Comparative experiences of two teacher educators: a self-study

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the reflections of a less experienced and a veteran teacher educator at a new university and compares and contrasts their experiences of primary teacher education. The paper draws on the power of the narrative to share these experiences through aspects of self-study. Autobiographical research methods were used to elicit reflection on significant events in the teacher educators' different and individual pasts in order to understand more about effective learning and teaching in their present roles. This process led to an examination of the values that underpinned and continue to underpin practice. The collaborative examination of significant aspects of personal practice has led to renewed confidence and implications for primary teacher education within the University.

Key Words
Self-study; narrative; teacher-educator; stories; values; reflection.

Background to the research

This paper is based on on-going research that arose from a Primary Education Department day focusing on reflective practice in teacher education. We were asked to share our experiences as teacher educators at different phases of our careers. Consequently, a relationship has developed which is based on continued sharing of teaching experiences and this is further supported by a departmental self-study project. Our research is based on extended analysis of particular teaching episodes to understand more about what effective learning and teaching in teacher education means for us. We suggest that this will have wider relevance, particularly for teacher educators interested in examining their own practice. Our experiences to date are very different; for one of us, recent transition from teaching in a primary school to teaching in a university (2010), for the other, long experience in teacher education (since 1982). This has enabled us both to benefit from a comparison of our experiences. As the collaboration has developed, it has become apparent that what has actually developed is a form of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) based on a social constructivist model. The interaction and dialogue that we have shared has enabled us to learn from one another and instilled greater confidence in our ability to respond to our students' needs. We study ourselves, our responses to students and then document these for subsequent discussion.

Mentoring and induction of teacher educators

Many studies identify the difficulties that new teacher educators experience when making the transition from school teacher to academic, and the lack of induction into these new roles (Murray, 2008; Ritter, 2009; Smith, 2005; Wood and Borg, 2010). The importance of an identified mentor and institutional support is also emphasised (Griffiths et al., 2010; Harrison and McKeon, 2008). While systematic research for teacher educators has grown in the last decade, there remains a need for more research on how teacher educators, particularly in their first years of practice, negotiate the challenges of preparing teacher candidates for the field (Gallagher et al., 2011).

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Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of peripheral participation outlines the need for newcomers to a particular working environment to learn from experienced practitioners in the field ('old timers'), in order for transitions to be facilitated and for the newcomer to gradually become a fuller participant. This is highly relevant for a study of teacher educators. In this case, a more experienced member of the community of practice (veteran) has taken on the role of mentor for a new colleague (new teacher educator). The difference in experience has been central to the relationship, development of practice and self-study.

Self-study in teacher education

There is a growing body of research into teacher educators' professional identities (e.g. Griffiths et al., 2013; Skerrett, 2008; Swennen et al., 2010). Much of this research is located within the genre of self-study or a systematic approach to research with self as a focus (Lunenberg et al., 2011; Williams and Ritter, 2010). Examining one's own assumptions about teaching and learning in order to 're-frame' practice is seen as valuable for the teacher educators involved and for their professional practice (Samaras and Freese, 2009).

It is acknowledged that there is a need for rigorous and systematic methodologies as teacher educators' experiences form a key resource for their research (Lassone, Galman and Kosnik, 2009). The ability to articulate the purposes underpinning practice is a professional skill, yet it is complex, and particularly difficult to develop alone (Loughran and Berry, 2005). Collaboration is desirable in order for teacher educators to explore what is tacit and make sense of it for others. Support from more experienced teacher educators is acknowledged as a source of confidence and expertise (Harrison and McKeon, 2008; Wood and Borg, 2010). Many of the findings from self-study in teacher education centre around issues of collaboration and support.

Through 'learning the ropes', the newcomer, with the help of experienced workers and 'experts' in the teacher education community, is able to gain confidence and expertise in particular tasks (Harrison and McKeon, 2008:165). This also applies to teacher educators who are further on in their careers and see research development as transformative personally as well as academically (Griffiths et al., 2013). The importance of collaborative research for the whole teacher education community cannot be over-emphasised. Doing this alone is acknowledged to be difficult (Mitchell et al., 2005) and it is for this reason that we both work together and with others to seek new insights into our experiences both within our institution and beyond. Learning through working alongside experienced researchers is an important model for new teacher educators, however barriers include lack of confidence and skill in doing research, and lack of experience in academia more generally (Griffiths et al., 2010).

Wood and Borg (2010) explore some of these tensions, drawing on the literature of professional identity, teacher socialisation and teacher educator transition. Their conclusions parallel the findings in the literature that the road for new teacher educators can be a rocky one. The effective strategies identified in participants' stories include support from a mentor and opportunities for professional development in the areas of teacher education and research.

Methodology

Our research is firmly based within an interpretive tradition with an emphasis upon an auto/biographical and narrative approach. Self-study approaches are becoming increasingly influenced by autobiographical and narrative forms of research. Stories enable teacher educators to report those experiences which would not otherwise be made public (Clough, 2002).

Mitchell and Weber (2005) emphasised the ways in which this research paradigm can support the understanding of the self and thus the development of the professional identity of teacher

educators. Our research is actively interpretive. We are working within a cultural framework of teacher education and this research may form a part (albeit small) of the evidence towards developing more of an understanding of how self-study approaches might support teacher educators in developing their practice. As Atkinson and Claxton (2008) acknowledge, this has received very little discussion in the literature on qualitative research.

Narrative approaches and the use of story are important to research in educational settings because they allow the reporting of those experiences which would 'not otherwise be made public by other "traditional" tools of the trade' (Clough, 2002:8-9). Goodson and Sikes (2001:59) have drawn attention to their conviction that the importance of teachers' work and their life histories are central to the reconceptualisation of educational study and professional development. We hope, by sharing our stories and examining aspects of our own practice, that we will add to an understanding of what it means to be a teacher educator.

This approach was appropriate for our own self-study: we share our stories in order to demonstrate how we have worked together to develop our practice and become more effective teacher educators. Doing this helps us to retain a sense of critical rigour and perspective and our aim in sharing them with other teacher educators is that we will move collectively towards self-reflexive, self-critical and engaging ways of knowing (Reason 1994).

Our research aim is to facilitate a consideration of what makes the teaching and learning of prospective teachers most effective and to understand more about what good learning and teaching feels like for us in our classrooms. The methods that we developed evolved intuitively as we moved through the process. We decided to document experiences in diary form, which created a safe space enabling these thoughts and feelings to be shared. These inform the conversations that we have and continue to be updated. We regularly collected our thoughts and perceptions on our teaching in both written and aural ways, meeting regularly in an attempt to reflect on particular episodes and to build an understanding of what happened and why. In doing so, we sought to actively reflect on and reconstruct our stories and gain new insights as we framed and reframed these experiences. Approximately ten face to face conversations have taken place, for between one and three hours, based upon diary entries and teaching episodes. Occasional emails record aspects of our thinking and demonstrate the impact of sharing our experiences more widely.

Through keeping a diary, including notes on our teaching and interactions with students and colleagues, we reflect upon our stories, choosing particular episodes that stand out for us. As we share our data and analysis of this within a reflective framework, we have begun to gain new insights into why these narratives of events and episodes exist as they do, or perhaps consider how we could begin to influence the potential future chapters of the stories. It is an exploratory analysis. Often as we discuss one of the episodes, we feel a great sense of the 'sound of silence breaking' (Miller, 1982). An intrinsically accepted part of the story has suddenly taken on a new energy as new possibilities are considered. Perhaps a new perspective on the accepted narrative has been illuminated or the spark of a new idea or prediction about what this might mean for the next stage in the story. Possibilities are discussed, the discussion provides the analysis and we record notes of these conversations. In this way, we integrate our stories drawn from our diaries, conversations and emails into our data set.

Our aim is to attempt to build our own understanding of what happened and why through a constant comparative approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008), to identify emergent themes, and to convey these thematic understandings to an audience through our papers and presentations. In this way we attempt to frame and reframe the account through perspectives drawn both from our own analysis and from the wider community of teacher educators (Samaras and Freece 2009:7). We

examine the chemistry of what may have happened and why and see our research as magnifying these experiences and making our insights explicit for others to make their own meanings. Elliot states that 'at a minimum, a narrative must include the complicating action, i.e. a temporal component, while it is the evaluation that has been highlighted as crucial for establishing the point or the meaning of the story' (2008:9). Our evaluations can convey a sense of our understanding as we have seen them but as Elliot continues; 'the audience must collaborate by demonstrating that the evaluation has been understood' (ibid.). We actively seek the views and insights of our audience too in order to develop our narrative even further.

Discussion of Findings

Our discussion is based upon emerging themes that we have drawn out for analysis. Some of these themes are centred on the importance of relationships and pedagogical approaches. We found, as we moved through the research cycle, that a metaphorical approach enabled us to identify emerging patterns of experience and to compare and contrast these. By using this approach we found we could explore the story in more meaningful ways, drawing others into the research cycle in order to frame and reframe our understanding of the episodes (Samaras and Freece, 2009).

We will now share some extracts from our discussions before exploring some of the issues we have drawn from the analysis of our stories.

> *'Sometimes, teaching students feels like pulling an elephant through mud. There is resistance. You question, probe, prompt their thinking, trying to engage them in the topic under discussion but what is really lacking is the motivation. Do we spend energy trying to connect? Connecting with students' experiences of being teachers enables us to share the common ground and, as teacher educators, these periods of pondering can be highly valuable. They are precious moments: a meeting of minds'* (Karen).

Karen's analogy of the teaching sometimes as feeling like 'dragging elephants through mud' was one of the statements that we examined very early on in our research. This analogy arose from attendance at a creative life-writing workshop where it appeared as part of a story writing activity dealing with feelings about teaching. On reflection, Karen can see that, in these early phases of her career as a new teacher educator, she was struggling to connect with the students in her class. Karen was initially requested to work 'cross-department' within her specialist area of Early Years. Other members of the department are usually employed within specialist subject-based teams. Consequently, in these early days, Karen's teaching was spread across many different courses, both postgraduate and undergraduate. Consequently, Karen met many students for the duration of a module or in some cases for a day only. Karen had to work hard to develop relationships quickly. It can be argued that knowing students well builds trust and enables closer connections with our learners. If the relationship between members of the group is not sufficiently developed, it is much harder to find connections in order to make learning meaningful and perhaps, in these early days, it should be of no surprise that some students felt heavy and hard metaphorically. Karen struggled both with her commitment to many different subject areas and modules as well as working with students from many different programmes. Karen's story highlights the feelings experienced in her trying to connect with her students in sessions where she did not feel confident that she fitted into their worlds of experience. Realising her commitment to developing more meaningful relationships with students was the impetus that enabled Karen to deliberately seek more involvement with fewer courses in the Faculty and to subsequent discussion with Judith about the importance of developing relationships and getting to know our students.

Judith's experience has led her to describe her role as that of a mother duck. Judith's role as Science lead within the Primary Department meant that although she works with many different students,

she was working within one subject only and with continuing groups of students in many cases. This has enabled Judith to view herself as a facilitator of learning:

> *'I have not, except very occasionally, felt that I have dragged elephants through the mud. For one thing I do not have the energy for that. Teaching students in the way that Karen has felt the need to would have killed me off years ago. That is not to say that the way I teach is not exhausting, of course it is, but the pressures are different. My idea of how I teach students is more like a mother duck with ducklings. Mother ducks teach the ducklings the basic things they need to know and then they let them go, as we have got to let our students go to try things out for themselves. We don't always like what they do, but we keep an eye on them from a distance and gather them back when necessary'* (Judith).

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Exploring this metaphor led to a discussion centered on teaching style and aspects of pedagogy. This dialogue led Karen to question her perceived reticence in facilitating more discursive ways of teaching:

> *'As a primary school teacher, I knew my children so well that I was able to respond to them in personalised ways. Initially, I know that, as a teacher educator that I was particularly content driven, leaving less time for more meaningful discussions with students. On reflection, I think this says more about me that it does about them. My insecurities meant that I fell into the classic trap of focusing on my own role as an educator rather than focusing on the learning that I was trying to engage the students in. On reflection, this should not really have been the case with my Early Years background where tuning in and really listening to young children was key'* (Karen).

We explored some of the fundamental differences in pedagogical approaches and this led us to debate at length the differences and relationships between imparting knowledge and 'drawing it out', and whether there are differences between teaching adult learners as opposed to teaching young children. In these early days, it is apparent that Karen was finding the transition to teaching adult learners challenging. An examination of her values helped her to understand that these remained the same whatever the age of the learner, however, feeling that you have to take on all the responsibility for the learning of your students could have led to the feeling that the students are heavy and hard to move metaphorically.

> *'My emotional and value commitments remain the same - independence, flexibility of thought, promotion of self-esteem, feelings of value and worth through trust and empowerment. It just took me a while to truly embrace this and use it to inform my teaching'* (Karen).

An examination of our understanding of what it means to 'educate' new teachers led us to question whether learning is effective if learners 'receive' knowledge about what is means to be a primary school teacher. We explored how we constructed understandings with students based on our experiences of teaching:

> *'When I ask sometimes in school. Why did you do that? Students will often say that it was something I said or something I had written that had given them the confidence to try things out that they might not otherwise have done. I am not really talking about particular activities, but that happens too, but about an aspect of their pedagogy. It is about extending impact on other people's practice in a way that will benefit students that I wouldn't come into contact with. This is true in what I do with the students. I ultimately do it for the children. It is satisfying when I know that my students and Karen are moving forward. I have confidence in what I do. I know that my way of teaching has an effect. I feel that I own the pedagogy'* (Judith).

Judith is very strong in her conviction that her pedagogical approach is an enabling one for students. Judith's confidence in her approach led to an extended discussion about teaching style. Judith disclosed that occasionally, teachers and students who have a different view of what effective teaching is about have questioned her approach. This could be seen as being a positive endorsement and adoption of the questioning approach that Judith employs in her teaching methods;

> *'If the view of students is that tutors should be didactic in their approach, then I fall below what they expect of me. It sometimes worries me that students might think I am lazy, expecting them to do much of the work for themselves. These tend to be students who want to be spoon fed – lazy elephants who do not want to think for themselves, who indeed want to be dragged through the mud. It worries me that maybe students expect me to be more directed and tell them what to do…but I resist that role absolutely. Sometimes I do have to be very directed, but not very often. This does not sit comfortably with the view of effective education that I have built up over the years and internalised. Being told doesn't help. Students need to be helped to understand'* (Judith).

Exploring this approach enabled a closer analysis of particular episodes where Judith illustrated her approach in more detail:

> '*When I am listening in, I can move conversations on. I facilitate their ideas but I don't tell them what to do. When I've got students who don't want to be there, or who don't want to play my 'game' with me it can be hard and quite scary! Sometimes I can't turn quickly into delivery mode from facilitating mode. When I'm in that situation, which isn't very often, I feel like the duck sliding on the ice. A duck in the water is in control and the duck on the ice isn't. In such situations, I have to remember the positives. That having facilitated learning that my ducklings are swimming about everywhere, in Canterbury, in Kent, in other part of the UK and beyond'* (Judith).

Judith explains how she centres her teaching on a resource or a stimulus to prompt discussion and how she gives the students a framework for their feedback discussion and provides a skeleton for them to structure their thoughts. She then encourages her students to discuss their interpretation and thoughts. Judith acknowledges this as a risk. She understands that some may not wish to take the risk or may be uncomfortable with being challenged. Judith acknowledges that she may offer a view that may not be perceived to be the 'right' view and that students may challenge this view. She works hard to ensure that students understand that her view is 'a view' and not 'the view' that should be held. Judith sees herself as one of the group and thus actively encourages students to question these perceptions.

Exploring these approaches in this way has enabled Karen, as a new teacher educator, to become more confident in enabling opportunities for her own students to examine aspects of their practice. Reflecting upon how Judith facilitates discussion during her sessions has been an enabler for Karen when planning her teaching sessions. Karen now actively seeks opportunities to facilitate discussion between students during her sessions.

> *'The students aren't such big elephants anymore…. The mud is less deep because they are moving in my direction….Judith has the rope!'* (Karen).

Throughout this process, Judith has become more confident that the way she teaches has an important role in the preparation of beginning and continuing teachers as well as new teacher educators. 'My reward is when students do really well'.

Concluding thoughts

The impact that examining our practice has had on the teaching and learning of our students is yet to be evaluated. However, our conclusions suggest that this collaboration has already had an impact upon our practice. Our data suggests that collaboration between newer teacher educators and more veteran teacher educators is crucial in enabling new teacher educators to become inducted into a community of practice and participate effectively within it. The literature (Griffiths et al., 2010; Harrison and McKeon, 2008) acknowledges this. Our study suggests that sharing teaching episodes between newer and more established members of the teaching educator community can effectively support development in understanding more about what might constitute effective pedagogies within teacher education. Self-study could be seen as an appropriate and non-threatening way for new teacher educators to participate in combining their teaching with their research.

There remains a need for more research on how teacher educators, particularly in their first years of practice, negotiate the challenges of preparing teacher candidates for the field (Gallagher et al., 2011). This approach could be one way of doing this.

We continue to meet regularly to discuss aspects of practice as we continue to benefit equally from this research. Karen is conducting a piece of action research involving the students in discussing the effectiveness of the pedagogical tools within sessions. Judith continues to benefit from reflecting upon her own teaching as well as experiencing a sense of satisfaction that she has an important role to play in the development of the next generation of teacher educators.

> *'The mother duck does not always watch the ducklings. She is caring but not necessarily present. As an experienced colleague in the university the role is extended. I see myself as a mother to students but also to colleagues' (Judith).*

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