

Pen Portrait: How PGCE tutors at the University of Chester support mentors in developing critically reflective practice

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Context

The PGCE Secondary cohort at the University of Chester is relatively small, with 160 student teachers across seven subjects. All student teachers are enrolled on the programme at M level and may accrue 60 M level credits for their academic work. Critical reflection underpins the programme and is developed through several tools which include a personal philosophy of teaching and learning, a small scale practitioner enquiry, a reflective journal and a critical analysis of their personal learning journey presented at the end of the course.

The role of school mentors in supporting student teachers' capacity to develop as reflective practitioners is crucial. Of key importance, is the development of a shared understanding of what is meant by 'reflective practice'? The term 'critical reflection' is not easily defined (Hatton and Smith, 1994), but it is generally agreed that it involves 'higher level' thinking beyond that which is technical or descriptive (Schön, 1983). PGCE Tutors at Chester sought a definition which encompassed M level criteria, central to which is the notion of independent critical enquiry. Student teachers are encouraged to ask their own questions, to problematise their own learning and seek solutions through dialogue and reading (Freire, 1995; Bruner 1986).

How mentors are supported to develop critical reflection

A shared understanding of reflective practice can only be achieved if all involved are active participants. It is important that mentors and tutors provide observable models within their own practice. For example, subject tutors undertake all school visits which facilitates the establishment of close working relationships with mentors. At four key points during the year, trainees are jointly observed by the University tutor and the mentor, providing opportunities for tutors to model good practice through engagement in three way reflective dialogue. The development of critical thinking is seen as a collaborative rather than individualistic activity (Bruner, 1985 Vygotsky, 1978).

Trainees are introduced to critical reflection through a gradual process which is supported by mentors, tutors and peers. In common with many ITE programmes, they are required to maintain a Learning Journal which is shared with their mentors who are asked to provide feedback regarding the quality or depth of reflection. Initially, they are offered a frame (Tones and Rush 2004) containing a series of open questions enabling trainees to work through particular professional situations, issues or problems. They are required to identify their own foci for reflection and as they become more confident in writing reflectively they become less reliant on the frame. Trainees are actively encouraged to seek out the views of

their mentor and peers as part of the reflective process, a mode of social learning which models that expected of trainees in their own practice. The final assignment requires student teachers to demonstrate an understanding of the theoretical constructs which inform the complex process of professional reflection and critically analyse how this has (or has not) helped them to develop their own practice. Engagement with reflective practice at a metacognitive level affords student teachers a sense of agency, encouraging them to take control of their own learning.

M level assignments, both for trainees and mentors, have been designed to assure discourse and encourage shared reflective processes. For example, trainees undertake a small classroom based 'practitioner enquiry' into an aspect of their subject pedagogy. They are required to develop a research proposal in consultation with their mentor. Evidence suggests that mentors are supportive of this collaborative approach and that it provides a space for reflective dialogue with peers and mentors (Hulse, B. & Hulme, R., 2008).

A growing number of mentors enrolling on the Masters level CPD programme at the University choose modules in Mentoring. The modules require mentors to explore models of reflection and to undertake a critical analysis of their role and the relationship between mentor and trainee. Mentors are encouraged to use interventionist research methodology to analyse a series of stages in the student teacher's journey which are then critically discussed and analysed in the final research commentary.

There are indications (from student teacher evaluations and from statistical evidence of the number of trainees obtaining Ofsted Grade 1) that this has had a very positive effect on the quality of support for the development of reflective practice. Mentors, who have themselves learned of the value of critical reflection in the development of their own practice, provide excellent role models and have an understanding of the processes involved. Following the success of this CPD programme, all mentors will be encouraged to attend a series of twilight seminars with the express aim of developing their reflective skills.

Issues emerging

The development of a 'community of practice' (Wenger,1998) where tutors, student teachers and mentors share a common understanding of 'reflective practice' which is based on active participation and dialogue, is dependent on a relationship which is reciprocal and equal (Goodson, 2003).The move towards making teaching a masters level profession, may encourage a more equal partnership between school and University, whereby 'critical reflection' is seen as a desirable 'professional disposition'(Schön,1983;Feiman-Nemser,1990 in Hatton and Smith, 1995) rather than, as it can be at present, something imposed by the University.

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