

Writing as a professional development activity in ITE

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Introduction

When a second level teacher becomes a supervisor of school-based experience on an initial teacher education programme (ITEP), they bring their experience as a teacher to bear on their new practice. Through reflection on their own teaching experiences, they offer to the student teacher those nuggets of advice that help the student teacher to develop their craft. As yet, no formal programmes or strategies exist within the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland that assist these supervisors in studying their own practices, both as teachers and as teacher educators, and articulating this craft knowledge. There is, however, an international trend towards self-study of teacher education practice (S-STEP) where teacher educators are encouraged to both reflect upon and publish about their practices.

Knowles and Cole (1995) depict professional writing as “an integral part of our professional practice” (p71) and describe their transition from classroom teachers to university faculty members as follows:

With years of teaching experience behind us, we entered the professoriate with considerable confidence in our abilities to carry out our teaching responsibilities; however, we did not feel sufficiently prepared to adopt a writing persona easily...Whereas teaching was so embedded in our professional identities that it seemed to come naturally, writing for publication was something with which we had little experience...Unlike practices associated with beginning to teach – where my actions were transitory and ephemeral, and my mistakes could be blotted out in my mind...- writing has a sense of permanency about it that sometimes renders me wordless. (p.73)

The aim of this research project was to introduce professional writing as a professional development activity for a small group of supervisors of teaching practice in two education schools/departments, one in the Republic and one in Northern Ireland.

Over the course of the academic year 2011- 2012, two groups were formed for the purpose of exploring the role of writing as a professional development activity. The NUI Maynooth group comprised four part-time University staff who are supervisors of school placement while the group in Queen's University were teachers in schools who also worked as school-based tutors with newly qualified teachers.

Methodology

These groups followed the same programme of activities over the course of the year. These were designed to engage the participants in reading and writing about their practices as teacher educators and to share their writing with each other. Meetings were held monthly from November onwards. Prior to each meeting, participants were invited to write 500-1000 words on a particular topic and to bring this to the meeting. The structure of each meeting was as follows:

1. each participant shared his/her writing with the group, either by distributing a photocopy of the piece or by reading it aloud.
2. the written pieces were discussed, with participants invited to comment on similarities and differences between them
3. following the discussion, the key points were summarised and noted. This formed the basis of the report of the meeting.
4. the meeting concluded by setting the focus for the next month.

Each meeting was audio recorded with the permission of the participants and, following the meeting, a participant undertook to write the report and circulate it to the members of the group.

The writing themes were:

1. journaling about the everyday practices of supervising school placement
2. engaging in conversation about practice with a critical friend who does not work in teacher education
3. writing one's autobiography as a learner
4. critical incidents as a school placement tutor / supervisor

5. writing a case study of an incident

Participants were also provided with a selection of readings that related to the emergent themes from the written pieces. After the series of meetings were completed, participants were invited to evaluate their involvement in the process to date.

The project concluded with a one-day conference held in December 2013 entitled *The Work of Supervisors of School Placement: Educative, Formative, Normative*. The conference was held in the Long Room Hub of Trinity College Dublin and was attended by 55 school placement supervisors. The day began with an input from Dr Stephen James Minton (TCD) and Ms Maeve Daly (NUI Maynooth) on The Seven Tasks of Supervision (Carroll, 1996) applied to School Placement Supervision. This was followed by a workshop where supervisors had the opportunity to put the skills outlined into practice.

After lunch, Dr Anja Swennen (VU University, The Netherlands) gave the keynote address “Crossing Borders - University and School Based Teacher Educators”. The afternoon concluded with inputs from Dr Rose Dolan, Mr Michael Kearns, Ms Mairead O’ Riordain and Mr. Seamus Cummins, all from NUI Maynooth, and Dr Billy Mc Clune and Ms Blanch Gallagher from Queen’s University Belfast, all participants in SCoTENS project, “Writing as a Professional Development Activity”. These inputs, along with data from the group meetings, were analysed for aspects that related to professional development for the part-time teacher educators.

Findings

The findings from the research indicate:

1. the importance of reading literature about teacher education. Engagement with the literature allowed the participants to connect to key ideas in teacher education and developed their confidence in giving feedback to the student teachers. This is encapsulated by the following quote from one of the participants who spoke about how reading a particular article underpinned “what I was trying to do with my student teachers...it was no longer me telling them, it was me and Lee [Shulman] telling them”.

2. the benefits of journal keeping as a way of increasing one's self-realisation. This activity, which continued throughout the academic year, allowed participants to identify preconceived notions or assumptions about students and schools. It also allowed participants to develop their own capacity for critical reflection. As one participant describes "I am always encouraging my students to be reflective...but it's something I find really difficult".
3. the significance of the study group culture as a motivational factor for critical reflection. This also was instrumental in identifying preconceived ideas about students and schools. Engaging in discussions about critical incidents allowed participants to view the incidents in a different way. The process of writing, reading aloud and listening to others perspectives was described as "empowering" as it allowed the teacher educator to "hear what I was thinking".
4. that the process assisted the participants in increasing a sense of interconnectedness with the ITE programme and thus reducing the sense of isolation that had developed in the supervision role.
5. that the process was instrumental in causing supervisors to change their practices. One supervisor described adopting a more analytical approach to observation, resulting in feedback to the student that was more measured and focused.

While participants described the process as very worthwhile and professionally developmental, there were also aspects that were difficult. They spoke of the emotional dimension of engaging in the process, describing feelings of nervousness and anxiety, of finding the idea of writing and reading aloud one's thoughts and reflections to be very difficult.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Engaging in professional development is critical for teacher educators as they move from being first order practitioners in classrooms to the role of second order practitioners who teach about teaching. While the creation of a space for conversation about practice is important, what happens within that space is critical. Structured engagement with literature, with reflection, with journaling and with the 'hunting of one's own

assumptions' (Brookfield, 1995) was the critical dimension of this professional development. The research project points to the importance of creating safe spaces for teacher educators to develop the capabilities necessary for this new role, including support as they write, as they reflect and as they read. The importance of this for those who undertake the role in a part-time capacity is particularly critical.

References and further reading:

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