

'Just Tell Me What To Do': The Challenges of Facilitating Professional Judgement in

Vocational Trainee Teachers

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Abstract

This paper explores the tensions which arose when encouraging vocational trainee teachers to participate in meaningful action research within an academic framework. Trainees expressed concerns when encountering the university-mandated action research module, and they appeared to be inhibited by research terminology and academic literature. The author investigated ways to motivate trainees to independently research their practice. This account explores how the author sought to overcome these challenges through designing strategies to motivate trainees to adopt action research as a productive approach to learning about teaching. It outlines the challenges of supporting their achievement of the teaching qualification whilst fostering their fundamental commitment to an enquiring approach to their professional practice. The author devised strategies to make the action research process more accessible, and to shift trainees' perceptions that research could only be practised by those of proven academic ability. This process was educative for both the trainees and Teacher Educator.

Key words

Beginning Teachers; Action Research; Vocational Teacher Education; Academic Terminology; Perceptions; Evidenced-Based Improvements to Practice.

Introduction

I am a college-based Teacher Educator leading a two-year part-time Certificate of Education In-Service Programme resulting in a qualification offered through our Further Education (FE) college in collaboration with a local university. Traditionally, the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course attracts trainee teachers from a range of graduate and vocational or craft subject specialisms. Over two-thirds of the trainee teachers who begin the university-accredited programme hold a vocational certificate qualification as their highest qualification in their subject specialism. Many non-graduates only attended mandatory schooling prior to achieving their vocational qualification, and for a significant proportion of these vocational trainee teachers, this programme is often their first encounter with Higher Education. It can often be daunting for trainees with a limited academic background to attempt both the challenge of beginning teaching and also to encounter university-level academic expectations (Orr & Simmons, 2010; McPartland, 2014).

The Certificate of Education In-Service Programme is thus often perceived by trainees as having two distinct strands. They appreciate the practical classroom element of the programme, in which trainees often value the practical aspects of planning and implementing learning activities for their diverse groups. However, they often seem unnerved by the taught element of the university-designed programme, in which the underpinning theoretical content of the qualification is academically taught and assessed within the FE college where trainees attend for four hours per week over two years.

Many trainees take satisfaction from learning the practical procedures of planning delivery and assessment, but non-graduate learners can become intimidated by the more abstract psychological and sociological associated readings required for the university qualification. Within this taught element, trainees have to investigate and make significant changes to their own practice through an action research project, which is intended to enable trainees to make evidence-based improvements to their practice, and to contextualise these improvements in appropriate literature. For trainee teachers, the process of conducting an investigation into their own practice through action research is intended to foster their independent professional judgement: their teaching practice develops beyond the technical status of simply delivering a received curriculum. This instance of action research has been designed to meet The Education & Training Foundation 2014 Professional Standards. These

standards place significant emphasis on teachers and trainers becoming '*...reflective and enquiring practitioners who think critically about their own educational assumptions, values and practice in context of a changing contemporary and education world*' (ETF, 2014: p. 1).

This paper explores the tensions which arise when encouraging vocational trainee teachers to participate in meaningful action research, which is intended as a foundation to stimulate their adoption of an enquiring attitude towards future professional practice. Teacher action research has long been proposed as a means of realising professional autonomy (Elliot, 1991; McNiff, 2017). However, when it is introduced within an assessed academic framework, vocational trainees are often very apprehensive. When I have led the research module in recent years, trainees express concern about the alien terminology of research associated with the assumption that research is carried out by academics rather than vocational practitioners. Consequently, I was faced with the question: 'How can I address the trainees' concerns and motivate them to continue to independently research their practice throughout their teaching careers?' My challenge has been widely recognised in the sector, for example Mitchell et al (2009) who attempted to ensure that research became a tool that teachers can use to continuously inform and improve practice and engage in ongoing expertise development and not something that student teachers read about in college and promptly forget when entering the world of teaching.

This account outlines the challenges I have faced in leading an academic research module for vocational trainee teachers. It explores how I have sought to overcome these challenges through using a range of strategies to engage and enthuse trainees to adopt action research as the most productive approach to learning about teaching. It outlines the tensions of supporting their achievement of the teaching qualification whilst fostering a fundamental commitment to an enquiring approach to their professional practice.

Essentially, I needed to find ways to help make the action research process more accessible, and to shift trainees' perceptions that research could only be practised by those of proven academic ability. Within this paper, I chart my incremental attempts over three cohorts to help trainees.

Year 1: Acknowledging Challenges

In response to trainee feedback over recent years, my delivery of the research module has changed significantly. Initial trainee feedback from my first year of delivery was that trainees found the module assignment a hoop to jump through and a piece of writing which was a necessary means to an end (their teaching qualification). One construction trainee teacher pleaded: *“Just tell me what to do and I will do it, as I can’t see me using this research stuff again when I am teaching”*. As McNiff (2017) suggests, these trainees accepted research as the preserve of a distant elite. They had perceived reflection as part of an impractical academic dimension to the programme which required them to demonstrate a temporary allegiance to reflective practice as a condition for achieving their teaching qualification. I felt completely thwarted by the trainee’s comment, as investigating one’s teaching and identifying opportunities for better meeting trainees’ needs is fundamental to good professional practice and embedded in the sector’s Professional Standards (ETF, 2014). Following this feedback, I became committed to changing my approach to this research module.

Year 2: Making changes

The following year, I taught the research module again and the negative comments from the previous year were still resonating. Consequently, I introduced a learning activity to initially help trainees reflect on the multi-faceted nature of learning. All trainees were asked to work in groups to investigate an exotic fruit. In stages they were given the name (carambola), a picture, and a plastic replica before eventually being given an actual fruit to dissect and taste. Trainees were then asked to map out the developmental steps of the learning activity in order to identify how learners learn. Trainees confidently suggested:

“through repetition”

“making connections to prior learning”

“working with others”

“questioning to promote learning”

“learning conversations”

“teacher feedback”

“assessment activities”

“use of resources”

“reviewing a process”

Trainees were enthused by this activity and discussed the importance of using a range of methods to engage trainees with their vocational specialism. Importantly, they could also confidently relate the activity to the theories they had studied about how people learn.

This activity proved fundamental to developing trainees' confidence to interrogate their practice, as they acknowledged that the teacher's professional skill lay not in their vocational subject knowledge but in exploring a range of ways of learning the subject matter and making professional judgements to justify a choice of strategies to meet their particular learners' needs.

Having established an agreement that classroom contexts require continual review, the following week I asked the trainees to rank their confidence with the research project, using a scaling activity of 1 to 10. All of the non-graduate trainees ranked themselves between 1 and 3 on the scale and the graduate trainees ranked themselves above 7. I then asked each trainee to justify their self-rating. Most stated they had never engaged in research and others explained that writing about what they had personally carried out in their own practice was daunting as they did not fully understand the academic conventions for writing in the first or third person and were intimidated by the terminology and academic expectations associated with writing about research. Following the scaling activity, I organised the trainees into trios which included at least one confident researcher (usually a graduate trainee who had previously carried out research as part of their degree). They were then given a task of matching action research terminology with definitions. This gave all trainees the opportunity to work together and justify the interpretation of the terminology associated with action research whilst making connections to their prior learning and own personal experience.

As homework, trainees were tasked with critically evaluating the National College for School Leadership's (NCSL) paper on joint practised development (2012), and the following week their critiques from the reading were then shared within their trio. This was only partially successful, as not all trainees completed the readings, with less confident trainees sometimes leaving responsibility to the graduate member of their grouping. Several trainees suggested the readings were often too

complicated and written by academics who did not appear to have an understanding of working in a vocational Further Education setting with lower-level learners. Consequently, I modified the activity and asked trainees to focus on short extracts (two to three selected paragraphs) from selected action research reports and to share their findings with the class. Trainees were encouraged to research unfamiliar terminology and place these words along with the definitions into a glossary of terms.

At the end of the second year, when the trainee teachers' assessed assignments were eventually submitted, they were more academically-written and the external examiner commented positively. However, the completed assignments were still perceived by some of the trainee teachers as an abstract activity, compliantly constructed to address the assessment requirements. Less academically-confident vocational trainees continued to be apprehensive about the relevance of the action research process to their daily teaching, and I found myself asking the question: 'Had they developed a reflective and enquiring stance to their everyday teaching practices?'

Year 3: Analysing the process of research

Consequently, when re-designing the programme for the following year, my focus was still on finding ways to build trainees' working confidence to engage with the research process. I wanted trainees to recognise that they already had a working understanding of the fundamental action research process before I introduced the research module assignment. I again organised groupings based on trainee teachers' initial self-assessment of their research expertise, and I asked them to reflect on whether they had ever made changes to their teaching when they had encountered a problematic issue in their classrooms. All trainees agreed they had made changes to their practice because they had become aware of a problem. They described changes concerning the timings of activities, the introduction of inclusive activities to ensure that all learners could achieve in sessions, and strategies to manage behaviour in classrooms and workshops. I realised that I needed to help trainees to appreciate that they were obviously all capable of the sustained systematic enquiry that is central to action research, so I organised a simple research exercise based on their everyday activities outside of the educational environment.

All trainees were asked to complete a generic research activity in three small groups. I tasked them with investigating the replacement of a broken everyday appliance (mobile phone, vacuum cleaner or lawnmower). Essentially, this was a consumer research activity. In this task, I hoped that trainees would make connections between their prior experiences of focused enquiry and relate these grounded experiences to establish a confident understanding of the research process.

Trainees presented their research findings and conclusions to the class. This feedback activity prompted a very engaging whole-class discussion on fact and opinion and provided an excellent opportunity to address issues of bias, validity, and reliability of data collection in formulating conclusions from research. This appeared to boost confidence in those who had limited academic experience.

I then revisited the research tasks and added the formal terminology from the research process to illustrate the steps of the action research process which they had followed when investigating the purchase of an item. In pairs, trainees then began to relate the process which they had engaged in to their own teaching practice, thus showing how they might investigate a classroom-based issue of their own.

Building on this, I encouraged trainees to engage with research literature. I reduced the barriers to reading posed by complex peer-reviewed articles by setting a homework task of reading an unpublished action research report written by an FE teacher. This relatively short study was less than 1,000 words and demonstrated how a teacher had used action research to introduce practical improvements to their teaching. (I also uploaded some further exemplar action research studies to the college's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and set up an electronic discussion forum.)

My starter activity for the subsequent lesson invited trainees to work in their trios and review the FE teacher's account of action research. During this review exercise, trainees spoke more confidently about the account and also began to raise issues related to bias, validity, and reliability in the report. All groups contributed opinions about the study and suggested how it might have been improved. Following this activity, the trios considered potential action research questions for their own individual

research projects. Once this was agreed, and in tutorial with myself, trainees then took ownership of their projects by producing a poster for presentation to the class which highlighted the focus of their proposed individual research and the strategies which they would deploy to ensure a successful project. We agreed submission dates for their action research projects and organised individual tutorials and focus group tutorials which trainees were to attend on a weekly or fortnightly basis to share the progress (and frustrations) of their studies.

Provisional reflections on my attempts to engage trainee teachers in research

I evaluated the relative success of my evolving initiatives thus far as a stimulus for reflecting on my own teaching and arrived at provisional conclusions.

Positive findings from my changed strategies:

- a) The trainees' action research projects have been more grounded in practice and some trainees have made significant changes to teaching practices as a result of greater self-awareness prompted by their action research projects investigating their classrooms.
- b) There is growing evidence of trainee teachers engaging in deliberative reflective practice both in their projects and also in responding to feedback on their observed teaching. Following observation of their practice by mentors and tutors, several trainees have adopted a more self-evaluative approach in reviewing the consequences of their teaching strategies.
- c) The process of organising trainees into mixed-ability trios based on their expressions of research confidence has strengthened the climate of trust within the group. Both graduate and non-graduate trainees seemed more prepared to disclose their uncertainties and offer suggestions on how to improve.
- d) Several graduate trainees disclosed that through this research experience, they had developed their initial understanding of the significance of the research process. Several commented that they had improved their research confidence beyond their initial degree experiences and were able to apply their findings to inform their everyday practice.
- e) Non-graduate trainee teachers with very limited academic experience carried out meaningful action research projects. For some, this proved a unifying module, consolidating their fragmented theoretical knowledge from earlier modules.

Opportunities for further developments in my teaching

a) I was pleased that trainees had expressed greater confidence in using the research process from my everyday research activity, and this was evident in references to bias, validity and reliability in completed work. I adopted Elliott's (2007) understanding that action research is validated by the complementary perspectives of the teacher and the learner, and being opened to the scrutiny of a wider audience. However, beyond the discussions relating to the action research process which I had prompted in class, there was limited reference for some trainees in their completed assignments to wider reading about their teaching and learning contexts to which they had been directed. Some trainees were displaying evidence of academic engagement, yet they were still hesitant about independently using literature to explore their individual practice. One hairdressing trainee had experimented with behaviour management strategies, which were discussed in class and in their staffroom, but they did not take advantage of the wealth of relatively accessible supporting literature (e.g. Wiliam, 2011) to which they had been guided in tutorials and which could have provided additional strategies together with underpinning explanations. Although this trainee's methodological references were sufficient to provide evidence for their academic accreditation, it seems unlikely that after qualifying they would develop an interest in continuing to examine their everyday teaching beyond local – and limited – staffroom influences.

This realisation prompted two actions. First, for future teaching of that module, I would try to build on progress by organising an initial shared classroom activity to which trainees bring an example of a published source which influences their appreciation of their teaching context, so that they can share credible appreciations of literature in practice. Second, and in the longer term, I realised that newly-qualified teachers needed sustained support in engaging with reflective action research (rather than a temporary assignment activity), and that action research projects should be an option in our college's CPD offerings. I recommend that, once qualified, former trainees should continue to be supported to engage in action research projects that will foster the professional enquiry approach that has hopefully been stimulated through their initial training and education programme.

b) Trainees did not make sufficient use of the VLE discussion forums, which I had established, although some did use social media to discuss difficulties in progressing their research assignment. I felt excluded from these discussions and I became frustrated as I felt that I had lost some control over the support I could offer trainees to extend and develop their studies through signposting them to additional readings, evidence and research. I assumed that the trainees' use of social media helped them to negotiate the academic demands of this research assignment. I realise that it is important that trainees independently develop their academic identities within the informal communities of practice which they create for themselves, and it would be useful to my development of my role as a research facilitator if they could use these communities to feed back on their needs as learners. Although I am pleased that they have been discussing their practice with a wider range of peers from different backgrounds, I need feedback about how I can further facilitate their productive interdependence.

What am I learning about my practice as a Teacher Educator?

The above points indicate how trainees might have developed as more independent and interdependent teachers, but what am I learning about the nature of vocational teacher education?

If we want trainees to embrace the identity of teacher, we need to prioritise the development of constructive social relationships in teacher education settings.

The process of organising trainees into mixed-ability trios based on their expressions of research confidence strengthened the climate of trust within the group. Trainees seemed more confident to trust and to share their problems in a supportive environment. The re-organisation of my class to encourage all trainees to work more collaboratively appeared to remove some Certificate trainees' inhibitions based on their preconceptions about graduate classmates. This may also have helped Certificate trainees to engage in discussions about the abstract nature of educational theory in a classroom which had previously separated into graduate and Certificate affiliations. Sometimes, the large class groups could fragment into smaller working friendship groups which offered and took mutual support from each other (which does have some benefits). However, these sub-groups can gradually retreat into defensive alliances and can uncritically defend aspects of their practice (for

example, traditional attitudes towards behaviour management or self-assessment) that might well benefit from further challenge and exploration. My initial re-organisation of the groupings may have enabled a more open and less-resistant environment for the consideration of alternative practices.

New mixed groups led to more active participation by non-graduates in the consideration of alternative responses to shared teaching challenges. This might also help reduce a wider problem – acknowledged by Orr and Simmons (2010) and McPartland (2014) – of vocational trainees clinging to their occupational identity and claiming that “*I’m just a plumber, not a teacher*” (Trainee, 2015). Some vocational teachers can be reluctant to embrace new teaching identities and this can prevent them fully engaging with all of the potential responsibilities of their new teaching role if they still consider their subject to be their primary focus in the classroom rather than their trainees. However, as claiming a new teaching identity requires social and professional confidence, I must continue to work on designing an environment which encourages participation in – and commitment to – the examination of teachers’ professional responsibilities.

Teacher research reports need to be re-valued

As mentioned above, although I uploaded a range of approved literature, which could be accessed through the VLE, trainees did not take advantage of this. On reflection, I need to review my approach to trainees’ use of literature, identify where trainees did make good use of external reading, and use this as a starting point for future literature support with the trainees. All the trainees engaged with the external FE teacher’s account of her practice; this would seem to offer possibilities for the initial introduction of a selection of accessible literature, with more challenging literature being thoughtfully scaffolded so that trainees new to Higher Education are not overwhelmed by the extent and nature of the wide-ranging undifferentiated reading lists advised by the university. Werbersson and Orwehag (2016) have also noted that professional engineers’ resistance to engage with scholarly activities arises from their perceptions of alienating academic styles of communication, rather than from engineers’ capacity to develop and dissect arguments or to consider multiple perspectives. In light of this, perhaps I ought to provide frequent opportunities for trainees to review reports written by former vocational trainees to identify how these might inform their own studies. Indeed, from their initial proposals, trainee teachers could be invited to share one text relevant to their proposed classroom

project within their sub-groups to prompt an initial appreciation of the principles and value of wider reading, rather than simply being inappropriately signposted to an intimidating and seemingly impenetrable generic reading list.

Interdependence is a route to independence

I have noted my frustrations that trainees' use of social media meant that I could not supervise their research progress. On reflection, was I trying to be too directive in managing the trainees' academic development? Although I can see my guidance as having a positive effect on trainees' approaches (as in their adoption of some of my recommended teaching strategies), I am now becoming aware that perhaps trainees should be helped to become less dependent on my interventionist approval in their practice, and this means seeking strategies that will prompt them to assume more responsibility. Rather than becoming frustrated by their separate interdependence, I should devise ways to both encourage their greater interdependence and also to enable these new communities to make best use of me, should they consider it necessary. There is an obvious tension here between my intentions as a Teacher Educator – to motivate trainees to continue to independently research their practice throughout their teaching career – and my needing to accept so much responsibility for them throughout their programme. Am I unwittingly to blame for their dependent approach – “*Just tell me what to do*” – by being over-supportive? Perhaps, as Orr and Simmons (2010) suggest, ‘...*the emphasis on nurturing may militate against challenging trainees to experiment or expand their practice*’ (p. 84).

If I am to help trainees to develop as independent professionals – to think for themselves and to make professional judgements in the interest of their students – I have to introduce strategies so that the trainee teachers can gain insightful feedback into how their students are experiencing their teaching. Hopefully, trainee-initiated investigations will prompt trainees' more insightful decision-making as they are faced with the gap between the students' experiences and the trainee teachers' intentions. This should prompt a more independent reflection on the trainees' values when teaching, so that the trainees do not just superficially depend on external observations by tutors or managers to sanction their practice. This might lead towards the realisation of my ambition that trainees continue as more confident and enquiring teacher-researchers throughout their careers.

Moving beyond my teacher-education classroom

My reflective review of my contributions as a Teacher Educator in this paper has prompted me to evaluate which aspects of my practice have been relatively effective in helping trainee teachers to progress as enquiring teachers and has also highlighted where there are opportunities for greater independence to be encouraged in these emerging trainee teachers. In concluding this paper, I focus attention on how provision in the FE colleges can be improved as we collectively search for integrity in the initial and continuing education of vocational teachers.

Like many college-based Teacher Educators of in-service trainees, I have multiple responsibilities in promoting teaching throughout our institution. In our college provision, it is not sufficient that our trainees have successfully completed the Certificate of Education; for the college, this is the beginning rather than the end of their professional development. We return to that initial question: How can I address the trainees' concerns and motivate them to continue to independently research their practice throughout their teaching career? This is not pious rhetoric that acts as a farewell from the programme – if our qualified trainees do not continue to demonstrate effective teaching, their employment and the college provision is at risk.

The vocational teacher-education programme can give trainees the confidence and freedom to critically investigate their teaching, and the permission to acknowledge when there are opportunities for further improvement. Within colleges, we must build on their professional energy and enthusiasm by structuring further supportive opportunities for colleagues to continue researching their teaching as a recognised avenue within the wider institutional Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provision. This paper has highlighted how meaningful teacher research needs to be nurtured within a purposeful structure, as new teachers (especially) require considerable support and encouragement. Colleges possess untapped capacity in their grounded experience, creative resources, and pragmatic flexibility to provide the necessary opportunities for continuing development together with recognition and acknowledgement for those who commit to sustained professional progression.

This paper has indicated that an inclusive and supportive professional development environment can be encouraged and facilitated, respecting trainee teachers' varied backgrounds as the foundation for developing their academic and professional confidence. If the colleges were to invest in further supported teacher action research as a valued strand of CPD, then new and experienced teachers would contribute to creating a confident research culture and a collaborative ethos that welcomes and celebrates new challenges, and the defensive tendencies of established colleagues and departments might be reduced. If we want new vocational specialists to embrace the professional identity of teachers, we have to provide a professional developmental framework with which they are proud to identify.

(This study provided the rationale for a successful bid to the ETF's *Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment* collaborative programme. The final report on the project, '*Providing Practitioner-Led Action Research Activities for Recently Qualified Teachers*', will be completed in autumn 2018.)

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