

Locating the third space in Initial Teacher Training

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Abstract

Since changes to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in 1992, school–university partnerships for Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses in the UK have grown closer than ever. Yet, even with lessened hierarchy and increased dialogue, gaps between what is learnt at university and what is experienced at school remain. Taking Bhabha and Zeichner’s use of the theoretical concept of ‘third space’, this exploratory paper documents the author’s attempt to locate and negotiate a hybrid space where a cohort of religious education (RE) student teachers’ experiences can be mediated, and the gap between theory and practice reduced.

Keywords: third space, partnership, ITE, mentors, university tutor.

Introduction

Every year, I find that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students initially struggle with pedagogical approaches to religious education (RE). Although they academically comprehend the models, their difficulty lies in identifying particular models in practice. Despite adapting the taught course, there persists a disconnect between theory and practice. The difficulty may exist in RE for a number of reasons, including a lack of uniformity in approaches to RE in the UK, a rather piecemeal approach to pedagogy in RE in some schools, and the dearth of professional materials which translate pedagogical models. However, this is not a problem that exists only within RE. The theory–practice gap is much discussed in ITE (Gersten et al., 1995), and has largely revolved around the university–school partnership (Zeichner, 2010; Martin et al., 2011). In this case study, I will be looking at practical strategies to minimise the gap between theory and practice, using the metaphor of third space to provide a conceptual underpinning.

Current UK university–school partnership practice

In addressing this disconnect between theory and practice, the place to start is with an examination of the school–university partnership, this being the obvious link uniting academic theory and practice. The current partnership model has not undergone much change since 1992, although ITE is currently in a state of flux. The student teacher is assigned a school-based mentor who will give feedback, set targets and provide training opportunities. The university tutor’s role expands beyond the provision of lectures and tutorials. Observations of practice in both placements are made jointly with the school mentor. The ultimate responsibility for the student teacher’s development lies with the university, although the school has responsibility for personalising the training plan within the school context.

The stress on partnerships in the UK ITE model largely avoids the polarisation of theory and practice identified by Zeichner (2010) and Darling–Hammond (2009) as problematic in US Pre-Service training. In ITE, lines of responsibility for training are often blurred. Mentors have opportunities to come into university for training, and subject networks exist where mentors and the university tutor can exchange ideas. Mentors are often involved in interviewing prospective applicants, and some share their expertise in university sessions. University tutors provide guidance and school training plans. School-based research tasks are discussed at university, and university assignments are discussed in mentor meetings. School experiences are deconstructed in university sessions. Developments such as these are positive aspects of a system capable of producing many outstanding teachers.

The use of the word 'partnership' suggests equality, lacking hierarchy. However, hierarchies still exist in ITE. Despite the good practice that exists, relationships between school and university can be strained, with dominance seesawing between school and university over the student teacher's training, time and resources. Typically, both school and university can be blinkered partners whose work largely lies iceberg-like, hidden from each other's view. Weekly training plans are shared, and university and school representatives meet up periodically to fulfil the statutory obligations of the partnership or to focus on those elements that bubble to the surface, such as a struggling student teacher. However, once immediate problems are sorted, the partners drift back into their own spheres. The relationship is kept intact through frequent communication, although discussion alone does not necessarily lead to a shared discourse. School and university experiences are often viewed by student teachers as separate entities. This has an inevitable impact on their ability to apply their theoretical knowledge. Moreover, the waning of student teachers' initial enthusiasm for RE pedagogies is palpable. Entries in reflective journals reveal they encounter a lack of time for discussing theoretical underpinnings in school. What is required is space to mediate and unify student experiences to enable further growth and bridge gaps; the search is on for the third space.

The need for a third space

The concept of a third space (Bhabha, 1990; Soja, 1995) has been utilised in several fields of enquiry, signifying a hybrid terrain where different perspectives can be straddled, the difference between the two negotiated, recombined and extended. This can be a theoretical liminal space, or one with temporal and spatial implications (Soja, 1995). In teacher education, third space has often come to mean a hybrid space which crosses the academic and practitioner boundaries, giving rise to new possibilities and undermining accepted wisdom (Martin et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Zeichner, 2010). It is the third space which allows learning in and from practice to be processed fully, enabling reflective practice to draw upon alternative ideas and perspectives. The third space extends beyond reflection, feeding off clash to lead to new and often subversive productivities (Bhabha, 1994). This year, I have tried several new approaches for locating and utilising a third space as a way of bridging the theory–practice gap.

Locating the third space in ITE

The RE Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at UEL is split into two key components: the university taught course and practical school experiences. While separate discourses will inevitably exist for each, I have made a conscious effort to provide opportunities where these discourses can be brought together, aiming for a seamless transition between university and school. One tool which occupies a hybrid third space is the University of East London (UEL) RE wiki. The wiki is multi-functionary, although its heart is student-generated dialogue. Discussions are often initiated and mediated by the tutor. However, with the maturing of the wiki community, students typically assume ownership, raising their own questions and emphasising their own priorities (Lewis, 2011). The open-sourced nature of the wiki, and the simple editing facilities, encourage the creation of new pages. In this study, a third of all pages on the RE wiki were created spontaneously by student teachers. This is in addition to the free contributions on the existing discussion forums and collaborative pages.

The wiki provided a unique space that enabled the notions of academic and practitioner knowledge to be broken down, merged and reconfigured. The progression of this third space could be tracked easily though the tracking functions of the wiki, and not surprisingly, the progression of the community broadly corresponded with the stages of development expected for a student teacher. Therefore, in the early stages, where student teachers had little school experience, discussions were mainly of an academic nature, with questions relating tightly to the course discussions. After the first month, participants gathered confidence to question interpretations, bringing in a wealth of understanding influenced by their own personal narratives. This moved to a more pragmatic stage upon the start of school experience. Student-initiated questions became a matter of finding survival techniques, although the basic questioning of academic theory had begun. At this stage, the tutor was able to present problems related to university sessions for consideration in the light of school experiences.

Thus began a new chapter in the development of both the wiki and the student teachers' confidence: boundaries were broken, opinions altered in the light of other student teachers' experiences, and school experiences weighed against continually developing understanding. The tutor was able to take a mediating

role, intervening where necessary to introduce wider perspectives missing from dialogue. As the student teachers progressed through the course, questions raised on the wiki tended to go beyond pragmatics. Emerging ideas were blended together as they sought clarification, and re-clarification where opposing worlds of discourse from very individual schools and pedagogical ideals clashed. The wiki became a medium where the diverse experiences encountered could be traversed and ideas negotiated. It is important to note that where ideas were disputed, this did not always lead to a stalemate situation, but one where the original ideas were merged and reconfigured.

The collaborative nature of the wiki was complemented through the personally reflective use of video cameras to record and analyse students' own teaching. While self-analysis using recordings has been widely used in teacher education (Snoeyink, 2010; Jongsma, 2000; Dymond et al., 2006), a bridging programme was needed to connect the reflective component with theory effectively.

At the beginning of the year, all RE student teachers were issued with a Flip camera and trained in lesson observation. The bridging programme was designed to enhance the opportunities to connect reflective practice to the theoretical aspects of the course. This consisted of a number of focused recorded observations. The first set of six recorded observations were only five minutes long and directly related to the taught session from that week. Thus, when trainees attended a session on effective plenaries, their corresponding 'homework' was to have a plenary videoed, demonstrating how they were putting theory into practice. In the subsequent weeks, time was set aside for 30-minute sessions, with the moniker, 'RE TV'. These sessions would enable us to watch one or two of these clips, drawing out the complexities of putting theory into practice. Again, this was an attempt to provide a third space where theory could be considered in the light of pragmatics and practitioner wisdom. In the latter half of the first placement, focused full-length videos were recorded, with trainees and mentors watching together to facilitate a joint analysis of teaching and learning. An additional benefit for the trainees who uploaded their videos to their password-protected electronic journal website was that the tutor could also contribute to discussions around the observation. In some cases where the student teacher required more support, or a different perspective, the tutor turned the videos into screencasts. This enabled the tutor to provide a running audio commentary. This in turn provided

the tutor with a richer understanding of the student teacher's progress and the operating context, enabling a greater level of course personalisation to be made.

The success of this gap-minimising strategy was mixed. Student teachers who recorded their videos found the process beneficial, especially where the mentor watched with them. However, getting some student teachers to be recorded was a mammoth task. Some found the process of watching themselves too painful to contemplate, and a plethora of excuses to explain the lack of compliance were regularly issued. Occasionally the school was wary of supporting the project, despite all safeguarding measures. The short observational programme designed to bridge the academic and professional gap proved particularly problematic. In the early stages, mentors tended to record mini-clips, sometimes only 20 seconds long. Often, they had not followed the observational programme, rather recording snippets of interest. It quickly became difficult to piece together the relevant clips in our short 'RE TV' sessions, and the tightly focused reflective and analytical opportunity was lost. The increased self-confidence and development of understanding which some student teachers attributed to the recordings will secure a repeat trial next year. However, new guidelines will be put in place for both mentors and student teachers, particularly regarding the length of clip and the importance of keeping to the model. More time will also be spent in the preliminary stages for everyone to practise observing themselves in the safety of the university classroom to desensitise individuals to watching themselves.

Other strategies to bridge the gap between theory and practice were trialled. These included a series of integrated sessions spanning both university and school, using strong, authentic tasks. Academic and practitioner knowledge were shown to be equally important, and activities were designed to break down hierarchies. To help develop strong observational skills, the whole RE cohort spent a day with the university tutor at one of our partner schools. While we crowded into the classroom, the RE mentor taught a typical lesson which we were able to deconstruct together. The timing of the observation came after a month at university, where several lesson-planning workshops had already taken place, as well as introductions to RE pedagogy and observing lessons, the latter primarily using RE videos. The opportunity to observe a live lesson had several benefits over the videotaped lessons. Firstly, the tutor was able to deconstruct the whole lesson with the student teachers, allowing them opportunity to debate the theories they had

encountered and make sense of the strategies they had observed, some of which were difficult to identify. The observed teacher was able to contribute to the debrief, in particular in providing a context for decisions made in the classroom. Lastly, there was an advantage to having many student teachers in the room, in that a focused observation could be made of multiple pupils, enabling a focus on learning, rather than solely teaching.

The next stage was to mediate student teachers' first steps in the classroom. This involved jointly planning a lesson which the cohort would teach together to Year 9. The student teachers found that planning together was a difficult and frustrating exercise. However, the task was useful, not just as a collaborative exercise, but as an opportunity to think dialogically about approaches to planning. It served as large-scale plenary to the first section of the university course, where previously taught pedagogical theories were drawn together and debated. The authenticity of the task proved a motivating factor in its completion. Once again, the session provided an opportunity for a whole-group debrief with the tutor and class teacher, enabling a greater range of ideas to be considered. Additionally, but perhaps most importantly, the self-belief this boundary-crossing activity generated demonstrated its value. In the words of one of the group, 'everyone was amazing, we all metamorphosed into "teachers"'.

Another activity where academic and practitioner knowledge were blended to the advantage of the partnership occurred at the end of the course. This involved an attempt to contextualise the Living Difference constructivist pedagogy, which up to this point had been considered only from an academic perspective. The task had two parts. Firstly, the cohort of RE student teachers were to plan and present a continuing professional development (CPD) workshop on Living Difference to an RE department in an Essex partner school. After the CPD session, the department led a discussion, asking clarifying questions within the school context. The second half of the day was devoted to planning a scheme of work using the Living Difference pedagogy. The topic of the scheme of work, requested by the school, was War and Peace. Subject knowledge per se and practical input were given before the day from a Campaign for Nuclear Department (CND) education officer. Again, this task marked a shift from the traditional hierarchies that exist in teacher education, to a more level playing field where the collaboration and contribution of all members of the partnership gave rise to a new and exciting productivity. The friction of academic knowledge, coupled with the stumbling blocks provided by the

RE department during the CPD sessions, gave rise to a hybrid space where the scheme of work, strong in rationale and micro-planning, could be conceived.

Other sessions designed to utilise the expertise in schools included a Web 2.0 project that fed into the master's-level assignment on new and emerging technologies. After a university-based session, trainees were asked to plan and carry out a practical workshop for Year 9 pupils at a north London school, providing an example of how that technology might be used in lessons. Pupils were off-timetable for the afternoon to attend the workshops in a carousel format, and got to vote on the technology they would most like to see in their school lessons. There was a commitment from the school that pupil votes would result in changed departmental practice, and to complement this the student teachers prepared 'walk-through' guides for their particular technology.

The afternoon was completed by a session from the Head of Humanities who spoke about the role technology plays in his pupils' lives, and how the school integrates technology in pupils' learning. This boundary-crossing exercise enabled the student teachers to think about how to approach the teaching of small groups, to prepare for their assignment within a practical context, and the opportunity to consider the extent that theory meshes with practice. Post-workshop, all the student teachers demonstrated a deepening of understanding. This gave rise to higher grades on the M-level paper than previous cohorts had attained, and resulted in a more thoughtful use of emerging technologies later in their teaching practice. An additional dimension to the workshop was the expertise which the student teachers brought to the partner school. The initial learning had taken place at university, but was developed through personal research. Here, hierarchies of expertise were again broken down to include student teachers, to the benefit of the whole partnership.

The ITE tutor as the third space

Third-space strategies, such as the above, enable student teachers to make sense of the conflicting discourses and experiences that occur between university and teaching experience. However, these strategies have time implications and are dependent on willing partners. Good partnership practice alone is not enough to bridge the academic-practice divide. It is essential that there is someone who can mediate diverse training experiences within a wider picture. Already occupying this liminal space is the ITE tutor: a teacher educator, who works to develop a strong

partnership with the school, casting one eye through the window of academia, and the other eye through the magnifying glass of individual school placements, where the theories must be interpreted. The role of the ITE tutor is key in all subjects. However, the very nature of some subjects makes the ITE tutor's mediation role fundamental to student teachers developing balanced perspectives.

This is surely the case with RE ITE where student teachers have radically different experiences. RE exists without a statutory programme of study. Locally rather than nationally determined RE students can be expected to teach across a range of religions, faith and non-faith belief systems. The lack of a pedagogical framework in the vast majority of locally agreed syllabi leads to widely differing models and approaches being utilised in different schools. The layers of difference in approach, content and processes increase further when any special character of the school is taken into consideration; 40% of this year's RE placements at UEL are in faith schools. Therefore, the university tutor needs to carefully mediate student teachers' individual experiences in the light of national diversity of practice. The third space becomes essential in providing both a window and a foil for student teachers to situate wider pedagogical principles within their own practice, helping them to personally reflect on what it means to be a teacher of RE. In 2010 at the National College Annual Conference in Birmingham, Michael Gove stated that *'Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman.'* Given the narrow experiences that some student RE teachers can expect, they are in danger of a constricted and replicated perspective of RE teaching should university input into RE teacher training be moved to the periphery.

However, the danger of insular perspectives in ITE is not the sole preserve of RE. Gannon (2010) draws our attention to the unintentional underpinning of ITE courses, which contrary to intentions are inclined to be conservative, nurturing student teachers within the practices and norms of the school and profession. This conservative focus is problematic for several reasons, not least that it undermines true professionalism; a critical engagement is required to be able to evaluate, rather than swallow, educational policies. In the light of recent educational changes to Initial Teacher Education (ITE), the increasing marginalisation of the role of universities will further exaggerate the normalisation of educational practice. This means that we cannot take the existence of the third space for granted in ITE, but we need to actively locate and navigate it in order to preserve the critical

and creative thinking of our newest teachers in their construction and understanding of their role.

Conclusion

Locating multiple third spaces in ITE is essential for student teachers' negotiation of seemingly competing theoretical and practical factors. Key is the further entwining of the university-school partnership. Once we have located these third spaces, it is necessary for someone to help the student teacher navigate the terrain. This person must be someone who straddles both the academic and professional worlds. To develop university-school partnerships further is a positive move that will facilitate a seamless transition between theory and practice, enhancing the student teacher's capacity for reflective critical analysis. To marginalise the role of the university tutor in teacher education in doing so would be a grave mistake.

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