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Lebor, Merv

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Original Citation

Lebor, Merv (2013) War and peace in the classroom: moments of reprieve; a strategy for reflecting on – and improving – students' classroom behaviour. Teaching in lifelong learning: a journal to inform and improve practice, 5 (1). pp. 21-31. ISSN 2040-0993

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War and peace in the classroom: moments of reprieve; a strategy for reflecting on – and improving – students' classroom behaviour

Merv Lebor
Leeds City College
HUDCETT

Abstract
In this article I intend to outline a strategy for supporting trainee teachers on Certificate in Education (Cert Ed) and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses in developing their ability to deal with disruptive student behaviour in their classes. I describe a particular class-based, peer-reflective practice and demonstrate how this has been effective in impacting on helping trainees to deal with teaching disruptive or challenging groups.

The rationale for exploring this issue, and the problematic national context in which disruptive student behaviour takes place, is outlined. I then explore a strategy for offering trainee support and peer reflection by sharing a case study of two trainees' classes where students were particularly disruptive. I examine how this reflective strategy helped support these trainees to improve their practice. Before concluding, some epistemological questions are raised as to the problematics of how teachers know whether improvements took place.

Rationale
There is a deep interest, anxiety and concern amongst trainees and tutors about the issue of dealing with disruptive, challenging or difficult classes (Rushton, 2010; Spiers, 2011; Mulholland, 2012). My previous article on this issue (Lebor, 2013) has provoked considerable response in terms of many emails offering analysis, discussion and questions, and tutors sharing their experiences. In February 2013 I interviewed a group of Cert Ed trainees at a particular college, henceforth known as Cleangate College, who said their main anxiety on their course was students' challenging behaviour and class control, which corroborates research that student bad behaviour is the key negative experience of being a trainee tutor (Hobson et al, 2009). The concern is extant and the situation is arguably getting worse (Sellgren, 2013). Many teachers have to face insulting and aggressive behaviour as an aspect of their teaching lives (Townend, 2013). Teachers need to find ways to cope with these situations, develop resilience, receive necessary support and offload the stress that challenging or disruptive classes pose for them. In this article I put forward a strategy for achieving this in a teacher education context.

The wider context
The notion of improving practice in Lifelong Learning is part of the title of this journal, but is also currently a dominant aspect of the discourse of surveillance (Ball, 2004; Watters, 2007) where models of improvement assume that things are or might get better (O'Leary, 2006). The new Ofsted regime of observing teaching and learning reduces all lessons to two pass grades, whilst other activity is characterised as the failure range of 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' (Ofsted, 2012a). This is a context where there is no tolerance for disruption (Beere, 2012: p. 109) and the blame for student 'bad behaviour' falls very firmly on the teacher and consequently the institution in which the disruption

occurs. Disruption is understood as any behaviour that stops the process of learning taking place (DfE, 2012).   This could range from students merely talking in class to obstructive, violent or subversive behaviour that prevents learning in the classroom environment (Hannah, 2012). Such behaviour leads to the 'requires improvement' grade. The belief that underpins this view is that if the educational institution had systematically set up a zero-tolerance attitude towards disruptive classes, then no student would breach the peace of the learning process (Ofsted, 2012a). The context is also one of increased commodification of learning (Simmons, 2009) where an audit culture of checking value for money is a key element. Teachers are constantly being judged on their performance (Ball, 2003), whilst their teaching often takes place in geographic areas of poverty where there are no jobs and therefore the incentive to achieve is limited if the qualification is not going to lead to employment (Simmons and Thompson, 2011).

The reason these factors are important in exploring class management is because they all impinge on purpose, motivation and aspiration of students who do not see a future for themselves in training or jobs and therefore fail to see the point of more education if it does not become financially justified.

The question is how can our trainees improve on their teaching for the Cert Ed/PGCE if they are faced with a class of challenging, aggressive students who will not submit to authority or almost seem implacable to class management or negotiation (Kounin, 1977; Dreikurs et al, 2005; Kohn, 2006; Wong, 2009)? Are Marzano's establishing negotiated classroom rules (2003) sufficient to deal with deeply negative views of the education system? Should we be modelling more neo-behaviourist, positive and negative reinforcement processes (Jones, 1980: p. 162) or more humanist attitudes (Kohn, 1993: p. 4) to help trainees deal with these fraught situations? If trainee tutors are teaching, for example, Functional Skills to those who are daunted by numeracy (Ofsted, 2011) or just don't want to be in class, is it carrot, stick or something else that can possibly motivate students in these contexts? How can we, as Teacher Educators, model appropriate behaviour (Powell, 2012) in our teacher education classes to prepare, support and have a real impact (Reinis, 2013) on trainees who face these disruptive groups?

There are many questions that underpin even a superficial analysis of these issues. Is improving teaching (Ofsted, 2006) in this context engaging learners, getting them to conform, achieve qualifications or merely quieten their noise? In this paper I explore an approach towards acknowledging the problematic nature of teaching under difficult circumstances and offer a strategy for supporting trainees and teachers who find themselves in these situations.

The teaching strategy
The educator teaching strategy is a straightforward, but effective method for developing reflection, possibly in tandem with the written reflective practice models of Boud and Walker (1998) where the feelings provoked by situations are open for exploration, but also moves towards an oral form of Brookfield's critical lens (1995). It could develop self-reflexivity interaction (Cuncliffe, 2004) or group critical challenge. It offers support for trainees on an emotional and psychological level, suggesting a particular form of setting up a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and argues for a non-competitive class environment where trainees offer critical support for each other. It explores the effect of this strategy in two case studies. It should, however, be said that case studies have limitations in terms of their generalisability (Cohen et al, 2005: p. 184), nevertheless, they are a means for offering limited tests of ideas in practice.

The strategy is a four-fold vision based on social learning theories, such as Bandura (1977), Vygotsky (1978) and the more contemporary Anderson et al (2004: p. 221), but also based on over 30 years' experience of teaching at all levels from pre-entry up to third-year degree dissertations, often taught on the same day (but never in the same class). I had a deep concern for supporting teaching and learning for individuals in geographic areas of exceptional poverty and deprivation. As a reflexive practitioner (Kennet, 2010), it should be said that there was a social distance between myself as an ex-state grammar school pupil exposed to a heavy corporal punishment regime, and the experiences of my students. Classes at my school were highly disruptive, but most students achieved their qualifications. Did this show that disruption was not connected with particular class background (Paton, 2012)? Would I be influenced by my own grammar school experience? Although corporal punishment was officially abolished in 1998 (BBC, 1998), this school experience may well have instilled in me a sense of discipline. On the other hand, ideologically it gave me a mission to become involved in education and, in opposition to my own experience, take a more person-centred, humanist, self-actualising approach as recommended by Rogers (1961) and Maslow (1954).

I set the classroom out in a horseshoe layout with myself at the centre in my role as facilitator. Although I had many years of teaching experience, I made it clear that trainees could and maybe should challenge my view. I pointed out that trainees were not in competition with each other, but were there to support one another. Could they use this supportive process in their own classes? Would these discussions have an impact on their practice? The class operated as a supervision session (Kadushin, 1992) whereby each trainee's teaching of the previous week was discussed with myself and the rest of the class in an emotionally supportive, hopefully sensitive, but possibly critical way. The final aspect of the strategy was that the class operated as a kind of think-tank, whereby each trainee offered proximal help (Vygotsky, 1978) or suggested solutions (Iveson et al, 2012) to other trainees' class-management problems. However, the key defining characteristic of the strategy was that it gave primacy to the trainee's experience. In this respect it could be thought of as an empirical methodology in that trainee in-service teaching experience is the focus of discussion; theory or a meta-language of analysis is used to define, explain or give some structure or interpret that raw trainee experience.

The fact that I began by telling the class that they were not in competition with each other in the opening session had a demonstrable effect on all trainees. They immediately relaxed; faces visibly lowered in tension. Could this have an impact in their classrooms? I deliberately did not use imagery of competition or even games which might bring in a competitive edge. The reason was that if trainees were going to trust each other totally or were going to be reliant on one another for feedback and support, then there had to be an adult atmosphere of facilitative learning (Knowles, 1975). Games and competition might detract from the atmosphere of reflection and authentic support. I was concerned that bringing in competitive activities might encourage a more individualistic approach and undermine a supportive atmosphere. I wanted them to be intrinsically motivated by interest in the nature of meta-discussion of what went on in each other's classes. As Kohn argues, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are '*reciprocally related: as extrinsic goes up, intrinsic most often goes down*' (1998: p. 1).

I wanted an atmosphere where all trainees would feel comfortable about sharing their experiences, responding to social engagement, collaborative learning and dialogue (Pritchard, 2009: p. 91). I started each session with simple questions, such as "what has gone well this week?" This was supposed to elicit confidence, building up a bank of good experiences, examples of best practice or how trainees overcame difficult circumstances.

It was also supposed to build an accumulation of activities where trainees had successfully engaged students, had overcome problematic behaviours or taught good or even outstanding lessons (Beere, 2012: p. 67). Enumerating these experiences reinforced positive messages about teaching, built up a community of good practice, developed a sense of resilience and continually offered a model of what was going well, particularly offering ways for trainees to operate in a challenging climate with clear ideas of how it was possible to be successful. However, the key question for exploring what was problematic or leading to improved performance was the question "what have the challenges been this week?"

The class were all teaching in a range of vocational and academic environments; private training companies, Further Education Colleges or community-based adult education. All were willing to give of themselves and support each other in class. Although they were all teaching in distinct contexts, they were all there to gain generic skills and qualifications in the underpinning principles of teaching and learning.

Once I had asked the opening question each trainee had three or four minutes to outline what had happened in their classes during that week. Some trainees needed longer when they faced more difficult circumstances and other trainees wanted to help support them or offer ideas or directions from their own experience. Each trainee explained their specific challenge and then other trainees or I would offer theoretical models, solutions or explore how they would have dealt with that problem in their own context (Kounin, 1977; Kohn, 2006; Jones et al, 2007). The fact that the problem was out in the open and could be discussed or put under scrutiny started to have a strong impact on all trainees in the class. Everyone began to feel more confident to speak in sessions; this developed trainees' sense of self-confidence and ability to express themselves in public. Everyone felt supported by other trainees; everyone said they felt less isolated. Trainees said they looked forward to class because they felt they had a space where they could talk about professional issues and challenging class management problems. They said it was a space where they could be listened to and supported.

As facilitator I sometimes abnegated myself in order to make more space for the trainees' presence. However, I made it clear that this was not a space to talk about relationships, family or personal problems unless these impinged in some direct way on the trainee's ability to teach. The trainees' personal presence, self-esteem, reflection on self and emotional resilience was only important in so far as this impacted on their professional lives. The focus of all discussion was how to overcome difficulties coping with 'problematic' classes and students.

What sort of problems did trainees face?
Trainee A, henceforth known as Lee, explained how he taught a Foundation Learning group for Functional Skills, Communications. The room was large; he had a group of around 12 learners. There was a PowerPoint presentation delivered at the front and the students sat on benches, but these were placed at quite large distances of over ten yards from the whiteboard. The benches were at disparate angles from each other. The students found it difficult to concentrate. They had fights outside the class. Chairs had been thrown round the room. One male student had headbutted his ex-girlfriend before the lesson. Both had been students together in this class. He was excluded as punishment; she had been hospitalised. The atmosphere in class was sullen and tense.

Trainee B, henceforth known as Bee, described his class where eight students sat in a computer room at a table. This table was in the middle of the room. They were supposed

to be studying Functional Skills Numeracy. One student tore up another student's work, security was called and the student was excluded. Another student shouted out "he's ugly; I'm not sitting near him." Another female student handed out condoms. One student settled to her work on a computer; the others talked or argued. Some carried out tasks, whilst others disrupted the atmosphere with changing seats or texting. Someone asked "why do we need to do maths? I left school to get away from all this!"

How did the strategy work?
We began to discuss Lee's class. Violence was no longer coming from teachers to students as in my experience, but was now between students. Lee seemed relieved that the tension of coping with this fraught situation was shared. He had warned the fractious couple about dating whilst on the same course. They had not heeded his warning. So what should Lee do to improve the class situation? The first point made was that the geography of the class needed changing. Setting the teacher education class up as a horseshoe might work in our training context, but would it work for disruptive students? Vizard (2009) and Petty (2009) advise teachers to set up classes where possible before the start of the session. Colleagues suggested that the benches should be positioned near the PowerPoint screen at the front. Through discussion, Lee was beginning to model his class on what he had seen happen in our training class (Powell, 2012).

In class we were modelling Rogers' view of unconditional positive regard, a humanistic perspective on relationships between tutor and students (Rogers, 1961; Clarke, 1994). We also used Knowles' andragogy approach (1975) where all trainees were treated as self-directed adults. However, the problem was trying to translate this sort of relationship into Lee's classroom. How could he transpose the sort of civilised discussion we had into such a fraught situation? Or should we discuss other theories of class management (Brookfield, 1995), using behaviourist approaches, such as negative reinforcement (Jones, 1980: p. 3) as relevant and more effective?

Through discussion, support and analysis, Lee started to build more confidence, self-esteem and presence. In training sessions he was starting to take on the tone that he was going to use in his class. He recounted how he was starting to speak to this group in a caring, but direct way. He was beginning to recreate our adult version of learning with his group. Students now sat in pairs and discussed an idea (Vygotsky, 1978: p. 86), as we did in training, or read a piece before they contributed in a more general class discussion. We had a trainee education class discussion on genuinely imbedding Equality and Diversity into lessons (Ofsted, 2012). Lee reported that his group were particularly engaged in discussing issues of equality and diversity and then other areas of the curriculum. The support that Lee received from the teacher education class was beginning to have an effect on his teaching. Lee said that class discussions were starting to be more meaningful and impact on all his students' learning. He had introduced a non-competitive element into his class; students were beginning to open up and explore issues, just as we did in our training sessions. On many levels this was an 'improvement'.

Bee was using creative ideas to engage his students. He reported a range of activities, such as identifying coloured shapes on a PowerPoint, offering a range of imaginative worksheets on numeracy, providing innovation, goals and feedback (Hattie, 1999). This was discussed in class, but not modelled in our sessions. The students were, however, resistant. In the trainee education sessions, someone suggested changing Bee's class layout, putting each student on a computer round the room and then putting them on a numeracy programme whereby they could build up their maths skills and get used to ICT in a more professional context. This strategy might 'settle' the students down, ensure they

were enjoying the work, helping them become intrinsically motivated (Dweck, 2000; Morris, 2008) and involve them more directly in the culture and outcomes of their numeracy exam.

Should Lee use a more behaviourist approach to get results (Knippen and Green, 1997)? Against the culture of our own training discussions, I suggested that Lee could take on a more controlling approach to the students. I said that he might get more assertive and then '*pick on individuals who are not obeying by name or eye contact*' (Petty, 2009: p. 107) or bring in rules, sanctions and rewards (Merrett and Wheldall, 1992). Was I suggesting this because of the disciplinary methods in my own background or because I was offering a provocative, alternative view? Or was it from my experience of teaching 'difficult classes' during my career, protecting others from the overwhelming stress of unresponsive students or the Ofsted context of not tolerating disruption? All these thoughts were in my mind.

Both Lee and Bee resisted my view very strongly. Both wanted to use person-centred teaching methods (Gatongi, 2007) and did not want to treat their students in a behaviourist, controlling or negative way. They refused to treat students as objects because this completely contradicted their values and the reason why they had become involved in teaching in the first place. Was this a re-statement of my own motive for going into teaching, a valuing of the human above the requirements of performativity that so dominate our current environment? Bee had empathy for his students (Patterson, 1980; Rogers, 1961); they had been degraded or treated in a negative or demeaning way in their homes or schools. They were from poorer backgrounds (Freire, 1972), had had limited access to education, development or progression in their personal lives or careers; their disaffection had covered a '*wide range of characteristics, attitudes and dispositions towards home, learning and life*' (Wellington and Cole, 2004: p. 102).

The andragogy model had been internalised by the two trainees and they made it a principle that they were going to treat all students in a full, humanised respected way (Doyle, 2008). They both said they were trying to connect, have congruence and empathy with their students (Gatongi, 2007: p. 206). The modelling of what we were doing in our teacher education classes was being carried out in the framework of their Further Education foundation learning classes. When it came to observing these classes, by the end of the first term, both classes had 'settled' down. Both groups were carrying out tasks as required, becoming engaged in class discussion and most important of all beginning to speak to each other and their teachers in a more respectful way.

Some analysis
The question is whether there is a direct relationship between the reflective strategy deployed in the teacher education class and the improvement in student behaviour in Foundation Learning classes. It could be argued that the students may have matured during the 10-week term under discussion anyway. They may have become acculturated into the more adult modes of college life, realised that there was a purpose to Functional Skills and that the alternatives to training and upgrading qualifications were even more challenging than being in class. They may not have wanted to be excluded as their two contemporaries had been. The institutional framework, managerial attitudes and course requirements may have all begun to percolate into the students' consciousnesses.

Learning is constructed (Prasad and Caproni, 1997); the assumption of this paper is that learning takes place and there is development and change. The problem is how do we know what causes what? How do we know that the teacher education model of andragogy and focusing on trainee experience actually had an effect on the trainees and this in turn

impacted on their classes? In other words, how can we be sure that reflection is effective (Cornford, 2002)? All we know is that according to the trainees, their students were initially un-cooperative. We know through the evidence of an observation towards the end of term that they were now engaged learners working on required tasks. There was little, if any, disruption. Was the improvement due to the observation creating a more productive lesson (O'Leary, 2006)? Or was it the growing confidence of the trainees? Was this in turn due to the strategy used in the classroom? There were so many variables.

However, the trainees themselves said that the support they had received from the teacher education class, the way that they had formulated their own values in this context, and the space they had to experiment with possible approaches was crucial. The weekly supervisions had helped with working out a humanistic approach to dealing with their respective 'problematic' groups.

Conclusion

As suggested, case studies open debate on specific situations, but cannot necessarily be applied to other contexts. However, these trainees' teaching situations seem to be typical of the problems and challenges many tutors face in the foundation learning sector. The debate around how best to deal with disruptive classes and individual students is an ongoing problematic issue that depends on the dynamic of each individual tutor, their relationship with their classes and the institutional framework within which they work. In this paper I have tried to suggest a strategy for supporting trainees in these fraught situations; the next stage is to interview successful tutors who have managed to develop the skills of overcoming these problems in current, ongoing, challenging contexts.

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