning and evaluation. The university mentor meeting may also act as a forum for discussions on the handbook’s design.

Overall, the History handbook (238 pages) was the most detailed, outlining the week-by-week expectations of the student teachers with links to the national standards for preservice teachers and sample document templates (of lesson plans and student teacher profiles) to illustrate how these may be completed. The MFL handbook (176 pages) differed in that it was composed of a number of separate lists of expected tasks for the school placements, but these were not presented as part of a weekly programme (unlike the other subjects) and therefore, suggested some flexibility as to when they were to be completed. There were also many optional activities outlined. The differing degree of specification in the handbooks and how this affected their use is commented on in our findings, which suggest that what may appear as a prescriptive design may not necessarily encourage an instrumental approach.

In the MFL and History handbooks, there was a clear sense of a conceptual rationale underpinning the tasks, activities and guidance. For example, in MFL,

We hope that you will adopt this theoretical model of learning throughout your teaching career. (MFL handbook, p. 3)

We will discuss the different ways by which you might learn to become a language teacher against the backdrop of a theoretical model for the course as a whole. (MFL handbook, p. 17)

In history, there was an extensive reading list intended for the days student teachers were working in the university and for each of the six main themes in the history programme. The purpose of engaging with the activities was clearly outlined with an emphasis on developing a high level of critical thinking and a “critical understanding of teaching through which you can extend your professional development in the future” (History handbook, p. 124).

Typically, weekly school-based tasks in both handbooks were addressed directly to the student teacher. History tasks often took the form of a number of highly specified activities; for example,

Reading for week 11

(i) Black *et al.* (2002), (ii) Butler (2004)

Complete your evaluation question sheet for Friday 20 November.

Plan for your teaching next week. You should have formal, written lesson plans and written evaluations, preferably on the plans.

Finalise work on poster presentation (see week 9). (History handbook, p. 153)

In MFL, it was more typical for a number of general requirements to be addressed to the reader and for the student teachers to be expected to make sense of how and when they were completed. For example:

It is your responsibility in consultation with your mentor, to ensure that you have a comprehensive programme of observation of experienced teachers. You should take notes on all 10 categories of lesson observation throughout A weeks [the first part of the placement] and should aim to answer most of the “for you to do” questions asked in each one. (MFL handbook, p. 36)

In terms of their historical evolution, all of the handbooks had been written by the PGCE tutors or their predecessors and were potentially open to continuous revision. Some text was shared across all subject handbooks (e.g., assessment criteria, entitlements to certain kinds of school-based experience, etc.), but most had been developed within the different subject areas. Although potentially contributing to the handbooks during regularly scheduled mentor meetings, the MFL and history mentors considered their input as minimal compared with the contribution of the university faculty. Discussions with regard to the clarity of the handbooks’ instructions and

to timetabled arrangements for outlined tasks occurred in these meetings rather than the initiation of developments in the handbooks themselves.

The history tutor (and the university's lead tutor for that subject) had worked on the handbook for more than 20 years and was able to outline significant changes that have happened over the period:

What we have now is unrecognisable . . . it is far more comprehensive; secondly the way in which it is structured changed very significantly when I did my own doctorate. The attempt has been to structure it much more evidently in terms of the nature of experience that student teachers get in school. (Interview, August 14)

The MFL tutor had also made significant contributions over eight or nine years. She made many changes to the course and handbook, importing a lot of ideas developed during her previous teacher education work at another university. Both tutors were able to talk about how their subject handbooks had evolved over the years and were able to describe significant changes. For history, developments were associated with the history tutor's own doctoral study and, particularly, the way in which he conceptualized how student teachers learn in schools. For MFL, developments were associated with the tutor's research programme and with providing a "theoretical model" (MFL handbook, pp. 3, 17) for second language learning. These factors contributed to our decision to focus on the MFL and History handbooks-in-use in this article.

### Handbook-in-Use: History Programme

Unlike the MFL mentor, the history mentor did not refer to the handbook regularly or explicitly in meetings with the student teacher. However, an exchange such as the following showed the mentor's awareness that the handbook could be used with the student teacher, as a tool to organize their learning:

Mentor: Shall we try looking in the book at what we're meant to be talking about, because we keep forgetting to do that?

Student teacher: What should we have done? (Field notes, November 22)

The mentor's flexibility ensured that the handbook did not drive the meetings, and frequently, the student teacher came to them with her own agenda and list of questions to discuss. However, the mentor was aware of the university requirements in the handbook and produced his own version of weekly topics for discussion, as he felt that the handbook was too "overloaded." Adapting the tool in this way was very well received by the history tutor who emphasized that

the course should be tailored to student teachers' requirements: "We are not trying to distort a reality there but work with it" (Interview with history tutor, August 14).

This mentor's approach to using the handbook as a tool in working on the student teacher's learning showed a confidence in deciding what was appropriate and when, with the mentor occasionally questioning the suggestions in the handbook. Consequently, some tasks were not completed, and this ensured that mentor meetings were responsive to the immediate social situation of the student teacher's learning. Therefore, discussions referred to the student teacher's experience; forms were not filled in as a bureaucratic requirement; and talk arose out of a specific context of current concerns and ideas, linking what was happening in school with the university programme. The handbook as a tool was seen to enable discursive mediation of the student teacher's learning and allowed diverse perspectives to be opened up for examination. The following exchange (extracted from a longer interaction) took place during a mentor meeting fairly early on in the student teacher's full-time placement in school in response to an activity set out in the History handbook:

[Mentor returns the student teacher's written activity (required by the handbook) with scribbles on the word-processed work. The focus of the activity was the importance and use of historical sources.]

Student teacher: In year 7, I started with sources which [History teacher 1] said were too difficult.

Mentor: Do we need to put other layers in first, raising tension in how we use sources? What are our ideas about students involved in history as a way of thinking about things? Why do students think they do history? Do they view sources as something they get facts from? Their levels of understanding—how do we make the link with practice? Differentiation in your poster example—you know when they hand the work in what they understood. Put in the case study how you realised the issues.

Student teacher: [Pupil] who has got the talk gets level 3 but when written, when he uses the source, he is level 1 [referring to national curriculum levels, which range from 1 to 8].

Mentor: The source is giving perspective on the issue, how do sources lead you into differentiation? Note the contention in three sources—how do students realise the overlap? Support? Concept of source evaluation—how far are they challenged by literacy barriers? They may understand how it works and can't write it down and vice versa.

. . . What kind of questions can you use in class? Would you change them on reflection? How are you developing inference skills?

Student teacher: Some could develop that in poster lessons. [Lessons that use posters as sources for

historical analysis.] I see [History teacher 2] and [History teacher 3] in lessons trying to draw out inferences from sources. Would that be worth doing? Scaffolding – pros and cons of frameworks. I presume they [the pupils] ignore me when they don't want to do it. (Field notes, January 17)

Even though the student teacher is on the receiving end of many questions here, they are largely rhetorical in function; their purpose appears to be to demonstrate that there are no easy answers. Three different teachers, including the mentor, are mentioned, showing awareness of the collective work of the history department. Such exploratory and deeply contextualized talk opens up important distinctions in the conversation, raising questions that cannot be answered immediately but act as stimuli for future dialogue about the use-value of sources in history. This recognition of ongoing and dialogic exploration was typical of the discussions in history mentor meetings throughout the long field experience. The way the handbook is used as a tool can be seen as initiating dialogue by extending the activity that the student teacher has completed. The joint reflection introduces ideas that might extend the discussion, now and in the future.

The History handbook emphasized the key role that the mentor played in the school placement and positioned him as someone with responsibility for the student teacher's learning. In response to a question about the purpose of the handbook, the history tutor said:

It is meant to be an integrated programme so we all needed to have the same stuff. But the green sheets, which is the bit addressed to mentors. Those were specifically written with mentors in mind given that it is their responsibility to organise the programme in school and in order to make the overall programme sheets manageable they are very much a sort of quick summary of what should be happening. (Interview with tutor, August 14)

This explicitly shared understanding is designed to encourage all parties to fulfill what is clearly presented as a major responsibility within a clear division of labor, and the handbook, therefore, acts as a reminder of how the student teachers should, ideally, be learning in the school placement. It also reinforces the understanding that the learning activity is a collective enterprise, that is "stretched over" (Lave, 1988) participants in the teacher education partnership and aspects of their environment, including the explicitly mediating tool of the course handbook and implicitly mediating mentor–student teacher dialogue.

### Handbook-in-Use: MFL Programme

Although the MFL mentor herself did not use the handbook in mentor meetings with her student teachers and was pre-

pared to organize the mentor meetings around what they wished to talk about, she nevertheless said in interview that she saw her role in part as "keeping an eye, and making [the student teachers] keep an eye on the enormous amount of paperwork" (Interview with mentor, January 10). With just such an "eye" on an impending visit by the MFL tutor, she would ask if the paperwork was up to date but rarely looked at their teaching files herself (lesson plans, resources, evaluations, etc.). Again, in interview, she said "paperwork is not me and at this stage in my life is never going to be me" (Interview with mentor, January 10). Often, she used the MFL handbook as a material symbol of university authority in the partnership but did so in a very different way compared with the history mentor. In conversation with the student teachers, she positioned herself in relation to the handbook as an "academic" text with intentions that were rarely realistic in the "real world" of school, words used by the mentor herself in a mentor meeting (Field notes, January 30). Throughout the placement, there were numerous occasions when she appeared to collude with the student teachers to circumvent the learning intentions of the MFL handbook. For example, in the following exchange, the mentor appears to be coaching the student teachers to deal with the handbook's requirements in a rather superficial way. The mentor and the student teachers (two were placed in this department) are reviewing a list of tasks in the handbook that should have been completed by this point in the school placement (A weeks refer to the first part of the placement and B weeks the second):

Mentor: Sorry folks, B week tasks?

Student teacher 1: Have we finished A week ones?

Mentor: I saw in the student evaluation sheet given out at the Downtown meeting that as adult learners you do not need constant reminders—I bet that was aimed at me.

[They all go through the lists saying what they feel they have done and what they are unsure about.]

Student teacher 1: Oh God

Mentor: I wish I knew what that meant.

Student teacher 1: Let's just say we have done GNVQ materials.

Mentor: But it might be checked. You could say you have seen the Business and Tourism thing [referring to the Business and Tourism General National Vocational Qualification]—you can't see what isn't done.

[They continue checking the list of activities.]

Student teacher 2: Questionnaire; a year 7 class in the autumn term— not done

Mentor: Drat I am going to ignore that feedback and just keep nagging you

Student teacher 1: There must be people who just don't do it

Mentor: Tick off what you have done—cobble some kind of survey together. You have to create a questionnaire

so do one together; an example can be asking if they did MFL in primary school and for how long. (Field notes, January 31)

Here the handbook is seen as a checklist, and it is used efficiently, though instrumentally, to appear to comply with the bureaucratic requirements of the course. The mentor does not see some of the tasks set as a priority for the student teachers' learning, and this is reflected in her word choices, for instance when she suggests a survey could be "cobbled" together.

Similarly, in this exchange, the mentor is explicitly encouraging a strategy to help the student teachers respond to the MFL tutor's anticipated question about uncompleted tasks:

Mentor: B week tasks—say you have set them up for the following week. To be morally right, they ought to be done. Validly you can say that you kept tasks back, as you wanted to keep up your teaching. She [MFL tutor] will be fair.

Student teacher: She is really fair.

Mentor: So say what you know is outstanding but it is mapped in.

Student teacher 2: Other tasks? Evaluation of text book/ CD Rom etc?

Student teacher: She won't do that.

Mentor: She won't do that but you have discussed with colleagues. She won't be unduly picky—we have generally said that *Deutsch Heute 3* [a textbook] is rubbish. (Field notes, February 28)

In the hands of the MFL mentor and student teachers, the handbook has become, at least in part, a "dreaded list," a pawn in a strategy ("validly you can say") with the MFL tutor during school visits. Although the mentor and student teachers regarded the tutor as fair (and elsewhere in the data appear to hold her in high regard), the mentor usually paid lip service to making sure all the tasks were completed in a way that enabled the items to be "ticked off" but without impacting negatively on the priority of the student teachers' taking on of a teaching timetable. The necessity of ticking off the tasks was often viewed strategically, with the intention of satisfying the visiting MFL tutor with the appearance of compliance ("You don't want someone to suspect and then start looking at the work in detail"; Field notes, January 17). Indeed, the first question the mentor had for the student teachers after one assessment visit by the tutor was "did [she] say anything about the paperwork?" (Field notes, March 28).

The pressures of fulfilling what the mentor and student teachers perceived as the handbook's bureaucratic requirements were seen as in tension with dialogue about teaching in school and served to insulate the ostensible learning

intentions of the teacher education partnership from the daily working practices of the school MFL department. This suggests that the university's motive of enabling student teacher learning is, for the mentor and student teachers, directly in tension with their perceptions of fulfilling the requirements of the course. In other words, the *objects* of their activities are not shared; the PGCE course handbook's rhetorical actions and the mentor's social actions were directed toward rather different goals. The detailed guidance in the handbook for guiding the student teachers' learning was not seen as relevant to the activities taking place in the school, where teaching classes and "having a timetable" were seen as the main goal. One student teacher explained in interview:

Some of them [the handbook tasks] I think are a waste of time like the shadowing of a MFL teacher because that means that you have to take a whole day out of the timetable . . . I think the emphasis should be on teaching, and learning from that. (Interview with MFL student teacher 1, February 22)

The course handbook is perceived as a diversion from teaching in the MFL department. There is an apparent contradiction in the recognition that the handbook is intended to help student teachers learn but at the same time adds to their pressures of working in the school placement. It seems that, in use in the MFL department, the handbook has become a set of rules or regulations that is perceived to be set by, and subject to the external monitoring of, the MFL tutor—a rather different division of labor to the one that had evolved in the history department.

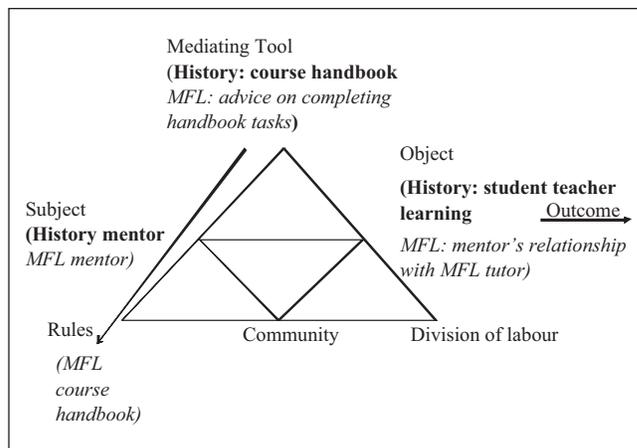
### **From Connecting to Achieving Coherence: The Mediating Function of Tools in Learning to Teach**

In seeking to explain the different ways in which the MFL and History handbooks are picked up and used within the school department teacher education activity systems, it is important to note that we do not seek to make any evaluative comment on the quality of these processes. As we stated at the outset, there is good evidence from a variety of sources that the various subject programmes within the Downtown teacher education partnership are successful and highly valued. Rather, we are concerned with trying to understand why the history and MFL course handbooks serve rather different functions and why the negotiations and social exchanges around the handbooks in the course of mentoring activity have such a different character and lead to such different kinds of learning. Nonetheless, focusing on the MFL and History handbooks as they figure in the work of subject department mentoring has enabled us to

reveal important distinctions between handbooks as mediating tools in relation to the object of the activity systems in which these cultural tools have emerged over time and also in relation to the concept of partnership teacher education that organizes the work socially (the rules and the division of labor).

In both history and MFL departments, PGCE course handbooks are intrusions. Our analysis of the History handbook-in-use shows how a purposefully introduced tool can be implicitly mediated through dialogue and has the potential to make a qualitative difference to student teachers' learning. In other words, the History handbook—developed over a long period and drawing on new knowledge developed over that period—informs the mentoring practices and the dialogic interaction not in the sense of direct quotation but in the way that ideas from the text come to inhabit the social exchanges and negotiations of the mentor and the student teacher around the handbook in the course of the mentoring activity. The extent to which there is a shared object in this activity system is revealed not by the degree of compliance (with what are often quite highly specified weekly tasks) but through the sense of continuing joint work on a shared problem and of ways of thinking and interacting that are embedded within the handbook-as-tool. The object of the activity system was the learning of the student teacher, learning to teach history in the Britley High School History department within the Downtown University teacher education partnership. Participants in the system, including the history tutor, regarded the handbook itself as a *means* to an end, the end and the motive being, in part, becoming an effective teacher of history. In and of itself, the handbook as a material tool did not lead directly to learning as some sort of “input” but instead had become a site for some shared understandings about how one learns to teach history. Therefore, the History handbook as a cultural tool could be said to have achieved some “functional coherence” (Miettinen, 2005, p. 60) in the various collaborators' work on the object of activity. The History handbook reveals its cultural significance in the way that its historical development has become written into the text and is then rewritten by mentors and student teachers *out of it* in a coherent relation to the object of their joint activity. To put it another way, there is room for the agency of all of the participants in the system as they work together to envision a future for their joint activity.

Engeström (2007) has categorized levels of tool mediation based on the type of epistemic or knowledge-work the tool affords. In the case of the History handbook-in-use in Britley High School, the handbook can be interpreted as a “where to?” tool—a mediating tool that has an envisioning, future-oriented, and ideas-driven set of affordances for student teacher learning. Therefore, when the handbook is used, it helps to initiate discussion about future activity. These open out ideas that test thinking and question practice, which can then potentially lead to changing practice. Such discussions



**Figure 2.** The course handbook “slipping” from a tool in the history to a rule in the MFL department ITE activity systems  
Note: MFL = modern foreign languages.

are vital as they acknowledge that the object of student teacher learning is a continually changing one.

In the MFL department, the handbook has come to be used rather differently. Indeed, there *are* direct quotations from it in mentor meetings (by the student teachers, who read from it) and the mentor explicitly draws attention to it as a distinct, material tool in the social exchanges around it. It is associated by the mentor and the student teachers with the regulations of the Downtown University teacher education partnership and with the external authority of the MFL tutor. The function of the handbook within the MFL student teacher education activity system at Britley High is interpreted as a set of rules rather than as a flexible tool that can be adjusted to the specific needs of the student teachers; in the course of activity, the purposefully introduced tool has “slipped” around the triangular representation of the system (see Figure 2) to become a rule (see Ellis, 2008) within this community, and a rather different division of labor has grown up around it.

Therefore, the MFL handbook as a tool does not work in the same way as that of the History handbook. In the MFL setting, the object of the activity system in which the handbook has become a rule is the mentor's relationship with the MFL tutor within the hierarchical social structures of a school–university teacher education partnership in which the university is privileged. The MFL mentor was observed working with the handbook and the student teachers very strategically to contrive a good working relationship with the tutor and to seek the tutor's positive view of their work by foregrounding compliance with a rather superficial interpretation of the tool.

The status of the MFL handbook as a mediating tool (its “level” of mediation)—and the object of the MFL student teacher education activity system—are much more difficult to interpret than was the case in history. In part, this is because an analytic focus on the handbook as a mediating tool does not necessarily allow us to understand how the object is constructed and negotiated in the MFL student

teacher education activity system. Other tools may have figured in equally complex ways in mediating MFL student teachers' learning in the Britley High School MFL department. However, we would suggest, in observing the social exchanges around the MFL handbook, it was not easy to discern whether there was a focus on the student teachers' learning that might be construed as a shared object at all. In Engeström's (2007) terms, the MFL handbook works at the level of a "how?" mediating tool—concerned with the order and sequence of actions, "timelines, plans, scripts, heuristic rules" (p. 34). The "how?" mediating tool is not perceived as having the same set of expansive and developmental affordances as the "where to?" tool and can be associated with a qualitatively different kind of learning.

In understanding these differences and the question of the object of activity for MFL mentor and student teachers, it is useful to refer to the MFL tutor's own explanation of differences between curriculum subjects in the Downtown University teacher education partnership:

I think we are a bit different from the other departments . . . because of the research background, MFL and Maths have a big, big research literature and all that literature is starting with the learners. Whereas very much the teacher education literature I think, I am not criticising here, I am just saying the difference, like History hasn't got a big how do kids learn History background, and so they focus on how do student teachers develop over the course of a year. (MFL tutor interview, July 3)

We anticipate that history education specialists would disagree about traditions of research in the subject just as teacher education researchers will disagree with the characterization of their work. Nevertheless, one explanation of the different ways in which these handbooks figured in mentors' and student teachers' work on learning to teach those subjects is that in history there was a strong, shared focus on the *student teachers* as learners, and this phenomenon seemed to be of intellectual interest in the partnership. Whereas in MFL, the interest was more from the MFL tutor's perspective, demonstrating the relevance of a particular theoretical model of second language learning, and from the mentor's perspective, socializing the student teachers into the process of being an MFL teacher in a way that could be described as "teaching by proxy" (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004) and in enculturating them into the habit of being a MFL teacher at Britley High. These differing perspectives and competing purposes may illustrate diverging interpretations of what it means to be a teacher. But whatever the different objects and motives of participants in the MFL teacher education activity systems, the fundamental point is that they were not seen to be shared and the kinds of negotiations between participants in the partnership that would allow a shared object to emerge did not seem possible.

## Conclusion: "Where to?" Tools and "Third Spaces" in Learning to Teach

We began this article with a brief reference to the evolution of partnership teacher education in England through various innovations and experiments that were subsequently co-opted by policy. Course handbooks are one of the most obvious manifestations of the strong structural connections between universities and schools. Potentially, at least, they are cultural tools that arise out of ways of working and ways of thinking about teaching and learning and are intended to feed back into and inform (implicitly *and* explicitly) those ways of working and thinking over time. If this intention is genuine and desirable (rather than regarding the handbook simply as a form of public relations or as a set of structural regulations), then we suggest that school–university teacher education partnerships in England might consider these handbooks as tools that need "to be made into a meaningful part of the reader's own life and work" (Stetsenko, 2005, p. 501). Understanding the course handbook as a mediating tool means regarding it as part of a process of meaning-making; requiring continual attention not so much to the handbook's "content" but for what it potentially signifies within the activity systems within which it circulates. Relationships between participants in this meaning-making process need to be open to learning; there needs to be some freedom of movement within the activity systems, some space for participants' agency, in order for qualitatively expansive or transformative learning to happen. Course handbooks, as living texts of partnership teacher education that have emerged over time from the complex interactions between schoolteachers and university-based teacher educators, undoubtedly have a mediating potential for student teachers but only if they continue to evolve within living partnerships focused on teacher learning.

If one thinks that mandatory, comparatively well-resourced, and long-established partnerships will inevitably lead to better teacher learning outcomes, the research reported here, focusing on the key material and symbolic tool of the PGCE course handbook, suggests that this is not necessarily true. Rather this article suggests that it is both the meaning of partnership and the kinds of knowledge different partners bring to the process of teacher education that need to be the focus. In his recent article, Zeichner (2010) called for the creation of hybrid or "third spaces" in which university faculty, schoolteachers, and teacher candidates come together to work on teacher education and also, by implication, school and academic development. The challenge, as he noted, is one of social hierarchy and knowledge creation: Universities and schools, institutionally, have different objects, rules, and divisions of labor, but they are also required to work with different conceptual tool-kits. Seeking to minimize the potential standoff between *academic* and *practitioner* knowledge, and therefore to enhance the learning of student teachers,

means rethinking both the social relationships and the processes of abstracting knowledge from experience. Although there is much to gain for the activity of teacher education from the creation of third spaces and hybrid practices, there is also something for partners to lose—some power or authority or grounds for credibility to give up on both sides. So far from simply being a matter of strong structural connections and the effective sharing of information between all partners, school–university teacher education partnerships are also difficult spaces where a qualitatively new, hybrid activity can only emerge if all partners are willing to examine—at a conscious level—the potential for a shared object and engage in the sort of conversations that take them away from what they might regard as their “core concerns”—whether it is the transmission of “research findings” to practitioners or competence in the day-to-day teaching habits of a school subject. We believe that the case of England and the specific research we have reported here makes the nature and degree of this challenge clear.

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