

TEACHER EDUCATION, SELF-AWARENESS AND EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

The paper explores some of the key tenets of teacher education as put forth by Dewey, traces their impact on the current approaches to teacher development and surveys the benefits of non-prescriptive models in generating lasting changes in teacher behaviour. The paper finally touches upon some of the practical consequences of the teacher-as-reflective-practitioner paradigm, highlighting the equal validity attached to the individual teachers' diverse experiential knowledge and the multiple manifestations of the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: “apprenticeship of observation”, non-prescriptive approaches, self awareness, reconstructing practice, empowerment

Background information

This paper is a follow up to “Teacher development through peer observation: The reflective approach” published in this journal in volume 6, number 1 of 2010. The current approach builds on two seminal quotations by Dewey and Schon on teacher education and my goal is to interpret and contextualize them, and ultimately explore the implications they hold for the education of language teachers.

Teacher development: Dewey's lasting impact

The following quote lies at the very core of this paper:

“Students cannot be taught what they need to know, but they can be coached: they have to see on their own behalf and in their own way the relations between means and methods employed and results achieved. Nobody else can see for them, and they can't see just by being 'told', although the right kind of telling may guide their seeing and thus help them see what they need to see”

(Schon 1987:17).

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This quintessential quotation highlights several tenets of professional education as advocated by Dewey as touches upon a number of key issues in teacher education programs. I will mention just the most salient ones:

- the relationship between input and intake with a view to inducing durable change in the teaching practice;
- the individual model of teaching each teaching professional has developed through exposure to massive amounts of implicit observation throughout the schooling process;
- the ineffectiveness of prescriptive approaches and of all imposition in general;
- the need to develop reflective practitioners;
- the role of teacher education programs.

Teachers-in-training are likely to internalize the methodological theory and practice that tends to resonate with their professional beliefs and values. Apparently only that input becomes intake that harmonizes with the teaching models developed by each of us as a result of our previous learning experiences. The phenomenon of the powerful impact of the “13,000-hour apprenticeship of observation” (Bailey in Freeman and Richards, 1996:11) occasioned by each individual’s schooling history has been extensively acknowledged. By the time language teachers come to teach, the long time they have spent in school implicitly observing the teaching process contributed in shaping their ideas of language teaching and learning. The teachers’ previous experiences as language learners have resulted in internalizing many teaching behaviours they were exposed to, to the extent that “teachers acquire seemingly indelible imprints from their own experiences as students and these imprints are tremendously difficult to shake.” (Bailey in Freeman and Richards, 1996:11).

As a result, each individual develops different expectations and beliefs about teaching by building on this very “apprenticeship of observation”. The influence of the teacher’s own experience as a student impacts his/her teaching philosophy and practice and the training teachers’ pre-existing conceptions of teaching may run counter to the forms of instruction offered by Teacher Education programs. Freeman and Richards state that “research on teacher learning suggests that the foundations of an individual’s ideas about teaching are well established through the experience of being a student, which Lortie refers to as “the apprenticeship of observation” (Freeman and Richards, 1996:210).

By internalizing specific teaching behaviours each individual develops his/her own perception of what constitutes good and bad teaching and implicitly internalizes values. Therefore teachers appear to be summative products of their previous learning experiences: throughout their professional development they will likely internalize information that is compatible with their already existing professional knowledge and assumptions derived from their past learning experiences.

As Kennedy quoted by Bailey states, “often, despite their intentions to do otherwise, new teachers teach as they were taught. The power of their ‘apprenticeship of observation’ and of the conventional images of teaching that derive from childhood experiences, makes it very difficult to alter teaching practices and explains in part why teaching has remained so constant over so many decades of reform efforts” (Bailey in Freeman and Richards, 1996:16).

Then how can the training teachers and teachers in general overcome their natural tendency to imitate unwittingly the teaching behaviour they were exposed to in school?

Empowerment through self-awareness

The answer is self-awareness as instrumental to developing a critical approach to the beliefs and perceptions established during our years in school. Awareness raising is meant to provide opportunities for teachers “to confront their own routine practice and the values it is intended to serve” (Lamb in Hedge and Whitney, 1996:148) and to explore their mental constructs of the teaching process, thereby their relevant beliefs. These beliefs should be the focus of short in-service courses. As Lamb emphasises, the teacher’s beliefs “need first to be articulated, and then analysed for potential contradictions with each other, the teaching circumstances, and the beliefs of learners. Only then will teachers be able to accommodate new ideas - to appreciate the theory underlying them, understand their practical realization, and evaluate their usefulness” (Lamb in Hedge and Whitney, 1996:148).

Awareness is critical to professional growth since it lies at the foundation of all change, initially attitudinal and ultimately behavioural. Bailey points out this critical role of awareness when she states that “as Larsen-Freeman has noted (1983), the first step towards changing out teaching practice is awareness. Such awareness may encompass what we currently do, the factors that have shaped us, and our options for change” (Bailey in Freeman and Richards, 1996:26).

This discussion of awareness invites the issues of reflection and introspection as valuable tools in the process of value clarification, as well as in developing critical thinking skills. By analysing their own teaching and learning experiences, the teachers’ own theories of learning will begin to emerge. Only when the teachers become aware of the teaching philosophy driving their classroom practice will they be able to examine these guiding principles and alter them as required by their respective teaching context.

As a result, teachers are not doomed to follow in the footsteps of their own teachers, no matter how indelible the patterns developed throughout the 'apprenticeship of observation'. The reflective practitioner will focus on his/her own teaching practice in an effort to make explicit to himself/herself the underlying beliefs of their classroom activity. Once these assumptions are rendered explicit, they can be reviewed and adapted, according to the practical needs of the respective teaching situation. When discussing the benefits derived from language learners' autobiographies in terms of awareness raising, Bailey sums it up as follows: "By becoming aware of our beliefs with regard to those teachers we have witnessed, we can begin to develop teaching philosophies based on choice: we realize that we do have control over our own actions and beliefs. We may model our behaviour after that of others, but it will be because we have made conscious, informed decisions to do so. Our 'apprenticeship of observation', like our childhood, will affect us to the degree and in the manner that we allow" (Bailey in Freeman and Richards, 1996:16).

By acknowledging the beliefs that habitually determine teachers' attitudes and behaviour patterns, that is by developing professional awareness, the teachers become empowered. That is to say that it is within their power to change and act in such a way as to feel more effective professionally.

The quotation in the opening section of this paper also warns against the ineffectiveness of prescriptive approaches. Dewey's words "... they can't see just by being 'told' bring to mind the models of teacher education that rely on knowledge transmission, that is 'input-output' models that depend on received knowledge to induce behavioural changes, without acknowledging the training teachers' need to reconstruct their own approaches to teaching, or, to echo the title of one of Freeman's articles, to rename experience and reconstruct practice so as to develop new understandings of teaching (Freeman and Richards, 1996:221).

This approach is echoed in the very role of teacher education described by Freeman in the respective article and warns against potentially counter-productive expectations of teacher training programs: "When they are viewed exclusively as the inculcation of knowledge and skills, the potentially powerful effects of teacher education programs may remain unrecognised and unexamined. It may be that the role of teacher education lies less in influencing teachers' behaviour than in enabling them to rename their experience, thus recasting their conceptions and reconstructing their classroom practice" (Freeman and Richards, 1996:238).

As a result, the models of teaching that Teacher Education programs offer are interpreted by individual training teachers in different ways as they analyze and deconstruct the respective models in the light of their classroom practice; ultimately the models are reconstructed by building on the teachers' professional assumptions, by relating the teacher education program to their own theories of teaching, that is moving from the initial stage of "skill-getting" (that is the *what* of

a teaching skill) to “skill using” (that is the *why*, *when*, and *with whom*), as stated by Britten (Britten in Hedge and Whitney, 1996:167).

The following quotation from Colton and Sparks-Langer best illustrates the point: “In the constructivist view, the learner’s direct actions, reactions and interactions with objects, people, rules, norms and ideas result in the personal construction and reconstruction of knowledge and adaptive abilities. Thus, teachers learn from their experiences by constructing mental representations of their personal meanings which then are stored in memory to be reviewed as experience dictates” (Richards *et al* in Freeman and Richards, 1996:258).

Given the widely acknowledged ineffectiveness of prescriptive approaches, and of imposition in general - since they may induce some imitative behaviours in teachers but no deep running, long-term attitudinal change - in what follows I will quickly survey some of the benefits of non-prescriptive approaches, as reflected in the literature.

According to Mathur, non-prescriptive approaches are valuable since they generate lasting changes in teacher behaviour, lasting because informed by the teacher’s own perceptions, values and professional context. Non-prescriptive programs “aim at developing teachers’ competence to learn from their experience and to construct strategies from their awareness of the various needs and contexts in their specific schools or regions. This would be possible only when the teachers can internalise a set of guiding principles and develop their ability to exploit their existing knowledge and experience in the process of adaptation” (Mathur, 1987:7).

Non-prescriptive approaches rely on a sequence of training activities of the type: tasks for awareness raising leading to discussion of underlying principles, followed by tasks exploiting the principles that surfaced during the discussion stage, all crowned by a review and critical appraisal of the teaching theory, to be afterwards implemented in the teaching practice, and ultimately rounded off by a review. Such approaches emphasize awareness, reflection, analysis of the phenomena in the light of the new knowledge acquired through teacher education courses, making inferences and adjusting the approach.

Self-awareness: in search of relevant diversity

Both the practice and the literature show that only such an approach as described above could serve the long-term goal of educating teachers to continue to learn as autonomous learners, grow as people and thrive professionally, thereby constantly enhancing their ability to adapt and better respond to their specific environment. Or as Mathur puts it, such approaches to teacher development strategies are likely to “help to produce balanced, creative, growing individuals” (Mathur, 1987:18).

These creative individuals able to construct strategies in response to needs and contexts in their specific teaching situation are likely to develop different angles and bring to the fore diverse experiences. “When practitioners reflect in and on their practice, the possible objects of reflection are as varied as the kinds of phenomena before them and the systems of knowing-in-practice which they bring to them” (Schon, 1983: 91).

Schon’s words appear to emphasize the diversity of the individual teachers’ experiential knowledge, and, implicitly, their equal validity, as well as the myriad practical manifestations of the teaching and learning process. The reason for this endless diversity of manifestations may lie, to quote Mathur again, in the fact that “there is no direct route from theory to practice” (Mathur, 1987:7), that is the same theoretical input will be processed differently by the range of practitioners, therefore it will likely generate dissimilar practical applications.

The infinite variety of the teaching contexts rules out the possibility of a universal expert solution applicable to all contexts. The teacher educator plants the seeds of professional growth in the teachers, who, through their own tender and reflective care, will help the seeds develop. This approach is likely to grant teachers a rewarding sense of increased professional competence and confidence, enabling them to adapt and adopt the teaching strategies best suited to their students’ needs and their own specific teaching situations. In the face of the infinitely diverse teaching situations available, teacher education programs cannot offer training teachers a magic formula good for all their teaching contexts.

However, teacher education programs can raise the teachers’ awareness of the learning processes, of the specific language skills they are called to hone and of the learning outcomes specific teaching methods can achieve. That is to say that teacher development programs can lay the foundation of teacher professional growth by providing the guiding principles. At the same time such training programs can encourage the fledgling teachers to develop their reflective skills by exploring their existing knowledge and practice. Ideally, in Mathur’s words, teacher education programs “would aim at developing teachers’ competence to learn from their experience and to construct strategies from their awareness of the various needs and contexts in their specific schools or regions” (Mathur, 1987:7).

It is the teacher as a practitioner that is able to relate the theoretical context of the teacher education program to his/her own personal teaching environment, thereby generating a personal theory of teaching that is applicable to the specific teaching situation. The model of teaching circulated by means of the teacher education program is interpreted in different ways by the training teachers in the light of their own teaching practice, to be ultimately reconstructed in terms of each individual’s professional assumptions. As all teachers will know from their own experience, when teachers reflect on their practice they interpret it and ultimately reconstruct it in terms of the knowledge, beliefs, and values acquired individually throughout the “apprenticeship of observation”, which, for every teacher, had a peculiar chemistry.

The reflecting subject's unique professional identity - mirrored in a distinctly singular system of "knowing-in-practice" – is shaped through individual learning and teaching experiences, as well as through the varied nature of the objects of reflection. This matches the endless variety of the subjects' teaching situations to which each subject applies his/her reflective skills. The ensuing concept of each and every teacher's unique professional identity thus emerging fully resonates with Schon's statement whose key tenets are, on the one hand, the equal validity of the individual teaching situations and approaches and, on the other one, the reflecting subject as sole authority in choosing the strategy most appropriate to the respective context.

This singular and peculiar nature of each teacher as reflecting subject as well as of each teaching context account for the uniquely individual ways in which teachers respond to teacher education programs. As each teaching situation makes unique demands on the teacher, teachers adopt a bottom-up approach by means of which they make decisions, reflect, analyse, and assess the teaching strategies, procedures and techniques they deemed suitable in order to address the particular characteristics of the teaching situation in question. As a result, teaching methods are hardly generalizable and teachers need to adapt them and adopt the teaching decisions that appear to best meet the learning requirements of each environment. Therefore the importance of reflectivity as an instrument of professional growth and the need of training teachers to develop into reflective practitioners who, in view of their intimate knowledge of every teaching context, can come up with the best decisions, so as to promote learning.

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