Professional Learning Matters

Reflective learning in teacher preparation – the movement away from HE based learning

Having spent the past 17 years working in higher education (HE) teacher preparation I am a strong believer in the positive effects of reflective learning on young teachers of physical education. Many HE providers have systems in place for collaborative or shared reflective learning sessions where student teachers have the opportunity to ‘share’ and reflect on experiences from their teaching placement. However, with the movement of teacher preparation away from HE providers to school centred initial teacher preparation the onus to provide quality reflective learning falls to the school based professional tutor or subject based mentor.

The de-regulation of teacher preparation has enabled more individual choice but created more difficulties in the standardisation and regulation of assuring the education of student teachers and production of teachers with ‘outstanding’ pedagogical skills. The different routes into teaching could be viewed as a productive way of recruiting teachers and with a competency-based system of achieving qualified teacher status being moderated by Ofsted the quality of teaching could be maintained. However, as universities and school-based trainers have become more closely affiliated to corporate businesses (Torres, 2012), Ofsted inspections completed by private companies and many schools maintained by private organisations, I have a growing concern for the lack of ‘institutional commitment’ to the learner from a provider (Del Gandio, 2014). The priority of the provider is to ensure an appropriate pedagogical approach to encourage student learning, but as pressures and future enrolment numbers are influenced by achievement grade rather than quality of learning, it is understandable why institutions prioritise other factors.

Hoult (2008) considers the ‘tick box’ system, of teacher preparation involving an evidence-based portfolio, part of the ‘audit culture’ of teaching. Although I can see the value of a competency-based system that moderates standards across a range of routes into teaching through different types of institutions, my concern is that the Teaching Standards ask the student teacher to reflect but the learning from the reflection is neither explored nor monitored. Doubts should be raised as to whether the ‘tick box’ system of teaching has gone too far and that a more ‘holistic approach’, where the relevance of the learning from personal experience is placed into perspective, should be employed (Boud, 2010).

The term ‘reflection’ forms part of the Professional Standards for Teachers as in the current Teaching Standards (Training Agency, 2012) to ‘reflect systematically’. The use of the term ‘reflect’ in the Teaching Standards implies a direct link between reflection and improvement in practice and appears to presume that reflection is systematic. So why is reflection important? Although Bloom (taxonomy, 1956) and the Teaching Standards consider reflection important, there is no single definition but there are various explanations suggesting the meaning of reflection. Dewey (1933) views reflection as an active, persistent and careful consideration of an event that is likely to initiate change, creating a connection between something that has been completed and a future event. Moon (2010) views reflection as a way to ‘learn from, learn that, learn to do and learn to be’, with Rodgers (2002) seeing reflection as a meaning-making process, that is systematic, and requires interaction with intellectual and personal growth. Dewey’s (1933) original thoughts show that reflection includes a feeling of perplexity, hesitation and doubt.

In order to learn and place the relevance of the learning into perspective, West (2010) suggests student teachers need ‘time and space’ away from the demands of the classroom, which the design of many HE based PGCE programmes provide. As we in teacher preparation are all aware the student learning is constrained through the demands of meeting the Teaching Standards but also by the constraints of the institutional policy and ethos of the provider. As the number of providers increases so the quality of the provision becomes more inconsistent.

The organisation of professional tutor programmes in schools has, in my experience, always been very productive but I have concerns relating to the provision of reflective learning. The results from a recent study based in an HE provider on the south coast of England demonstrated the PGCE PE cohort preferred to reflect in structured action learning sets with their peer group as opposed to discussion groups, interviews or in a written journal. The results appear to show PE PGCE students prefer oral reflection with a familiar, non-threatening peer group. The formation of SCITTs with a smaller number of student teachers may find it difficult to provide such a forum. The default mechanism for professional tutors to encourage reflection is likely to be a reflective journal or diary but recently acquired evidence proves this is not effect for student teachers of physical education.

I, like Burke (2008), feel there are academic boundaries relating to writing that inhibit rather than promote learning and feel the student teachers may feel an academic expectation and a lack of familiarity with journal writing that constrains, or impacts on, reflective writing.

Richert (1990), Morrison (1996), Moon (2005) and Parsons and Stephenson (2005) have all used reflective journals or diaries, as a pedagogical tool to encourage learning, but individuals use the written word in a variety of different social, cultural and political contexts including personal or formal letters, e-mails, personal diaries, formal essays or examinations, with each context involving a different style of writing, therefore written reflection has several implications. First, individuals are taught from a very early age to write for a purpose and gradually learn to write in order to attain an appropriate response. The required response may be personal from a letter or academic gaining a high grade in an assignment, the individual will constrain the written document to conform to the given situation or context: writing for a purpose. Second, the introduction of writing for the purpose of learning from a personal experience may contradict the individual s experience of writing purely for an academic reward.

Literature demonstrates the disadvantages of relying on writing as a form of reflection but with student teachers now being isolated in SCITTs or consortiums there is little option if reflection is still valued in teacher training.

Recent research demonstrated that the participants showed very little written reflection but all did show some reflection through a full and coherent oral narrative. Journal writing did not encourage reflection for the PE student teachers as these participants chose to relive their experiences using an oral narrative. The story that was told primarily in the oral activities was detailed but not abstract or conceptual. The participants adopted a pragmatic approach to tell the story. The story helped the student to capture moments and experiences and some participants turned these moments into thoughtful, learning opportunities by reflecting. Supporting McDrury and Alterio (2002) opinion that storytelling is a vital part of reflection and should therefore be encouraged.

My concern is that the provision of teacher preparation in school based institutions may ‘overlook’ the importance of student teacher reflection and learning resulting in the production of ‘duplicate’ teachers who model themselves on the mentor or classroom teacher rather than thinking, reflecting and improving teachers of PE.

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