

Place, (cyber) space and being: the role of student voice in informing the un-situated learning of trainee teachers

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Abstract

This article explores the ambiguities and ontological insecurities of pre-service trainee teachers as they prepare to enter training for work in the post-compulsory sector in the UK. Adopting a contextual sensitivity which explores the role of location in teachers' professional learning, it makes problematic the anxieties and un-situated learning of trainees as they begin to boundary-shift professional identities at the very start of a PGCE programme. Contextualised by the hyper-rapid and intensified spatiality of teaching, learning and training in east London, the article explores the polycontextual realities of entering a newly drawn professional field in a global metropolis. Trainees' identity formation and lived experiences are captured by means of a digital ethnographic approach. The adoption of student voice research – as a teaching and reflection tool – is tempered against trainee teachers' own uncertain, (re)forming and emerging reflective voices captured through an ethnographic sensibility.

Keywords: Student voice; identity; boundary crossing; reflection; location; digital ethnography.

Introduction

This research explores how novice teachers train, and enter their first employment, within the context of the hyper-rapid and diverse influence of the city. The research that this paper describes depicts the 'boundary-crossing' of novice teachers as they join a teacher education programme in east London, UK, moving through their training in familiar and unfamiliar urban settings. It explains how these novice teachers, working in the lifelong learning sector, accommodate and change their values, assumptions and identities through their boundary-crossing processes and how the urban context situates and re-situates these processes.

The city as context and process

Rapid change in the global metropolis has resulted in the 'dramatic transformation' of the London context for learners and teachers in the past 20 years (Lupton & Sullivan 2007). Writing specifically about the east London context in the UK, it has already been suggested that the landscape and backdrop of the city is a dramatic and highly significant socialising experience for learners and teachers alike (Czerniawski 2010) and that London teachers in particular need to accommodate both the 'changing identities' of pupils and that of their own 'teacher self' (Ang & Trushell 2010). In addition, the deprivation of many east London areas represents in itself a 'major challenge' for lifelong learning in particular (Lupton & Sullivan 2007). Along with the diversity and change associated with the urban east London context, the lifelong learning sector across the UK has been portrayed as post-Fordist in nature (Avis 1999), with rapid policy hyper-fluency and workplace reform resulting in shifting platforms for practice and identity construction (Avis & Bathmaker 2009). Previously the boundary-crossing practices of new teachers as they move from training to employment have been described as a 'transition shock' (Veenman 1984), experienced by teachers as they enter their first employment. This research explores how the diverse urban context of east London intensifies this 'shock' and subsequent fluid identity-work undertaken by new teachers.

Boundary-crossing in a global metropolis

Heggen (2008), writing within the Norwegian context, has made the claim that there is a gap between professional practice and what professionals are taught about this practice. For Heggen, this makes teachers 'boundary crossers' – they are members of different horizontally segregated communities of practice. This polycontextuality informs identity and professional socialisation, but the 'realities' of the field constitute a stronger pull. Following the same European context, Van Oers (1998) argues that knowledge learned on training programmes

needs to be recontextualised before it can become of practical use in the field. This research illustrates and acknowledges the polycontextuality-shifting and the re-working of tacit knowledge of the urban novice educator – surrounded by the city as an ever-present context for social relations and identity formation. It explores how the city influences the rapidly changing identities of novice teachers and their habitual practices. In doing so, it explores how these teachers-in-the-making accommodate the unfamiliar, the esoteric and the infraordinary (Perec 1997; Ang et al. 2010) in their emerging practices and teacher identities. These stories are organised by the realities of urban education providing a background which orchestrates habitual routines and social practices and community memberships.

Method

The processes of data generation for this research were threefold. First, trainees on the author's own pre-service Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Post-Compulsory Programme entered a wiki prior to the start of the programme where they explored their aspirations, assumptions and values. Secondly, while on the teacher education programme, they kept diaries and journals giving reflective accounts of their workplace learning in urban post-compulsory colleges. Finally, after the teacher education programme, once in employment, they joined a weblog and shared accounts and experiences with each other through the first three months of their 'newly qualified' teaching roles. These tools, blending traditional and non-traditional 'diary forms', allowed for the generation of a rich body of qualitative data which was subsequently coded following an approach informed by grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) and adaptive theory (Layder 1998). The use of Web 2.0 tools such as wikis and weblogs to generate data has enabled the participants in this study – all of whom trained together on the same teacher education programme – to articulate reflections and stories. Such tools provide a 'digital diary' and yet also resemble an 'e-focus group', since they allow for interaction between participants. Their stories are located in shared histories of the experience of training in urban settings, but take into account the highly situated practices of their new employment.

The methodology and the epistemological sensibility of this research position the use of blogs and wikis as a form of educational ethnography – a digital ethnography (Muthy 2008), whereby the researcher as ethnographer is working within an online/virtual 'ethnographic field' (Guimarães 2005). This part of the research took place over a period of online 'fieldwork'

which lasted for 18 months, exploring the transitional and boundary-crossing practices of new teachers as they enter first-time full-time employment after training. The research has co-constructed a space and place where the researcher and participants share ownership of a secure online resource. Through collaboration in this 'unnaturalistic' virtual field, participants have shared, interacted, reflected and blogged (Hookway 2008) about their experiences of boundary-crossing from trainee to teacher. Through the adoption of virtual places (Muthy 2008), participants from different temporally, spatially and culturally divergent sites of educational practice have nonetheless been able to interact asynchronously, creating and changing authorship and shaping the meaning of the ethnographically rich data. This 'between space' has allowed participants in the online community the opportunity to articulate their reflections and stories of their transitory social practices in a 'real field', using a 'virtual field' as rich and as ethnographically and phenomenologically relevant as their own. In this way, participants are able to record their emerging practices alongside their emerging professional socialisation, workplace participation and identities.

The adoption of Web 2.0 tools as a means to construct and locate 'fieldwork' has enabled both researcher and participants to join in together in acting in a 'web of significance' (Geertz 1973: 5), allowing for interaction across space and time, changing the nature of how social relations within time work in this field. While not constructing 'naturally occurring text' (Hookway 2008: 96), nonetheless the blog and the 'online community' around it and the practice of posting and sharing enabled participants to record intimate information and insightful pieces of reflexivity.

While the digital ethnographic methods outlined above are a means of data collection of the thoughts, anxieties and emerging identities and values of pre-service teachers-in-the-making, they are but one side of the pedagogy at the heart of this research. The digital ethnography informs and captures trainees' reflections, experiences and practices. These occur before they join the PGCE programme, during the programme, and beyond as they boundary-cross into the world of first-time employment. This data informs the teacher education pedagogy and intentionality of the teaching of the PGCE programme and its curriculum. As an interventionist strategy, and a teaching resource, student voice research of learners in the local area is also used to shape the experiences of each successive PGCE cohort.

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The role of student voice

It is within the un-contextualised and un-situated ontological practices of trainee teachers as explored above that I have located my pedagogy as a teacher educator; within which I have framed my 'intentionality' (Loughran 1996; Hagger & McIntyre 2006; Malderez & Wedell 2007). In this way, we can see student voice as playing an interventionist role in trainees' learning and learning how to learn – constructing a 'radical collegiality' (Fielding 1999, 2000). Pedagogically, I seek to demonstrate to and explore with my pre-service trainees how 'place' or location compounds the characteristics of learning communities and how learners themselves are active, knowledgeable agents, able to reflect upon teaching and learning in insightful ways, drawing upon the practice of 'critical incidents' (Griffin 2003).

A strong theme that runs through early pre-programme blog posts and early reflective diary entries in the digital ethnographic research is how many trainee teachers conceptualise learners as a passive *Other*. Learners are seen, en masse, as a body to be 'worked on'. These novice teachers initially prioritise their positioning in the teaching–learning dynamic and within classroom performance and routines as taking priority over the learners themselves. For many novice teachers, the priority given to learning over teaching within the pedagogy and philosophy of the PGCE is received as at best a revelation and, at worst, often a challenge to dominate didactic models of the 'ideal teacher'. Alongside this, much early opportunity for reflective practice seeks to help trainees to begin to construct learners (especially younger learners) as having an intentionality over their own learning (Ruddock & Flutter 2000). Often, seeing learners as having 'interesting things to say' about teaching is regarded at first as at best an oddity and at worst a genuine ontological challenge to how novice teachers define for themselves the teacher role. To see students as 'radical agents for change' (Fielding 2001) lies at the heart of these interventions, while trying to ask novice teachers to take into account the complexities of place and space in students' learning and learning selves (Ang & Trushell 2010). As Edwards (2005) notes, the problems and social change associated with late capitalism 'create paradoxical tensions for those who inhabit them and put strain on a sense of self' (Edwards 2005: 169). This is true for teachers and for trainee teachers – they need to locate themselves within a world which is redefining around them what it means to be a teacher, made all the more complex and ambiguous by the hyper-rapid change of the city, and of east London in particular. Of assumptions,

contextualised by the location of east London, trainees have this to say:

'When I arrived at a local sixth form to have a look around I felt a little intimidated, as my experiences of sixth form were very different studying in middle-class York. However, during our tour I saw nothing but eager, hardworking students who were all focused and seemingly interested in what they were learning. I had half expected to walk past classrooms and see students running around, shouting, fighting and generally getting out of hand ...' [trainee teacher reflection]

'... in light of some of the early discussions on my PGCE I was worried that I had been too naïve about the challenges of teaching in FE colleges, particularly in Newham, and was left wondering if this was the right path for me after all ...' [trainee teacher reflection]

'As my choice to come to UEL was mainly based on the fact that I would be studying and working in east London, the introduction to the socio-economic "peculiarities" of the local area was of no surprise or shock. As I looked around the room I wondered how many in the group had a similar point of view (I'm guessing and hoping the majority) and how many might end up struggling to deal with East End's "deprived youth". One of course does not negate the other, and I suspect I too will find it rather challenging at times – despite all my good intentions and genuine interest in giving my students the best possible opportunities.' [trainee teacher reflection]

It is within this context that student voice research plays an important role. To demonstrate to novice teachers the importance of what learners have to say, an audio archive has been created to be drawn upon as a teaching resource while in induction and beyond, later in the programme. Local partnership colleges have allowed access to their local learners, leading to a series of in-depth interviews recorded with these local younger learners over a period of seven months. These audios serve as an example to trainee teachers of the articulation that younger learners can give to their awareness of learning and teaching and the authority with which they can speak of classroom practice and routine. The audios are used as a teaching and learning resource in taught sessions, and help trainees to begin to formulate attitudes to learners different from and at odds with the un-situated assumptions prior to the start of the PGCE. As one trainee puts it,

'My opinion varies: They are sweet and lovely, smart and enthusiastic, frustrating and hard work, stubborn and disrespectful. They can reduce you to tears in one lesson, but amaze you with their creativity and enthusiasm two days later. They are given a hard time by the media and the police – twice in the last four days I witnessed the police stop and search my students, once at the tube station and once outside the theatre. Their lives are not easy, or fair, and yet they sometimes seem resigned to their fate. I think they are scared of what they don't know, so choose to dismiss it and stick to their small (and safe) known worlds. I find teaching them hard work, but also extremely rewarding when they "get it". I feel it's a greater duty to do the absolute best I can and give it my all ...' [trainee teacher reflection]

Alongside the student voice audio archive described above, attention has been given, within the programme structure and content of the PGCE, to ensuring regular access to local colleges and the locality itself, usually within the induction period. Trainees are encouraged to visit local partnership providers to contextualise their assumptions about colleges and how they work, and to undertake a local area walk involving museum trips, taught sessions on 'place' and its affects upon learning communities and the socio-cultural realities of the local area – in this case east London. On recalling the group's induction walk along the east London 'Docklands' area of the Thames, one trainee reflects:

'The walk from Canary Wharf along the river to just east of Tower Bridge was a good addition, as it said plenty about what the area used to be like (warehouses, etc.) and what it is like now (posh flats, gated communities). It is in stark contrast to most of the rest of east London – as a walk to Shadwell station reminded us later – but the gated communities and riverside apartments could have as much of an effect on the lives of east London's young people as the council estates and tower blocks of Bow and Poplar. I can only try and guess what that effect might be at this point (anger? resentment? feeling of worthlessness? Who knows...), but I suspect I might find out once I start my placement! [trainee teacher reflection]

This 'walking and talking', looking at the area, visiting colleges, hearing local learners speaking and considering the nature of learning and teaching in the local area inform a large amount of the initial curriculum of the PGCE and the reflective practice this encourages. The importance of seeing learners as co-constructors in defining the meaning of the learning

situation is a key message of the PGCE in general and of the induction period in particular. In this way, the teacher education pedagogy adopted is also a 'critical pedagogy' (Giroux 2005); one which is seeking to develop a 'relational agency' (Edwards 2005) between trainees, between trainees and mentors and between trainees as teachers-in-the-making and their students. As noted by Giroux (2005), such a 'critical pedagogy' would be mindful of 'the various ways in which the voices that teachers use to communicate with students can either silence or legitimate them' (Giroux 2005: 454). As Edwards & Mackenzie (2005: 282) identify, developing 'relational agency involves a capacity to offer support and to ask for support from others. One's ability to engage with the world is enhanced by doing so alongside others'. Thus, conceptualising learners as active agents and as collaborators positions novice teachers to situate assumptions about learners and learning through the privileging of the learners' voice early on in the PGCE training programme.

Outcomes and conclusions

The use of Web 2.0 tools has provided non-traditional qualitative diary accounts of novice teachers' boundary-crossing and identity formation. The intent of this research has been to illustrate how novice teachers working in a multicultural and diverse urban context 'boundary-cross' between training placement (workplace learning) and the University. In doing so, it is possible to explore how novice teachers in 'becoming qualified' accommodate their assumptions and aspirations prior to training with encounters with learners, unfamiliar organisational practices and the habitual and mundane realities of new employment.

Urban novice teachers easily and uneasily adapt to the situated context of the urban institutions they train in. New teachers 'fit into' the temporality of social practice in urban contexts and in how this practice (and identity construction) is orchestrated as 'doxa' (Bourdieu 1990). The posts, reflections and interactions from the Web 2.0 tools used in this research articulate how novice teachers' values are central to their positioning as urban (London) educators (Czeraniwski 2010), and chart the stories of their ongoing identity formation alongside the accommodation of their craft and tacit knowledge into regular, institutionally legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991).

The use of student voice – as an intervention into reflective practice – has enabled trainees to articulate and reform their initial assumptions regarding the nature of learners (younger and adult) in the lifelong learning sector. This student voice practice and the

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audio archive it has produced has provided a means through which trainees can explore and reflect upon the influence of place and spatially upon the character of learning and learning communities; another lens (Brookfield 1995) through which the twin dynamic of trainees' reflective practice and my own teacher education pedagogy can be understood.

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