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Recent-undergraduate to trainee-teacher: exploring the complexities of teacher-identity-formation through narrative inquiry

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Introduction

I taught two groups of pre-service trainee-teachers at Sheffield Hallam University for 13 weeks during the autumn semester. The course I taught on was a one-year full-time post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE). There were 45 trainees in total across the two groups whose intention was to qualify as teachers in the post-16 and further education sector. The majority of the trainees were recent graduates who had some limited experience of volunteer teaching in schools or colleges. Additionally, there were a small number of mature entrants who had completed their undergraduate degree some years previously and now wanted a career change into teaching.

The particular part of the PGCE I was responsible for leading and teaching on was a module called 'The Learner Experience'. The content of this module placed a strong focus on the need for trainee-teachers to be responsive to the individual needs of their learners in the planning, delivery and assessment of learning and teaching. This involved me in introducing theoretical perspectives such as ableism, inclusive practice and models of communication along with practical strategies for teaching learners with different social and personal factors likely to affect their learning such as ethnicity, gender, learning difficulties and disabilities. I also wanted to provide opportunities for trainees to begin to explore their personal philosophies of teaching and develop these through reflecting on their experiences in placement settings. What interested me in particular was the assessment task for the module I was teaching which required trainees to write an essay of 3750 words in which they reflected on a particular aspect of their teaching practice through a case study into a learner or learners. This style of assessment contrasted sharply with more practice-based assessments found elsewhere on the course which included self and peer assessment of micro-teach presentations, mentor-assessed observations of practical teaching, and the maintaining of a personal progress log mapped to the achievement of professional standards. My particular interest was in finding out how trainee-teachers' identities were formed and reformed during initial teacher training.

Teacher-identity-formation through literacy practices

Friesen and Besley (2013, p.23) argue that 'learning to *be* a teacher is as important as learning *how* to teach' for trainee teachers and suggest that the development of teacher identity is important in the development of teachers' personal educational philosophies as well as promoting their decision-making, well-being and effectiveness. Trainee-teachers embarking on teacher-training courses arrive with pre-formed beliefs about what it means to be a teacher formed through their own life experiences both within and beyond the classroom. These beliefs, Friesen and Besley (2013) suggest, are likely to undergo considerable change during teacher-training involving periods of exploration, uncertainty and conflict that eventually leads to a reforming of personal identity with professional identity.

Flores and Day (2006) describe learning to be a teacher as being 'a long and complex process [that is] multi-dimensional, idiosyncratic and context-specific ... which entails an interplay between different, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives, beliefs and practices, which are accompanied by the development of the teachers' self.'

The importance of narratives developed through literacy practices in teacher-identity-formation is attested to in the literature:

Often times, identity negotiation is evident in literacy practices during teacher education courses. Whether preservice teachers engage in discussions of course experiences with their peers, write reflectively about their learning or conference with their instructors, preservice teachers present and negotiate identities in their language use with others. (Ticknor 2014, p.290)

By reading, writing, talking, thinking, and interacting with others invested in the education community ..., preservice teachers can engage in opportunities to negotiate professional identities within the supportive context of teacher education programs and build confidence as novice teachers. (Ticknor 2014, p.291).

One of the most important but most complex issues in defining identity is the notion of self, which is revealed through personal narratives or life stories ... Through writing or talking about oneself, the 'self' is shaped. (Anspal, Eisenschidt & Lofstrom 2011, p.198).

In the sections that follow I will describe a narrative inquiry in which I used the assessment task submitted by one of the trainees I taught (who I will call Amy) as the starting point with which to explore with her the transition from recent-undergraduate to trainee-teacher and ways in which her identity as a teacher changed during that journey.

Narrative inquiry as a methodology

Amy had achieved a Bachelor of Arts with Honours degree in Media, Communications and Culture with an upper second degree classification. She commenced initial teacher training in the autumn of the same year and was placed in a large general further education college to complete her practical teaching placement. She taught media studies, mostly at GCE Advanced Level, to learners aged 16 to 19.

I selected Amy as the focus of my narrative inquiry because the essay she submitted as the assessment task for The Learner Experience module showed some emergence of teacher-identity which I wanted to explore further with her. Here is an extract from that essay:

As a trainee teacher who specialises in [media studies] and someone who has worked very hard in developing my academic knowledge and career in this field ... I feel invested in my learners; I want to enable my learners to take ownership of their A Level subjects and feel motivated in their application to them. I want to create a creative, inclusive and active learning environment which will try to make the theory side of the course less daunting for my learners.

... In recent sessions, the teaching style has followed a didactic lecture format, which is teacher focussed; learners are encouraged to take notes from the information on the PowerPoint presentation which is been narrated by the primary tutor. The class as a whole have demonstrated their lack of engagement

through their body language; I feel this technique has led to the loss of concentration from the learners. ...

[A particular learner] has displayed negative behaviour in sessions and this often disrupts not only her learning but the learning of her classroom peers. Often at the beginning of the session, [the learner] will ask what the session will be on, once [she] sees the PowerPoint she will pass comments out loud, using words such as 'boring', rolling her eyes and sighs heavily. ... I feel this is partly due to the method of teaching. [Amy continued her essay to discuss Honey & Mumford's learning styles theory].

Clearly Amy entered teacher-training with the identity of 'someone who has worked very hard in developing my academic knowledge and career in this field [media]'. This shaped her views in the early weeks of her placement of the teachers she observed and the learners she would soon teach. Narrative inquiry appealed to me as an appropriate methodology for exploring the emergence of Amy's teacher-identity. It builds on Dewey's (1916, 1922, 1938) emphasis on lived-experience where understanding and meaning is created through the storied-lives people live and where experience is made sense of through story-telling (Hamilton, Smith & Worthington 2009; Trahar 2009; Thomas 2012).

Narrative interview with Amy

I collected data through a narrative interview, described by Trahar (2009) as a major way of gathering verbal narratives that bears resemblance to semi-structured or unstructured interviews. I began my interview with Amy by reading to her the extract from her essay that she had written, referred to earlier. I confirmed with Amy that she recalled writing it and then proceeded with the interview. I was aware of Trahar's (2009) emphasis on the importance of audience in narrative inquiry where the researcher is audience to the narrator who will in turn retell the story to other audiences - their readers. I have chosen to reproduce Amy's story abridged but otherwise unedited below. This does not imply a belief that the narrative in its original form is any more valid than had I re-ordered it to suit my intended audience because 'people's accounts of their experiences are always partial, situated, tentative and gendered' (Thomas 2012, p.214) and cannot provide 'a clear route into 'the truth', either about reported events, or of the teller's private experience' (Atkinson & Delamont 2006, p.166). Rather, it renders visible my voice as researcher alongside Amy's voice as narrator. The voice I adopted was a supportive voice that sought to mirror back and affirm Amy's story so as to push her voice into the limelight (Trahar 2009).

Here is an abridged transcript from my interview with Amy:

Me: So that was quite early in your teaching practice when you observed that. How did that make you feel?

Amy: Quite angry to be fair... because I have a love of my subject [media studies] whereas they're doing it because they feel it's easy so they're not quite so engaged in the activity. But me obviously observing the teacher, they're supposed to be teaching me sort of how to teach as well so I'm looking at them to get sort of tips and hints but obviously they've not taken into account like learning styles of the learners and things like that so I felt they've not sort of stepped up as I should have.

Me: Alright so you felt a bit angry, and that anger was focussed towards the teachers [pause] because they weren't modelling ...

Amy: Yes, they weren't modelling best practice.

Me: How did you feel about the learners, though? What about [the disruptive learner]? How did you feel towards her?

Amy:Errm [pause]. I don't know. I think because it was at the beginning, I mean I think differently towards it now, but obviously like her disruption led to the disruption of the rest of the class which was quite negative and it's difficult in the setting because there's no issues like how to deal with behaviour and things like that and it was like quite progressive -it happened throughout the lesson, it was all the time - and so obviously that was quite disruptive for me and sort of I was quite stressed out about that because I didn't really know how to deal with it. ... I wanted to go out of my way to make sure she was included and she was engaged and it met what she wanted to get out of the lesson as well as everyone else. It was quite difficult for me at the time.

Me: So you wanted to engage her and make the lesson accessible but because it was didactic and because it was PowerPoint-centred it wasn't working, and you felt some frustration with the teachers. Was it that they weren't aware of Honey and Mumford? Or that they just didn't care? What was it?

Amy: Just that they didn't model it. So I was looking to them for advice and guidance and hints and tips to help me with my own practice and obviously it wasn't there. And like I was going into a session with learners that had already been with those teachers and already established ground rules and then I was coming in and wanted to go from a different angle and it was a difficult transition from the learners having the primary teacher to me because I wanted to make it like all singing and dancing.

Me: So looking back now, would you say it was the teachers' fault or was it the culture of the placement?

Amy: I wouldn't say that. Mostly the learners. Because now moving through and period of time passed actually no matter what kind of session it is they're not engaged anyway. So I've done sessions where it has followed a quite didactic approach and that's what I thought the issue was at the beginning and then I started to do like an active learning space and ... that worked for a time but now they're like losing their motivation again.

Me: So actually it's not the teaching style. It's not the teachers. It's actually the learners who are, what, disengaged?

Amy: Disengaged, because they're not invested in the subject. Going into my TLE [The Learner Experience] I thought it was the teacher who wasn't meeting the needs of the learners in terms of their learning styles and it was just following the same format whereas now I've obviously progressed through and I've experimented and done different ways and it wasn't the teacher.

Me: Ok so actually you've tried the didactic, the PowerPoint, the participative and actually, none of them work? So how does that make you feel about yourself as a teacher?

Amy: Errm. Dunno. Frustrates me, because I don't feel like I'm moving forward. I don't feel like I'm improving and I'm faced every time I go into the session with quite negative comments and thoughts and responses and it influences, like, the excitement I have for teaching. I don't go in and think "I wonder what they'll

come up with today", I know for a fact they won't work with me. It's quite like pulling teeth out.

Me: So you remain invested in media but feel your learners aren't necessarily invested in media, and therefore it makes you question teaching and whether you want to be a teacher? Is that what you're saying?

Amy: Yes

Me: Because the learners aren't invested in the subject, to the same extent you are?

Amy: Yes, I don't feel I'm equipped to engage them. I don't know what else I can do to get them invested and I don't want to let them down because of their grades and things like that and I don't feel like I can step up enough.

Me: So what's most important to you? Is it media [studies]? Or is it the learners?

Amy: To begin with it was my subject because I went in with the love of my subject and then I came into teaching to teach people so there was an element, but now I'm not really bothered about any of them.

Me: So how do you feel now about yourself as a teacher? Guilty? Angry? Relaxed?

Amy: I don't feel angry with myself. Yeah, I probably feel a little bit guilty because my lack of motivation might influence them, I don't really know. I still go in and give 110% but it's not to the best of my ability. Bit of a perfectionist so maybe that's what it is, always wanting to be perfect in everything ... but I can't get them engaged. They don't go out of the session saying "Oh my God, this is exciting!" so I feel I've let myself down and I'm probably not a very good teacher.

Discussion

Clandinin, Pushor & Murray Orr (2007) emphasise the importance of interpretation and disciplined thought in narrative inquiry. They propose three commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place as 'checkpoints' or places to direct attention to in conducting narrative inquiry. I will use these three commonplaces as a theoretical framework with which to interpret Amy's narrative.

Temporality, the first commonplace, reminds us that 'Events under study are in temporal transition' (Connelly & Clandinin 2006, p.479). Even within the narrative interview itself Amy began with an assertion that 'I have a love of my subject' and later contradicted this with 'I went in with the love of my subject and then I came into teaching to teach people ... but now I'm not really bothered about any of them'. In a similar way she started teacher training looking to others for 'tips and hints' which changed over time to looking to herself and finding 'I don't feel I'm equipped to engage them' and 'I don't know what else I can do'. Attitudes towards disengaged learners also shifted from 'I wanted to go out of my way to make sure she was included and that she was engaged and it met what she wanted to get out of the lesson' to 'I know for a fact they won't work with me'. Amy's initial feelings that the teachers she observed didn't step up changed to 'I don't feel like I can step up enough', and her feelings of anger towards the host teachers for 'not modelling it' to feelings of guilt towards herself 'because my lack of motivation might influence them'. Amy's views at the time of the narrative interview also represent a temporal moment subject to future change which might lead to the reforming of her personal identity into a new professional identity (Friesen & Besley 2013). It is not surprising that trainee-teachers experience significant changes in their orientations towards

teaching through their placement experiences, especially those that lead to emotional tension. The pertinent issue is how teacher-training can support trainees through such experiences, including through using literacy practices that promote teacher-identity-growth.

Sociality, as the second commonplace of narrative inquiry, is concerned with the personal conditions of researchers and participants (feeling, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions), social conditions (environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form each individuals context) and the relationship between researcher and participant (Connelly & Clandinin 2006). Amy's personal conditions include some very high expectations of herself ('I wanted to make it all singing and dancing'; 'I still go in and give 110% but it's not to the best of my ability'; 'always wanting to be perfect in everything'). The social conditions mitigated against her living up to her high expectations, particularly the difficulties for a trainee-teacher of taking over a class that had already been established ('I was going into a session with learners that had already been with those teachers and already established ground rules and then I was coming in and wanted to go from a different angle and it was a difficult transition'). Other significant social conditions for Amy appeared to be the learners acceptance of the popular perception of media studies as an easy subject (they're doing it because they feel it's easy so they're not quite so engaged in the activity') and her perception that there wasn't a behaviour policy in the placement. The commonplace of sociality can be resistant to change since it relates to dispositions, relationships and organisational cultures. Nevertheless strategies can be developed as part of teacher training that provides trainees with opportunities to develop inter-personal and intra-personal knowledge. Developing awareness of self and others within organisational cultures is important to teacher-identity-formation even though the benefits of such development may not become apparent in the short-term.

The third commonplace of place means 'the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place' (Connelly & Clandinin 2006, p.480). Amy's experiences were specific to the location of her teaching placement. Whilst place did not feature explicitly in Amy's narrative it is important to remember that her account is context-bound to the location of her placement. A different placement, or the move to a first teaching appointment in a new location, might change her narrative. Providing opportunities for trainees to 'suspend' the commonplace of place, for example through a second placement experience or peer-exchange opportunities, may provide for significant teacher-identity-growth for some trainees.

Conclusion

A narrative interview was used to explore changes in Amy's teacher-identity during her journey from recent-graduate to trainee-teacher. The data gathered was analysed using Clandinin, Pushor & Murray Orr's (2007) three commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place.

Amy's story affirms that teacher-identity-formation is a long and complex process between different and sometimes conflicting perspectives, beliefs and practices. Her identity changed considerably through her placement experiences and will undoubtedly change further if she perseveres from trainee-teacher to early-career-teacher. It is recommended that teacher-trainers identify which literacy practices most effectively promote teacher-identity-growth and embed those practices into teacher-training courses. Reflective writing and talking about teaching experiences,

particularly those that lead to emotional tension, have potential to lead to significant teacher-identity-growth.

Sociality (including personal and social conditions) is resistant to short-term change. Nevertheless, the development of inter-personal and intra-personal knowledge as part of teacher-training can support trainees to adapt to the organisational cultures in which their emerging teacher-identities are formed.

Whilst acknowledging that 'all events take place some place' (Connelly & Clandinin 2006, p.480), providing opportunities for trainees to suspend the commonplace of place may lead to significant teacher-identity-growth for some trainees. This might be achieved through second placement experiences or peer exchange opportunities.

Further research is needed into the impact of particular types of literacy practices within teacher-training courses, particularly those that lead to significant teacher-identity-growth for some trainees.

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