

Teacher Educator and Teachers in Training: A Case Study Charting the Development of Professional Identities

Vicki Tait
Sunderland College
SUNCETT

Abstract

As a New Teacher Educator (NTE) within Further Education (FE), professional identity was brought abruptly into my consciousness as I scrutinised and even criticised my practice. The weight of responsibility for supporting a diverse group of trainees through their Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programme was not without anxiety and self-doubt. A number of challenges presented that required careful management on my part. This paper charts the complexity of the development of new professional identities within one ITT classroom and how collaborative enquiry was used effectively to build a supportive environment that nurtured both my transition from teacher to Teacher Educator and the trainees' transitions from teachers in training to qualified teachers.

Key Words

New Teacher Educator; Trainee Teachers; Teacher Identity; Transition; Teacher Enquiry.

Introduction

This is a personal narrative that aims to provide an honest account from a '*good enough*' (Clemans et al, 2010: p. 216) teacher, assigned as a Teacher Educator. Noel (2006) discussed routes into teacher education and found '*...a reasonable reputation as a teacher*' (p. 161) to be a common feature of those like myself who become Teacher Educators. This paper offers an insider's insight into the challenges faced by a NTE within a Further Education setting. It presents the efforts to monitor my professional practice whilst attempting to effect change within the trainees. The paper hopes to illuminate how my own identity as a Teacher Educator developed as I enabled shifts in the trainees' emerging teacher identities.

Trainee Teachers in Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET)

Several studies acknowledge the diverse and idiosyncratic nature of trainees enrolled on teacher training courses within FE colleges (Noel, 2006; Springbett, 2015) and the characteristic challenges arising within my cohort are discussed. In-service trainee teachers in FE differ hugely from pre-service trainees within HE settings and the school system. There are those newly-employed following a lifetime working in industry, together with subject experts who have been teaching for several years without any formal teaching qualification. Sitting alongside these are graduates fresh from university, desperate to secure their first permanent teaching post, and casually-employed or unpaid volunteers expecting to learn practical strategies giving them the pedagogical skills needed to perform the full teacher role. These trainees span a range of stages in the life cycle of a teacher (Sikes, 1985). From experience, I have learned that some trainee teachers may find themselves pressured to enrol upon ITT courses but do not see themselves as trainees, nor do

they identify as teachers, continuing to view themselves in terms of their primary occupation. Art teachers, for example, may well consider themselves artists first, and teachers second (Bennet, 1985). Robson (1998) argues that teaching within FE is not a coherent profession due to workforce diversity, teachers' qualifications, occupations, and routes of entry to FE; for instance, traditional curriculum subjects are offered alongside vocational and specialist subjects. Therefore, a mix of teaching staff from academic and vocational areas embark on ITT. The disparate levels of experience and specialist subject areas of my group of trainees made for challenging and enjoyable class sessions but also sessions laden with tensions, anxiety, and stress as I tried to manage the complex combination of experience, inexperience, cynicism, optimism, indifference, and excitement that constituted the group.

In early meetings with the group, I experienced an '*identity crisis*' (Clemans et al, 2010: p. 215) after previous years of feeling secure in an established subject specialist teaching role. Clemans et al (2010) noted this occurred when teachers are faced with the responsibility of helping their colleagues to develop their teaching. Indeed, Murray and Male (2005: p. 126) describe how the transition process from '*first-order*' (teacher) to '*second-order*' (Teacher Educator), involves the creation of a new professional identity. However, I was not leaving the former role behind as my first-order teaching continued alongside my new second-order teacher training responsibilities. Swennen et al (2010) describe tensions in negotiating the '*possibilities and impossibilities*' (p. 134) as a NTE. Such tensions seem compounded within FE by the necessity to meet the needs of diverse trainees whilst also managing my own needs in an environment characterised by heavy workloads,

curriculum turbulence, insecure employment, and corporate compulsion regarding the retention and achievement of students.

My main insecurity came from the realisation that I needed to help trainee teachers develop professional ways of thinking. About half of the group were already established teachers but were unqualified and therefore compelled by management to gain a teaching qualification. A minority lacked motivation and, on occasion, scepticism was evident which manifested as challenging, self-assured behaviour directed towards the content of my delivery. An example of this was when I had invited groups to compile a list of criteria against which to judge the effectiveness of digital technology in the classroom. One trainee argued that learner feedback was the only possible way of judging effectiveness and dismissed the task as irrelevant. With no past experience of teaching peers on which to draw, and none of having my delivery challenged by a learner who was an experienced teacher, I felt that my position as a teacher of teachers in a FE institution had been undermined. Although my authority as class teacher was maintained, this was to be a much greater teaching challenge than envisaged. I became more self-critical, questioned my ability and – at times – needed to suppress anxiety. Such experiences often lead to self-protection strategies to protect oneself from scrutiny, but this might impede the seeking of support from more experienced colleagues. Donnell's (2010) self-study found similarly, that '*developing voice*' as a NTE was required to '*...address the hidden corners of [her] practice*' and resist '*teacherly isolation and private struggle*' (p. 232). Only later could I appreciate that some of the trainees were also questioning their established teacher identities as they negotiated and re-negotiated their dual roles and dual identities as both teacher and trainee (Orr, 2009).

Swennen et al (2010) discusses how professional development requires a change in professional identity. I began to comprehend how both the trainees and I were undergoing a transitional process involving new ways of thinking about ourselves and our roles. Indeed, Jenkins (2008) suggests identity is created via an internal-external dialectical process. How practitioners in FE see themselves is not just determined by their degree of attachment to the idea of professional status and identity, but also how others see and treat FE practitioners in terms of being a professional. The whole class could consist of individuals in a state of flux, with several of us having to risk changing established notions of our professional identities. I realised that I needed to challenge my own and the trainees' insecurities. To achieve this, I designed a collaborative classroom where experimentation was encouraged and 'mistakes' provided an opportunity to reflect within a non-judgemental space where we collectively learned to teach with integrity.

Although there were significant differences due to varying degrees of experience, subject specialisms, qualifications, and motivations, all of the trainees worked within educational environments and were important resources for each other. We could exchange ideas and make sense of each other's situations by drawing on personal experiences within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998a).

The Classroom Dynamic

To help appreciate the developmental dynamic of class meetings, vignettes portraying typologies of trainees on the teacher education programme have been

constructed. They are not specific to particular individuals but are an amalgamation of the typical early motivations and behaviours I observed.

The earnest trainees have a history of educational achievement and are often relatively new to teaching with high expectations of themselves. These trainees produce academic work of high calibre but need continual positive feedback, reassurance, and feed-forward advice. Some are external students who have accessed placements and are trying to become integrated into the payroll of the institutions they are volunteering for. Amidst the prevailing rhetoric of outstanding teaching, being merely a good teacher can be interpreted as failure. Orr and Simmons (2010) found that many trainee teachers experienced the same demands and expectations by the FE colleges in which they were working as those of experienced teachers, which has become an additional source of stress. In addition, being reliant upon managing mentors for observational grades, these trainee teachers may confine their teaching to meeting mentor/manager approval. By pursuing teaching, they have moved from enjoying high credibility within academic or occupational specialist areas to an insecure position of 'novice teacher', leading to a period of finding a teacher identity.

The conformist trainees, employed in FE colleges, have become compliant with organisational culture and micro-politics; their demeanour one of strategic acquiescence. Some exhibit an air of resignation – a level of unresponsiveness that has come about from no longer questioning the '*...meaningfulness of what they do*' (Ball, 2003: p. 222). Vahasantanen et al (2008) suggest teacher identity is influenced by an individual's prospects, goals, and their perception of the type of professional

they want to become, but these trainees seem to have lost their way, bowing to structural pressures and adopting pragmatic rather than idealistic approaches to work. Practice seems routinised, governed by completing management planning and assessment templates issued in the quest for quality. Their presence on the programme is down to compliance; to achieve the qualification necessary to secure continuing employment. Nasta (2008) suggests that such trainees often consider their teacher training programme as certifying their ability to practise rather than as an opportunity to develop skills. To the Teacher Educator, such trainee teachers can exhibit reluctance to engage and even question the value of the course.

The self-assured ('resistant'?) trainees have been teaching in some capacity for years and often display negativity, intimating they have little to gain from the course. They could prove intimidating to less experienced trainees and to the Teacher Educator (it is unnerving to have mature students in the classroom who are opposed to being there). Frustratingly, such trainees are often skilled in instructional techniques and classroom management with experience that is valuable to their peers but their trainee status seems to elicit a level of discomfort for them. Swann et al (2009) identify '*the clarity principle*' within identity negotiation suggesting that any ambiguity in one's perceived identity can '*undermine trust*' and '*result in miscommunications*' (p. 94).

These short vignettes illustrate the diverse nature of trainee teachers within my group and thus highlight the complex nature of the classroom. Unequal power relationships were evident from the beginning and I was acutely aware of the need to encourage shared democratic views in this classroom. What I found initially

perplexing was how certain trainees, who were established teachers already, behaved as reluctant learners. Campbell (2003) suggests that Teacher Educators need to foster '*...ethical awareness, sensitivity and competence among practitioners at all levels*' (p. 45). How was I to do this with trainees who clearly believed that they had nothing left to learn in terms of the practice of teaching or indeed whose pedagogy was entrenched by prescriptive practices? The challenge would be to overcome these barriers by creating an integrated group that enabled all trainees to develop as reflective professionals.

Trainees are arguably in a unique position to trial new teaching activities free from the constraints of prescriptive institutional pedagogical practices. However, they may already be risk-averse through conforming to the guidance of a manager/mentor who discourages experimentation. They may be seeking work or they do not want to experiment if their students face exams. Nevertheless, my conviction is that trainees have a fleeting period during training where they can question, experiment, share practice, gain confidence, and use their ITT class as a safe haven where teacher enquiry can challenge dominant discourses and reflectively create their own systems of meaning. Wenger (1998b) suggests that learning is social and that drawing on all participants' experiences can help them discover new meanings. Wenger describes how occupational identity develops through such participation so I designed collaborative classroom activities to support the transforming identities. Encouraging independently reflective, student-centred teachers freed from the pressures to conform to mechanistic practices was the goal.

Putting Theory Into Practice: Encouraging Teacher Enquiry Sessions

The following sessions were designed for weeks four, five and six of the programme. Five working groups of three or four were organised, based upon similar subject specialisms, to enhance discussion through common subject experiences. By introducing the concept of belonging to a '*community of practice*', I shared Wenger's (1998a: p. 173) suggestion that we all belong to practice communities, some as core members and some in a peripheral way. Each group discussed the concept, mind-mapping a number of communities of practice to which they belonged. They were then asked to focus on the community of practices relating to their work, what the practices entailed, how belonging to a community affected their sense of self, and what they could learn and achieve collectively in contrast to working alone. All groups identified the teacher training classroom as a community of practice where they could participate and share resources to develop as teachers.

Moving on from this, trainees were tasked with defining what it meant to share good practice and how this was promoted within their organisations. Recorded by a note-taker, a class discussion ensued on Continued Professional Development (CPD) followed by working groups documenting its benefits and limitations, and a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of CPD. Feedback evidenced the overall view that CPD was often unstructured, uninspiring, irrelevant and a one-off transfer of information without follow-up or prospects for collaboration. Trainees then produced a list of what they felt would be effective CPD for teachers. Evidence from the literature was offered for the trainees to compare with their own lists to demonstrate which types of CPD were considered to be most effective (Cordingley et al, 2003; Harris et al, 1999; Durrant & Holden, 2006). The

trainees identified enquiry-driven CPD, with teachers as enquirers of their own practice, as the best way to effect teacher development. Following class discussion and feedback, they were tasked with formulating a process to undertake their own classroom enquiry. All trainees were now familiar with the concept of reflective practice and many were able to link their learning from experience to the making of informed changes to practice using a cycle of plan, act, observe, reflect, re-plan, act and so forth until improvement had occurred.

The trainees' action research cycle was displayed on a whiteboard and groups were tasked to consider the plan stage of the cycle by identifying areas of their practice for change. It was particularly lively and generated a great deal of discussion, comparison of problems, attempted solutions, and successes and failures. Being grouped by subject specialism increased activity relevance, as some classroom issues were discipline specific. During class feedback, it became apparent that the groups had reflected on several informal approaches they had already tried out in their classrooms that were akin to action research. What was missing was the formalised structure that could, or would, be their Action Research Project. Most trainees agreed they were now able to visualise what a potential project could look like.

The following week, trainees formed the same five working groups and a topic area was given requiring them to improve the embedding of maths within their teaching sessions. Each group was tasked with producing a teaching activity or resource to use in their classrooms. Again, grouping by similar subject specialism allowed for easier pooling of ideas and adaptation of existing activities from their contexts. Each

group showcased their resource to the class and peer feedback was given.

Following this, I requested the resource be moved to the next table to be adapted for use within a different subject specialism. For example, a resource designed by hairdressing specialism trainees was to be adapted for use by sport specialism trainees. This continued until each group had five new teaching resources to try with their own learners over the coming week. They were to formally record their reflections on success or failure and further adaptation. The groups were fully engaged, working effectively as teams and enjoying the collaboration that produced excellent resources.

The trainees completed purposive feedback on the sessions as a way of reflecting in a structured way. This encouraged them to similarly reflect on their teaching practice over the coming week to consider what aspects of their practice they could improve. I informed the group I would be collecting feedback on my teaching methods to improve my own practice. Trainees were asked to outline what they had learned and how collaboration had expanded this learning. They were asked whether collaboration had any effect on their sense of identity (feeling like a teacher), self-esteem or belonging, and if the resources produced gave meaning or clarity to their assignment and its purpose.

Personal Reflection: Teacher Enquiry Sessions

I carefully considered groupings for this activity and how to encourage collaboration between learners with widely differing experience, needs, and priorities. I had thought the challenge would be in managing the differing subject specialisms and initially decided to marry these by subject similarity. The class was a mix of

graduates and non-graduates so I had considered if it would be better to group individuals based upon whether they had experience of undergraduate research so those with experience could support those without using the Vygotskian principle of scaffolding by the more knowledgeable peer (Verenikina, 2003). I quickly realised that my early perception of individual traits had more bearing on group interaction than their experience did. For example, where would I place a conformist trainee to rekindle their passion for teaching, or an earnest trainee to enjoy the journey rather than focusing on the end point of achieving high grades? I had noted that one or two graduates new to teaching were quite shy and felt they may be intimidated by a self-assured trainee who was an experienced teacher. Planning for group work required careful consideration and my responsibility was to promote class cohesion, helping trainees to recognise the enormous amount of expertise and experience on which to draw.

By choosing working groups based upon similar subject specialisms, I observed a significant change in participation by those trainees who were initially reserved and reluctant to contribute. I realised that sharing subject knowledge was a springboard for increasing engagement, trust, and confidence, and it gave credence to individual contributions within the groups. Respecting trainees' shared subject knowledge celebrated their primary occupational identities and enabled them to extend their identities to incorporate a self-image of subject expert and teacher of subject expertise. Some trainees described a relative lack of collaboration in their actual teaching environments, such as non-sharing of resources and lack of interest from colleagues, as an unpleasant aspect of their teaching experience and enthusiastically used the space I had created for working together productively.

Hargreaves (1991) describes a type of '*contrived collegiality*' (p. 53) in which teachers' collaboration avoids critical reflection on practice due to it being administratively regulated and unspontaneous. In contrast, these classroom activities opened a space for trainees to develop resources, review their approaches and enjoy a collective responsibility for each other's progress which served to remove hierarchical barriers or reservations. An environment of trust had developed to the extent that trainees created and tested some innovative and experimental ideas that took them beyond habitual teaching practices and led to interesting action research assignments.

In the session feedback one trainee stated that:

"Being forced to work outside of your comfort zone where you can't be with the people you know from last year actually means you make more effort and learn more because it feels like an opportunity to get different perspectives and also show what you know. I felt it made me more confident, not less".

I have since habitually formed different working groups, providing a list of names on the whiteboard in the classroom each week.

The sessions outlined were a success in terms of raising my confidence as a NTE. Feedback from the class was positive. Many stated that lessons were hugely beneficial for supporting personal and professional development, boosting confidence, expanding their teaching toolkit, and focusing on their personal

motivations, strengths and limitations, rather than the position held in their organisation's hierarchy. Making continued reference to teacher enquiry as a means to bring about change in the classroom became an enabling factor for the trainees. As Elliott (1991) argues, teachers who value and adopt a teacher-researcher identity can accept the need for change in their practices and their related teacher identity. The ITT programme offered the students an opportunity to tentatively get involved in teacher enquiry and they became increasingly interested in discussing research methods. The idea of seeking, reviewing, and summarising literature for their own project assignment became less onerous for many in the class. One learner stated: "*I now see Action Research is useful as I have started to think about the kind of teacher I want to be rather than the teaching job I want to get*". This aspiration to become an extended professional (Hoyle, 1974; Hammersley, 1993) represented the success of my approach.

Concluding Reflection on Identity Construction

As a NTE, I wanted to present myself in a positive light – as a competent professional and, very importantly, as confident. My self-worth and self-esteem were satisfied in my first-order teaching role and I found myself confused over my feeling of anxiety. There was incongruity between my identities as teacher and Teacher Educator and I experienced some of the emotional tensions of the transition highlighted in Field's (2012) research, namely: vulnerability, inadequacy, and self-doubt over my abilities. Indeed, Clemans et al (2010) described how teachers entering into a Teacher Educator role feared they would be seen as '*...imposters with false identities*' (p. 216).

Facing this challenge, I learned that moving from teacher to Teacher Educator within FE is a complex transition; a complexity that is largely overlooked by colleagues and managers and borne in many cases solely by the individual. As such, those who begin this journey may lack any real depth of knowledge about teacher education – is it sharing strategies and recording trainees' practical and academic demonstration of classroom competences? Or is it about promoting individuals' growth as student-centred reflective professionals? NTEs may feel compelled to draw upon a mix of resources to cushion the ride for what may inevitably be '*...a seat of the pants approach*' to the role (Zeichner, 2005: p. 123). As a NTE, my initial enthusiasm was coupled with self-doubt. Did I have enough experience to be credible? Where would I fit in the time to engage with literature and undertake research? Would I be supported? Am I good enough? Will I bear up to the scrutiny of the trainees, my colleagues, managers, and the university partnership?

For my personal development, I was aware that I had begun to overcome some of the insecurity within my NTE role. I was still, at times, plagued by self-doubt and introspection, and felt I lacked credibility. I had a higher degree but no research profile to support a claim to the role and wondered if my peers questioned why I had been given the role. I was particularly focused on one self-assured trainee, noting with some relief that the collaborative classroom activities saw this individual develop within the new community of practice; being supportive, offering ideas and examples, and seemingly enjoying the sessions. I had put the mechanisms in place but the trainees were leading their own learning and thinking for themselves and not needing a template or a set of parameters to follow. Stenhouse (1975) argued that teachers must be autonomous and emancipated. This resonates with what was taking place in

the classroom; trainees confidently experimenting with ideas, and my own confidence as a NTE growing alongside.

Future Considerations

As Sennett (2009) notes, mastery of a craft is a complex process and cannot be rushed nor easily won. All of the trainees had the raw materials to be able to master the craft of teaching; what varied were confidence, motivation, and aspiration.

Sennett claims that motivation and aspiration are products of social conditions – organisations can hinder or enhance these qualities within teachers. Craft is inextricably linked to vocation, a vision of ‘this is what I am meant to be doing’ and it is this vocational identity within FE teachers that needs nurturing if they are to avoid the instrumentalism of ‘tips for teachers’. Future consideration will involve my investigating how trainee teachers might be further enabled to become innovative in developing their craft, and to be reflexive in their thinking in order to shape their professional identities and professionalism. At the heart of a good teacher are ethical questions: Can I improve my teaching? How can I improve? Does this help to develop individual students, and are there benefits to the local community and wider society? Significantly, Taubman states: *‘To develop as an education professional requires a belief that improvements can be made. It also requires an open and inquiring mind – one that is interested in learning and in how to enable learning to occur’* (2015: p. 116).

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