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Learning to teach English: three RQT perspectives on English subject Secondary PGCE

Clare Lawrence

One of the joys of my position as Teacher Educator is that many of my trainees take teaching positions locally, frequently taking up posts offered to them by their placement schools. This means that when I make observation visits to schools it is not uncommon to come across competent, professional, enthusiastic teachers whom I knew as anxious trainees just starting out in the profession.

But what do they make of this business of teaching English, and what do they make of the PGCE English course, now that they can look back at it? I asked three teachers who completed the course two years ago to reflect on these questions and to give me their perspective now that they are 'doing it for real'.

Feedback

1. Relationships

Feedback from all the teachers focussed strongly on relationships. They articulated that they had felt, during training, an unnecessary and self-inflicted focus on their individual 'performance' in the classroom and that only with greater experience do they understand the extent to which teaching is a team effort. They now plan collaboratively, support and feel supported by colleagues, discuss issues and share ideas and resources, but were reluctant to do so during the course. They suggested that this reluctance may have been because of their belief that they were being compared with each other, and their perception that the university makes judgement that some trainees are 'better' than others. They described how the grading system for the PGCE creates an artificial sense of different skills being categorised, where the emphasis could more usefully be on successful meeting of the Teachers' Standards as a whole and of the achievement overall of skills enabling the gaining of Qualified Teacher Status. They acknowledged that some of their perception of being in competition with each other was fair in the sense that they found themselves applying for the same jobs, and they articulated that losing a position at interview to a fellow trainee was a difficult situation for both parties. They discussed how the combination of training with job application put a particular strain on relationships, particularly towards the later stages of the course.

2. Confidence

The teachers were able to describe, from their position now as successful classroom practitioners, the extent to which they had lacked confidence in their own teaching styles during the PGCE year. One described how during the PGCE they had been 'trying on different jackets' as they adapted their approach to be like those around them. They

discussed the need to be able to ask for advice and to learn from other teachers, but also the need to develop confidence in their own emerging style and to have the self-belief, when observing an experienced teacher to ask themselves, 'how would I do it differently?' One of the teachers who is now a mentor articulated how important it is to allow trainees to make mistakes and to find ways to manage these situations for themselves rather than stepping in too quickly to help. She acknowledged, 'they may not do it your way; lead by example, but don't be hurt when the trainee does it differently ... and don't be afraid to learn from the trainee'. The concept of mentor fragility – the feeling that your teaching has to be perfect – was an interesting one to the other teachers who have not acted as mentor yet. They continued to view the relationship very much from the remembered experience of being the mentee: 'Your mentor is your first (sometimes your only) point of contact; he or she needs to understand your vulnerability and that the you are not ... someone to be moulded into their image'. Everyone agreed on the need for patience, the importance of acknowledging trainees' emotions and for trainees to be supported to learn at their own pace.

3. Course content

With the benefit of reflection, the teachers acknowledge that the 'boring stuff' of the course may, in fact, have been necessary: 'As time goes on, you realise you need to know about how to teach (i.e. pedagogy) and why that works, as opposed to just surviving in the classroom!' Some elements of the course were particularly valued, including consideration of how to manage discussions, how to manage group work and 'why "less safe" teaching approaches matter and how to do them'. They acknowledged a journey on the course from focussing on their teaching (a largely 'lecture style' delivery) to a focus on pupils' learning. They enjoyed the opportunity to experience elements that they now teach; 'tackling things like the Reconstructive Writing Task for ourselves on the course really put us into the position of learners' and appreciated the need to consider challenges such as how to teach pupils who may be cleverer than themselves. They each remembered the frustration of an EAL lecture that was delivered in Polish, and now appreciate its purpose ('it's good to experience what it is like to be flummoxed') and, with experience, are far more sensitive to the need to spend time learning about specific SEND challenges and how to meet them successfully.

They discussed the need to support trainees to know what they are looking at when observing lessons early in the course. Indeed, they identified that 'observing until you've tried it is less useful', so suggested greater interleaving of 'doing' and 'watching'. Regarding feedback given to them after observations they were keen that everyone remember how vulnerable it can feel: 'be honest but not brutal'.

4. Teachers as researchers

The teachers appreciated the concept that their on-going research in the classroom matters. Two had worked together on a published paper, and all had had the experience of feeding back on on-going 'trying-it-out' projects to their colleagues. They acknowledged that the assignment undertaken for the PGCE of a report on a piece of Action Research was useful

and helped to establish what they do in their own minds as research. They particularly valued the concept within the course of 'finding things out'. They continue to be curious and experimental and have begun to realise that this approach as researchers is part of their on-going development as teachers.

Their opinions varied about the exact nature of this research, although all agreed on the need for support with the process, given that at this early stage in their career they remain professionally vulnerable. One was keen to take a formal research route, including professional and academic publication and contribution to conferences. Others stressed that research need not necessarily be academic. They argued that 'staying in touch' could be by many means, including Twitter, blogs etc., and that this awareness of the voice of the wider profession should be part of a teacher's everyday life. 'We're all "seeing how this works" all the time.' They were keen to be seen less as craftsmen/women who 'do' and more as professionals with real understanding to underpin their teaching, and suggested that a more cohesive link could be made between training, teaching and researching. 'The Education goalposts [are] always changing; we need to be able to follow and evaluate research and should feel able to add to the discussions ourselves'. They championed the idea of 'embedding curiosity' into the profession and suggested the importance of being given time and support to attend conferences and to profess that 'the PGCE is not the end!'

5. Subject English

All the teachers expressed the importance of enthusiasm for their subject, and the challenge to maintain that enthusiasm in a system that can feel restrictive. Although they were well able to articulate all of the many issues with this system they were, interestingly, more keen to discuss the 'good stuff'. They argued the importance of autonomy in choosing texts in KS3 and why 'teaching stuff you love' makes for the strongest lessons. They emphasised the importance of wider reading (while acknowledging the challenge to this made by shortage of time), and all wanted to promote English above and beyond GCSE through widening the curriculum. They valued being part of a network of English teachers – both through staying in touch with fellow trainees and through membership of organisations such as NATE – to take time to have discussions about education and English, to have opportunities to plan together and share experiences, and to form a 'collective protection against acronyms and the gobbledegook!'

It was lovely, of course, to catch up with these teachers and to have an opportunity to spend a little more time talking to them. They, and the others I pass in corridors or who pop their heads out of their classroom doors, encourage me that English teaching, and the training of English teachers, is not in as bad a place as we might think. It's not perfect; there is always so much we could do better, and so much that teachers would like that would make the profession stronger and more sustainable. However, these teachers give me hope. Their resilience is impressive; despite the many pressures, frustrations, restrictions and demands of the job, they are staying in it – and, perhaps most important of all, they seem to be actually enjoying it. That can't be bad!