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Developing Intuition in Marginal Trainees on Teaching Practice.

Judith Kennedy

Introduction

The current approach to teacher professionalism is that articulated and conscious explication of our actions is all – by examining, reflecting, reframing, considering and analysing our teaching decisions we will be able to both understand our own actions and that of our learners and consequently improve on them. But such a conception of professionalism has its problems because when we look at how experts work we can see that expertise in whatever skill or profession depends to a large extent on fluid, largely unconscious performance where it is often not easy to either recall why we did what we did, or what kind of reasons informed our decisions but we know that it “felt right” and that “it worked”. Such implicit ways of behaviour are essential in any complex decision making situation because otherwise of course we would be unable to move forward with the ease and fluency that are required of a professional.

An interest in the intuitive is not a particularly new idea – but perhaps till now we have tended to look at intuition as the provenance of “scientific ideas” ... *it came to me in a flash*...or more recently as a characteristic of the postmodernist New Age where we are being trained or encouraged to ‘*trust our hearts as well as our heads*’.

But for professionals this approach to intuition may not persuade much as to its usefulness – nevertheless cognitive science itself tells us that there are diverse ways of processing knowledge; that there is indeed an implicit and explicit way of dealing with the world .

As Claxton says

... “and are there cases in which certain types of intuition and certain kinds of analytical articulated reason work productively in tandem? Conscious and articulated knowledge may come later after tacit knowledge has been developed but certainly both kinds of knowledge must be recognised.”

Guy Claxton 2000:34

In Teacher Education, the need to develop intuition in trainees has perhaps not received the attention it deserves; most teacher educators have explored the different ways teachers can be encouraged to reflect on and analyse their experiences believing this leads to a more competent performance. However, I will suggest that for many trainees and young teachers it is important to create the conditions in which intuition can develop – and that the manner in which mentors or supervisors organise teaching practicums is not always helpful in this respect. Working with three young trainees identified as ‘marginal’ trainees, I will describe a new approach to supervision which can lay the foundation for the development of implicit actions and judgements in a teaching context.

Intuition – its qualities and conditions under which it thrives.

Unconscious action and implicit learning

Intuition in the sense in which I am using it refers to a way of approaching and dealing with the world – Guy Claxton lists some of the qualities of intuition – for example that intuition is unconscious expertise – for teachers they may reshape a lesson as they go through it seemingly effortlessly and often afterwards having trouble thinking why they acted as they did. The belief is that indeed intuitive behaviour can be damaged by trying to bring it into conscious awareness.

Related to this is the suggestion that learning itself may sometimes be implicit – many studies show that with some very complex domains it is better to abandon all attempts to analyse and break down the task into consciously understood ‘bits’ but just ‘go at it’.

Judgement

Intuition also includes an element of judgement – that is to say that often our judgements themselves can be intuitive in nature. A teacher ‘feels’ that a student is not 100% OK – or a teacher intuitively feels that a learner doesn’t understand. Teachers asked to articulate their judgements often resort to such statements as “it’s just a feeling I have”.

Sensitivity and awareness

Intuitive behaviour suggests you are very aware and sensitive to cues in the environment. An interesting study of expert basketball coaches written by de Marco and McCullick explored the ways in which expert coaches such as Lombardi (who was a football coach

during the 1940's) and Wooden (a basketball coach in the 1980's) carried out their tasks. For these expert coaches many aspects of their actions were highly routinised, automatic and possibly carried out with minimal conscious effort which meant their approaches were more fluid and efficient. These expert coaches as described were highly perceptive – capable of accurately perceiving and interpreting the more important from the less important, able to quickly interpret their players attitudes and to 'sense' what was happening.

Creativity and imagination as elements of intuition

In many spheres, particularly perhaps in science and technology, intuition is associated with creativity, imagination and risk taking – the reasoning may come later. Teachers too need to be creative and imaginative and they certainly need to have the confidence to take risks.

Intuition as synthesis

Intuitive thinking tends to be synthetic; that is to say, we build up patterns based on a very large experience drawn upon in novel and creative ways.

The Sports Coaches referred to earlier built up a large reservoir of experience in different fields – but they also organised that experience – by setting realisable goals; by concentrating on specific aspects of their experience.

Naturally our intuitions can be wrong – often though when we already doubted them. That is, we can vary in our confidence ratings for our own intuitions. And when we are trying to encourage trainees to have faith in their own intuitions, one problem is that initially they may make mistakes. As I shall say later, how those mistakes are viewed is crucial.

Conditions under which intuition can be developed

Freedom from anxiety

Intuition develops firstly in an atmosphere free from anxiety – this is crucial. Trainees frozen in the headlights of a supervisors' gaze, cannot and do not act intuitively. They are focused entirely on themselves, their own behaviour and how far it is pleasing the supervisor.

Confidence

Intuition develops when people are confident about what they are doing and practised in certain routines so that there is plenty of processing capacity left . If every act in a class is demanding of attention and energy, then trainees lose awareness of what is happening around them and intuition develops out of a sense of awareness – a ‘knowingness’ about what is happening.

Conditions of relative freedom

Intuition is imprecise and often ‘on the spur’ - so in that sense doesn’t fit well with preconceived plans or indeed rigid predetermined goals.

Focus on the situation and the participants rather than self

For classroom intuition to develop a crucial aspect is that trainees need to be focused on things other than themselves and their own behaviour. A trainee who is over concerned with their own performance will visualise their lesson in terms of “What I did...” rather than “ How did the learners react and how did the learners feel”. Thus their actual experience of the classroom becomes very narrow and sometimes distorted – so that their experiential base from which intuition can develop is limited.

Developing the intuition of marginal trainees

Marginal teachers are not hopeless teachers, teachers who should be dismissed, or even incompetent teachers - rather they are teachers who operate consistently at the margins of effectiveness. They are less than ideal all of the time if you like and in an ideal world they would probably be selected out. But in many countries of the world the quantity/quality equation necessitates an educational system tolerating marginal teachers. Through the use of techniques such as ‘supervisors critical incident diaries’ , videos of trainees teaching, interviews with trainees, we have gathered a large amount of descriptive data concerned with the attitudes, teaching behaviour, and feelings of identified marginal trainees including isolating what I have termed ‘critical decision’ incidents. These are incidents which the mentor/supervisors deemed important to the effectiveness of the teaching and also require some kind of decision. Through an analysis’s of these the particular problems of marginal trainees could be described (see Kennedy 1995 for a fuller description). Of course, many of the problems of marginal trainees are experienced by many trainees and indeed teachers but at a general level such trainees have very little awareness or sense of classroom realities – they can be insensitive to learner reactions,, showing little flexibility or ability to ‘think on their feet’, and little intuitive judgement at

any stage. Perhaps this is not surprising because one of their major problems lies in their inability to prepare appropriately - which means that they enter the classroom 'primed' to fail as it were without the right kind of 'script'. Even if they had been very able and confident teachers, sometimes the activities and materials as prepared would have been difficult to utilise. So a lesson that was poorly conceived and put together, then led to further problems in implementation and possible failure

For the marginal trainees I worked with it was evident that post lesson feedback sessions were having little effect and indeed were merely compounding the problems. Trainees said that often when teaching they felt awkward and embarrassed. Frustration was common when nothing seemed to go right; they could become fearful and sometimes depressed about their performance. When lessons were then observed by mentors or supervisors, such feelings were intensified. Follow-up feedback sessions inevitably meant that their judgement would be called into question and their decisions analysed. Feedback in the mentoring or supervision process is grounded in the belief that analysing, explaining and exploring practice will improve it. It demands analysis even when trainees have done something for which they have no explanation. This focus on the classroom performance of the trainee means they become over concerned with their own actions and shortcomings which hardly encourages creativity and risk taking.. Thus conditions amenable to the development of intuition were absent.

The problem is then if intuition is an important aspect of good teaching and if the supervisory process as currently practised does not always encourage it, how can we help trainees, particularly marginal trainees, to develop any of the qualities associated with intuition.?

The SPARR approach

To develop intuition in these trainees means giving them a sense of confidence in an atmosphere which does not foster anxiety. Working with three marginal trainees I developed a system based on the key principles described by Lucy Atkinson building on the work of Grolnik and Ryan (Atkinson 2000)
i.e. support/direction/structure.

Trainees would be *supported* by mentors assisting them to develop and deliver lessons that were successful; but we would try to encourage them to develop their own sense of

judgement. In this way *direction* would be minimal allowing trainees to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for their classes. Supervisory dialogues frequently do not give trainees any confidence in their own judgement. *Structure* refers to the provision of a clear framework for action; explicit expectations and responses from trainers which are not random, illogical e.g. one day the trainer seems to take one line/ the next day another; or the trainer is confused about his/her expectations of the trainee and what should be achieved by the end of the practice.

The trainees were told that initially the mentor would aim to:

- focus on the before teaching stage and ensure that marginal trainees would go into a classroom well prepared and rehearsed
- help the trainee develop certain routines of action
- reduce the teaching load for trainees and encourage peers to work together to plan and teach
- reform supervision so that lesson observation was only gradually introduced

A key element in the process adopted with these trainees was that supervision became *before-lesson* focused – this goes against the current paradigm retrospective reflection focusing on a problem/solution scenario perhaps with an action research focus as well. Trainees were told that in the early stages of their teaching practice whole lesson observation would not occur; the only observation the mentor would carry out would be of particular activities or routines which had been planned beforehand between trainee and mentor. In this way we were more confident that what would be observed would be successful and thus likely to increase the trainees' confidence. The time normally put into post lesson feedback would be utilised in pre lesson *feedforward*, if there is such a term.

The SPARR approach itself consists of three elements:

- support planning:
- act;
- recall/review

Support Planning

The support given to the trainees is *before* the lessons in planning and preparing for the lesson; rehearsing items that might be problematic; sometimes calling together groups of trainees and together working on materials that could be used ; looking at texts for them; helping them to select and correcting any handouts they might be using. Planning became a shared enterprise at this early stage in the novice career. In this way, the burden was minimised; equally they could be helped to prepare an activity that whilst their own creation was surer of success.

Planning and developing Graduated Teaching Routines

Planning however was not just at the level of materials and activities. For some marginal trainees, developing routines of practice was very important. So graduated teaching routines are also used. This is where with the trainee a particular section or activity in a lesson forms the focus of the support planning stage. The trainee is encouraged to try to rehearse mentally how they will put this into practice; to run it through it in their minds beforehand. The mentor will then only observe at a later stage the graduated teaching routine. So for example, with one trainee, because they could not start a lesson appropriately;, it was impossible for them to gain the attention of the class to start an activity. For such a student, giving them a routine of practice which they could easily acquire meant they gained enormously in confidence. Such a routine might be something simple such as always starting with a greeting and a simple command plus an activity such as collecting in work; calling a register. But graduated teaching routines could embrace more complex activities such as setting up a group work task/ organising children to display work. Such routines are fairly short term – they are viewed as a lead in to enable trainees to feel some degree of control over their classes which was something which marginal trainees often lack. Modelling and demonstrating was also used at this stage – as with the famous coaches referred to earlier, making certain routines and practices routine, will allow the trainee to concentrate on issues that are more important – and will free up time to ‘think’ and ‘become aware’. It was these aspects initially that would be observed in the traditional sense – if the trainee had to carry out a whole lesson, then I would leave after having observed the section we had planned , rehearsed and agreed together. Often, if it didn’t go quite according to plan, then we would be able to rejig it when we next met for a planning session.

Act

The second stage is called ‘Act’ which refers of course to the trainee putting into practice the supported planning and built into this act are activities which hopefully will develop other aspects of intuition such as awareness raising. An important aspect of the ‘act’ stage is that the trainee was initially not observed – and then only gradually for small sections were observations carried out

Recall and review

During the act stage the trainees are asked to undertake various activities in class which have a pupil focus – in this way trainees are encouraged to focus their comments not on their own behaviour but on the learners themselves . By moving away from a preoccupation with self and encouraging a close and careful observation of learners , trainees will be able to build up a library of experiences which can help in intuitive development. Recall does not ask the trainee to critically analyse or even explain their observations – at this stage they are just encouraged to be observant. However, in many cases trainees do find themselves explaining learners reactions – but this is done naturally as they recall the event.

Recall activities ranged from pairs of trainees teaching in the same class, deciding on two learners whom they would observe and describe afterwards, comparing their responses and seeing what differences they had come up with, to recall activities using videos and tapes. As the whole lesson was unobserved, the trainee would be asked to show a small segment of the lesson which they would choose and describe what was happening.

The review stage of the process was introduced slightly later into the programme. Initially this was a group activity where the trainees would meet together to literally “review” particular aspects of their teaching; Review activities included, for example, trainees looking at learner diaries together, trainees analysing simple learner questionnaires. Review activities enable marginal trainees to meet with perhaps more confident and assured trainees to participate in the kind of analytical reframing of events which underlies the notion of reflection. The review stage is moving trainees towards a more reflective approach but with a lighter touch.

This SPAAR process therefore enables marginal trainees to develop confidence, self esteem and success – all of which are necessary for intuition to develop.

It is too early to say how far these trainees will develop into confident, flexible and intuitive teachers who are also reflective and analytical. But for the three marginal trainees with whom I worked it acted as a very great encouragement to better practice. With support and help, they were freed from the hours they had put into inadequate preparation and planning – energy levels were higher, trainees were more relaxed and confident in the class and this enabled them to notice and become aware of the class as learners. It is my contention that the SPARR process would be helpful not just for marginal trainees but for all trainees. SPARR also helps trainers and mentors – when a mentor works with a trainee on thinking ahead about how a lesson might be planned, what the learners are like, what kinds of activities and language are appropriate, the thinking of the trainee becomes much more apparent. They are less defensive and revealing in what they say because it is not their own performance which is being analysed and in this way we can not only see “how their minds are working” but more important we can help in a very constructive way. We can create the conditions under which trainees become more confident and relaxed, able to develop more fluent routines and become more sensitive to classroom cues – all of which are important for developing intuitive aspects of practice. There is, of course, a stage at which trainees will have to be observed but our starting point should be ‘construct’ not ‘critique’.

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