Too many cooks or too many recipes? The CDT student on teaching practice

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There is general agreement between teachers in school, lecturers in teacher education and students in training on the importance of teaching practice to initial teacher education courses. It not only provides a vital learning experience but is also the arena in which a student is expected to prove his competence for the award of qualified teacher status. This dual role assigned to teaching practice, experiential learning on the one hand and assessment process on the other, is one of a number of factors which make teaching practice a most complex activity and present student, teacher and tutor with a series of dilemmas about its supervision and assessment.

In the area of CDT matters are further complicated at the practical level by the workshop environment and associated problems of safety and at the theoretical level by the epistemological complexity of the subject and its changing character in schools which suggests that shared understanding of the nature of the subject might not be as strong as in other more traditional subject areas.

The following observations arise out of an evaluation of the teaching practice process. The project placed particular emphasis on the student perspective and this paper concentrates on the views expressed by final year CDT students who comprised just under one third of the total student sample of 61 final year students. In order to explore the complexity of the teaching practice process, semi-structured interviews were used initially to collect data in order to allow issues to emerge from those participating in the process. Issues identified in the interviews were cross-checked by feeding them to a larger sample by means of a questionnaire.

It is not the aim of this paper to comment in detail on aspects of the evaluation specific to the institution but to consider issues of more general relevance to those in schools and colleges involved in the supervision and assessment of CDT students on teaching practice.

All CDT students in the sample, irrespective of how difficult they found teaching practice, recognised its value as a learning experience and considered its assessment important. Perhaps because of this most students were motivated to gain as high a grade as possible for reasons of self-esteem, enhancing job opportunities and the fact that teaching practice had the highest status of all the assessed elements of the course, as the following statements by CDT students point out.

'It's the culmination of all the work, it's what the course is all about. Good marks for assignments are great, but they don't compensate for a low grade on teaching practice.'

'It's (teaching practice grade) telling you how good a teacher you are and that's important.'

In going for high grades, students will look for clues as to the teaching style and approach to the subject that the assessor prefers. (See Becker et al 1968). However, in this particular institution, supervision and assessment of students on teaching practice is the joint responsibility of college tutor and school. The report and grade from the school is given equal weighting to that of the college tutor who is expected to visit and observe the student in school at least once each week.

This places CDT students in a dilemma on occasions when they are confronted with differing views on the nature of CDT and the appropriateness of particular teaching styles between teachers and between tutor and teacher. One student summed up the problem as follows:

'If you are expected to teach a certain type of course in a certain way you have then got to decide how far you can veer from that if you want to impress your tutor from college. Do you do that to the extent of upsetting the school or do you risk losing a grade?'

The evaluation identified three specific areas where students faced this dilemma. These were (i) traditional craft orientated approach versus the 'new philosophy' of CDT, (ii) science-based technology versus design orientated approach, and (iii) teaching styles.

(i) The modern approach versus craft orientated courses

It was the mismatch between the teacher training institution's emphasis on the modern approach to CDT and the craft orientated approach still evident in some schools which was of most concern to students and the following comments are not untypical.

'We are taught one thing here how things should be done and when you get into the "real world" some schools' philosophy and outlook is totally different.'

'Some teachers who preferred a traditional approach were concerned about students doing progressive things.'

This issue was raised by the majority of students but not all of them who commented on the problem had actually experienced it, they were, however, aware of their colleagues' experiences.

'If the school is following the same philosophy as the college, I don't see any problems. But when the school follows the old system and the college is more forward looking, as it should be as a teaching establishment, I do know that in some cases conflict has arisen . . . although I was very lucky with my schools.'

The overall impression gained was that this issue, with the possible exception of 'difficult classes', was the major area of concern for CDT students in relation to teaching practice. Students were quick to identify it as a major issue and their comments on it were clearly thought out and perceptive, suggesting that the topic had been well aired in their own informal discussions.

This mismatch between theory and practice identified by students is perhaps surprising in the light of developments in CDT over the last decade. However, it does suggest that despite the wealth of literature on the changing aims of CDT, the swing away from traditional handicraft towards the 'new philosophy' of CDT is not yet fully complete in the subject's educational practice.

(ii) Science-based technology versus a design-orientated approach

The new philosophy of CDT, a number of students noted, differed in its emphasis from school to school between design-orientated courses and science-based Technology. This was not a major concern of students, the majority considered they could cope with both approaches. However, a minority, very committed to the 'design and make'

approach, found the science-based Technology they experienced in school rather narrow and constraining and lacking the creative freedom they wished to incorporate into their teaching.

'They (the school staff) had very tightly structured courses and lessons. In other words, there was no real situation where you could use your own initiative and perhaps develop it in a slightly different way. I never felt I could show much flair in the technology lessons'.

It is understandable, because of the breadth of CDT, that students and teachers become more committed to, and/or have particular expertise in one area of the subject. For teacher education institutions, this raises the question of whether it is still possible to train generalist CDT teachers as the subject continues to expand in depth and breadth.

(iii) Teaching style

The problem of compromising one's teaching style and approach to pupils in order to conform to the pedagogy of the school was commented upon by almost all students. It is, of course, not a problem unique to CDT and on the evidence of this research it was more of a dilemma to students in primary schools, where there was a greater variety of teaching styles and methods of classroom organisation. However, for some CDT students it did cause anxiety.

'I think the formal approach (of the school) affected my performance, but I think the tutor was aware of that . . . but I spent a lot of time worrying that he wasn't aware of it!'

'My style of teaching was to be more approachable. I was worried that I would be seen as not holding control like he (the class teacher) did and yet I was thinking that perhaps I could bring out more subtle things by not holding such a tight rein'.

The worry that deviating from the accepted style within the school would affect the grade of the student was a common one but not totally accepted by all students. A few considered that such differences would not necessarily lead to a student receiving a lower grade from the school.

'Teachers obviously have a bias towards particular styles but if you have what it takes to be a teacher, regardless of their preferences, they will still see that you have something to offer the pupils'.

Conclusions

While the methodology for this study was qualitative rather than quantitative, aiming to identify and illuminate student-centred issues related to teaching practice, it can be stated with some confidence that the majority of students considered the issues identified and discussed above do generate considerable anxiety and can influence the teaching practice grade obtained. The title of this paper alludes to the two major interacting factors which it is suggested are at the heart of this anxiety, the student being assessed by at least two people (and often more) and their differing philosophies and pedagogical stances.

Some of the more obvious ways of overcoming these problems such as using only one assessor per student or not using certain schools, while they might be effective in reducing the anxiety of individual students in the short term, could well have a long term detrimental effect for the joint assessment process generates valuable interaction between tutors and teachers which can lead to shared understanding of benefit to school, college and the teaching practice assessment process. Indeed, discussions between the interested parties was seen by some students as a way of alleviating the problem. One student, for example, commented on the way his lesson evaluations started a useful dialogue.

'I don't think it (the difference between the student's and school's philosophy) affected my grade. I wrote quite a lot about the problem, sort of trying to think it out I suppose, in the lesson evaluations in my teaching practice file. They proved to be an excellent starting point for discussion when people read my file'.

However, another student found no such dialogue, but he nevertheless makes a valuable point, for implicit in his comment is the suggestion that discussion would have relieved his anxieties.

'I don't hit it off with the head of department. He wasn't rude or anything like that and I was always very polite but I never got into any intellectual conversations with him . . . or even discussion of practical things. It was strange really and a bit awkward'.

Hogan (1983) suggests that at the heart of the assessment process should be frank and open discussion with the student in which prejudices are recognised and accepted. Such discussion he advocates should include the student's self-evaluation of his performance and grade and a consideration of the context. It is perhaps only through such interaction between teacher, tutor and student that increasing the validity of the assessment process and reducing student anxiety can be combined with the development of shared understandings of the nature of CDT.

References

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