

# Perspectives on teacher education

## Risk-taking in the workplace; challenging trainee teachers to develop their practice

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### Main Body of Contribution

As part of our role as secondary education tutors supporting the initial PGCE training course for teachers, we have been exploring interesting ways of developing good practice in the later stages of a one year course. We are used to working to a set of national standards (Qualifying to Teach) which have been expressed in terms of professional competencies. These provide a useful working framework for trainees in their school workplace, with reference to practical skills and also to more thoughtful reflection.

‘Can teach lessons using explanations, questions and discussion to suit the learners’ Q25(c)

Can reflect on and improve their practice Q7 (a)

(TDA 2006).

Most trainees reach a competent level of performance at the 24 week stage and we have been looking for inspiration to prevent a plateau effect where trainees coast toward the end of the course. Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, have, in our case, provided a catalyst through its framework for inspecting teacher education programmes (Ofsted 2008). This framework offers a set of characteristics for us to use to rank trainees at the end of the course and the ‘outstanding’ grades include the following as part of such trainees’ ‘professional characteristics’:

‘(Trainees) take risks when trying to make teaching interesting, are able to deal with the unexpected and ‘grab the moment’ (Ofsted 2008).

This language is interesting in that it paints a picture of teaching as a creative and bold venture but also raises a more uncomfortable notion of ‘risk’ associated with threats and dangers to students and perhaps also to trainees themselves. We are less interested in the physical risk-assessment which is part of the practical teaching in science, PE and technology lessons and has served as a teaching constraint in schools. We were taken with the idea of trainees challenging routines and trying something different which may or may not have been part of the planned lesson.

We have looked for guidance from an initial trawl of literature about the training not only of teachers but of other professionals. There seems to be experience elsewhere of risk-exploration and it appears there others see links to creativity and to challenging the norms of professional practice.

‘Taking risks can engender a new kind of trust between teacher and student’ (Dreger 2012 in her advice to lecturers of Michigan State University).

‘Creativity follows where uncertainty is tolerated and risk-taking encouraged’

(Craft, 2004: 36 writing about creativity projects in schools).

'We may be becoming too much a world of competent functionaries with overprescribed targets. Critical engagement could be becoming unwelcome in the workplace'

(Davies 2011: 72 writing about the training of probation officers).

We have discussed the Ofsted characteristics with PG trainee teachers' school mentors as well as with the trainee teachers themselves. The trainee teacher groups represent four clusters who are being prepared by the University of Worcester to teach their specialist subjects of science, design and technology, business and physical education in secondary schools. Each secondary trainee has a subject specialist teacher allocated to them to act as mentor in their school placement. The mentor provides guidance for lesson planning, supervises the induction into classrooms and works in partnership with the trainee up to the end of the placement when a summative progress report is completed.

One group of business teacher mentors reported that the idea of risk-taking meant encouraging their trainee teachers to go further than their comfort zones, sometimes dealing with new technologies and sometimes stepping back from endless Powerpoint presentations to use simple but more direct forms of communication. It often meant taking on a new form of working relationships with students in class which embraced emotional as well as cognitive learning. For some trainees, it led them to step up for extra professional duties in school such as helping with music and drama performances or taking assemblies

Some of the business trainees conceived risk as being prepared to lessen the direct control on a class, trying something when you don't know if it will work, handing over responsibility to students and perhaps tackling difficult ethical and social issues as part of the lesson content. Some science trainees talked of the use of role-play in a science lesson with props and scripts written by students. They reported, 'We all laughed for the first time in science with that group.' Design and Technology trainees experimented with a lesson on fair trade involving students for the first time in matching a significant amount of reflective to accompany the practical work. A PE trainee collaborated with a science trainee to motivate a low-achieving group of boys through a practical dissection of a heart to promote understanding of the cardiovascular functions.

What encourages this kind of risk-taking? Is there something we could do which would make these exciting opportunities more the norm than the exception? Some researchers suggest it lies in the hands of tutors and mentors as trainers.

'There are no short cuts; adults are needed to role-model the risk-taking behaviour. Training should include time for trainees to consider their own attitudes to risk-taking' (Piper, 2010:4).

Some PE mentors have allowed their trainees to practise 'risky' lessons through collaborative planning and teaching. As mentors, they can both model the behaviour and step in if necessary. One such lesson allowed the trainee to create new roles for students in a basketball group. Student coaches took on tactics, student medics the monitoring of heart rates, and student referees took charge of the rules. With students in charge, the trainee experienced an unaccustomed low profile in the management of the lesson.

Business trainees described other ways in which mentors and tutors had helped to model the process including jointly planned and taught enterprise days with whole year groups. Some mentors guided trainees to observe teachers taking risks in other subjects. Some departments promoted a culture where to take a risk and try a different approach was seen as a form of success in itself.

At the end of a teaching year exploring these ideas for the first time, we have tried to conceptualise the process of risk-taking as a result of our discussions with school mentors and with trainees. Four tutors have worked with 80 + trainees and 20+ mentors in focus groups to collect examples of school-based experiences.

Focus questions were used to prompt discussion; these included:

- What does it mean to you to 'take risks' in your teaching?
- What encourages you to try different activities or teaching approaches?
- What barriers are there to risk-taking in school?
- What are you planning to develop as a result of your experiences?

We suggest three important and overlapping sets of influences impact on trainees' willingness to take risks; their own personal perceptions of the risks, the working relationships between themselves and their mentors and students, and the workplace conditions.



**Figure 1: three important influences on trainee teachers' risk-taking**

### **Personal perceptions**

Part of the perceptions of 'risk' are coloured by a trainee's own confidence and self-esteem as a teacher. The process of becoming a good teacher involves a commitment to a world that is both emotional as well as rational and cognitive. Some trainees have been afraid of looking foolish in front of peers, of clocking up failures which will set them back and of rethinking their own identity as a teacher. This resonates in other studies of learning to teach.

'Teachers are at so many different stages of personal, professional and psychological development that there will inevitably be different degrees of willingness to reconstruct their models of themselves as teachers' (Spalding et al ., 2011:4).

We think we can make a difference by attending to trainees' individual perceptions in University taught sessions and by encouraging them to be explicit about their emotions as well as their cognition. The four tutors involved in this work have so far been able to explore some 'riskier' teaching strategies in an informal way with their trainees in the safer confines of a University environment before the start of the school placement.

Colleagues working in the training of nurses and other medical staff talk of using live case studies to explore these inner feelings and fears in the safer context of a third-party case-study. They talk of trainees

being encouraged to share their own 'internal dialogues' in a safe trusting environment. Crucial to the development is the process of reflection where those internal dialogues can be mediated with the help and feedback from peers and tutors in the role of critical friends.

### **Working relationships with students and mentors**

The professional relationships between the trainee and school students and the trainee and mentor seem critical to the process. Trainees have to have confidence in their students and in the strength of their working relationships to try new teaching strategies or to ask students to air and challenge their own opinions. The PE trainee who allowed students to explore the different roles attached to the basketball activities had to assume a degree of responsibility on the part of students in that lesson, and to some extent, in every lesson that then followed.

The relationship with a mentor is a subtle mix of guidance and assessment. The mentor might encourage experimentation but the same mentor is likely to write a final assessment report and reference for the trainee. Wright (2010) has described this as being akin to a family relationship, even to a close living partner where much time is invested in making it work. A considerable degree of trust is needed to take risks with such relationships.

Our decision as tutors to push at these boundaries with trainees only in the later stages of the course is important as by then, these working relationships have been generally well-established. Trainees have confidence that they are along the path to success and that mentors are at a point where they can consolidate and enrich their trainees' experiences without jeopardising the whole venture.

### **Workplace Conditions**

The workplace conditions appear as a constraint for many trainees. This can be a reference to the school ethos where a pattern of behaviour expected of students is challenged by a trainee's teaching strategy. This might be about an acceptable level of classroom noise or a profound discussion about the place of the student's voice in school activities. The degree of access students should have to new technologies has also been the subject of debate when trainees wish them to use the internet as part of a classroom task. Business trainees identified the exam-results culture as a real barrier to experimentation.

Craft (2004:43) talks of an appropriate working environment where there is 'freedom from undue time-pressures, over-supervision, competition and restrictions on choices of learning approaches or materials.' She was describing the classroom conditions set for students carrying out creative projects but this could be equally true for the conditions set for trainees by their school mentors. We believe there is much to explore in this world of 'risk-taking', not the least of which is the language itself. There may be better words to describe the venture but we think it is worth investigating as part of our developing partnership with mentors and trainees.

### **The Next steps**

This paper summarises the first stages of what is likely to develop into a more systematic investigation of an aspect of initial teacher education. There is a strong desire in the secondary education tutor team to see trainee teachers develop a voice of their own and a confidence to develop interesting classroom practice. If risk-taking represents one way in which the more effective trainees can be challenged to become outstanding and the less confident find ways to last the course, then it is worth exploring how best to model the process. We plan to use a more systematic framework to collect case study data in the year ahead; to interview trainees and mentors together in the workplace, and to try and identify factors determining successful outcomes. In sharing this experience, we hope to encourage discussion about the basis of effective and challenging programmes with all those who tutor professional trainees through work placements.

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## Biographies

Paul Clarke has taught Social Sciences in London schools and has worked on a national cross-curricular programme for economics education at London University Institute of Education. He is a Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Education at the University of Worcester contributing to secondary initial teacher training programmes. Previous publications include Learning Citizenship, BBC Bitesize and contributions to *How to be a Brilliant Mentor* published by Routledge.

Sue Howarth enjoys teaching Science and Science Education, especially Biology on the Secondary PGCE and GTP programmes as well as on the Primary undergraduate teacher training course. She also teaches Professional Studies, has been involved with delivering Newly Qualified Teachers Masters modules and is looking forward to working with the new School Direct programme. Her research interests include: STEM Enrichment and Enhancement; Learning Outside the Classroom; Tutor-Mentor Partnerships in Teacher Training; Risk-taking in Trainee Teachers; Retention in Secondary Students and Creating Outstanding

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Kerry Whitehouse teaches undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science. Her teaching and research interests include Secondary PE School Philosophy and Pedagogy, Formative Assessment and Risk taking in the workplace.

Sue Wood-Griffiths has been a design and technology teacher and head of department at schools in the UK, Germany and Thailand. She is now a senior lecturer in the Institute of Education at the University of Worcester contributing to both primary and secondary initial teacher training programmes. Previous publications include contributions to *A Practical Guide to Teaching Design and Technology in the Secondary School*, *Learning to Teach Design and Technology in the Secondary School*, and *How to be a Brilliant Mentor* all published by Routledge.