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Citation:

A discourse analysis of trainee teacher identity in online discussion forums

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Abstract

Teacher education involves an identity transformation for trainees from being a student to being a teacher. This discourse analysis examined the online discussion board communications of a cohort of trainee teachers to better understand the situated identities of the trainees and how they were presented online. Their discussion board posts were the primary method of communication during placement periods and, as such, provided insight into how the trainees situated their identities in terms of being a student or being a teacher.

During the analysis, the community boundaries, language and culture were explored along with the tutor's power and role in the identity transformation process. This involved looking at the lexis used by the students, the use of pronouns to refer to themselves and others such as teachers and pupils, the types of messages allowed in the community and the effect of the tutor's messages on their communication. The research found that the trainees felt comfortable with teaching but did not feel like teachers during the course. Tutors and school teachers need to develop an awareness of the dual nature of trainees' identities and help promote the transition from student to teacher. In the beginning of the course trainees should be familiarised with teacher vocabulary and practical concepts in addition to pedagogical theory. Towards the end of the course, trainee identity as teachers could be promoted through the use of authentic assessments that mirror real teacher tasks and requirements.

Keywords*:* identity; discourse analysis; online communication; discussion board; teacher training; teacher education

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Introduction

Initial teacher education is about preparation for a specific professional role, that of the classroom teacher, and involves a transformation for trainee teachers from student to teacher. This research examines one cohort enrolled on an initial teacher education course, the Applied ICT Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. The PGCE is a one year intensive course consisting of university classes and two long placements periods, during which the main method of communication for the cohort is through discussion boards within a virtual learning environment.

The seventeen trainees started the one year PGCE in September 2005, spending approximately one third of their time at university and two thirds of their time on two separate school placements, one per semester. All the trainees had access to computers with Internet facilities for the duration of the course, allowing them access to the discussion boards. The discussion boards provided them with the means of staying in touch with their peers while on placement in school. Trainee teachers commonly feel isolated during placement in schools, leading many to drop out as they feel lonely and disconnected from their peers and the institution (Gunawardena, 2004). Research that has explored the 'connectedness' of trainee teachers who engaged with each other through a VLE for the purposes of study, reports that there is a heightened sense of feeling connected as part of a wider learning community (Thurston, 2005).

This research analysed the discussion board postings of this PGCE cohort to examine the trainees' expressions of identity as both a university student and a developing professional teacher, and the role of the university tutor in this identity transformation process. Through this discourse analysis it was hoped a deeper understanding of the trainees' development of professional identity as a teacher could be reached, leading to insights into better ways to encourage and develop it in teacher training courses.

Key Terms

Before continuing with the paper, it is important to define some key terms that will be used, particularly as discourse analysis terms are not well known. Discourse has two definitions that will be used in this paper. The first definition is 'language in use' (Cutting, 2002, p. 2), such as the specific spoken and written language that was used. For instance 'the trainees' discourse' refers to the specific messages and the language used in them. The second definition is the way that a group of people act and interact to signify their belonging with a particular group (Gee, 2005). Gee states that this includes their use of language but could extend beyond that to gestures, dress or behaviours. So the phrase 'teacher discourse' would refer to shared features of language use by teachers in general, such as common terms or phrasing, which would signify belonging to that group.

Identity is a crucial concept in our research, so it also needs addressing. Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2004) note that everyone has multiple identities which we employ in our lives. For example one woman can have an identity as a wife, lecturer, sports fanatic, mother and daughter simultaneously. However, in any given situation (e.g. at work) we call upon one of our identities, our current 'situated identity' (Gee, 2005). Skulstad (2005) highlights there is some debate in the literature (see Ivanic 1998, pp. 10-11 for more detailed discussion) around whether 'identity' is the best term to use to refer to the discourses we call upon in particular

situations. She suggests that 'role' is a more fitting term, with multiple roles being a part of your identity. However, there is little debate about whether people call upon a 'role' or 'identity' for a specific situation. As such, this seems a primarily semantic difference about the definition of words, which this paper does not seek to address, instead choosing to use 'identity' as a reference to the 'situated identity' or 'role' that the trainee teachers call upon in their discussion board messages.

Community boundary is also an important concept dealt with in this study. Given the virtual nature of the communications, the boundaries discussed are not physical boundaries such as the location of the trainees and their community. Instead it is the self-referential boundaries of the community that is the focus of this research; whom the members of the community signify are included in their community through the use of language. For instance, do the trainees consider teachers they work with as part of their community, as Irwin and Boulton (2009) found, or do they consider themselves as trainees distinct from the wider teacher community? Though the trainees are communicating online in a community, their writing is about the physical communities that they work and study in. It is the perceptions of these communities, as expressed through their online communication, that is the focus of this research.

To avoid confusion during the paper, trainee teachers are referred to as 'trainees'; 'students' refers to the university student identity; and high school students are referred to as 'pupils'. Trainee names have also been anonymised to protect their identities.

The Discourse Community

In performing a discourse analysis on the text of a community, it is helpful to determine that the group is actually a discourse community that can be analysed as a cohesive communicative group. Swales defines a discourse community as having six properties: common goals, mechanisms for communication, use of communication mostly for feedback and information, its own genres, its own lexis (language patterns, vocabulary and abbreviations), and a level of expertise (Swales, 1990, pp. 24-27). The common goals of the trainees are to pass the PGCE and secure employment as teachers. There are various mechanisms for communication, including face-to-face conversation and email, but the discussion board serves as the primary communication mechanism during placement periods. The purpose of the communication is primarily to request information, share information, share experiences, and request emotional support. Swales' (1990) notion that the primary purpose of a discourse community is to share information clashes with some of these purposes, as many of the trainees rely on it for emotional support rather than information sharing.

Though this study did not include a full genre analysis of message types, threads were categorised into genres using Irwin and Boulton's (2009) research into trainee blog communication genres to identify genres the trainees used, including use of status report and request for help message types. The group has examples of a specific lexis, though this lexis is a combination of student and teacher lexes. Further discussion of the genres and lexis are in later sections, as they give clues to understanding the trainee identity.

Swales (1990) claims there must be a balanced ratio of novices and experts given the transitional nature of many communities. However this community is finite rather than transitional, all of the trainees are novices to the subject, and the only expert present is the tutor. Despite having one expert, the community is able to negotiate its own genres and style for communication, suggesting that this is not a necessary feature of

a discourse community. Cutting's (2000, p. 1) definition of discourse community when examining a group of MSc students similarly lacks having a primary purpose of sharing information and the requirement of having experts, suggesting that these are not necessary for a discourse community, particularly in a group of students. Students in a small cohort with a distinct start and finish to their community may represent a different sort of discourse community than that looked at by Swales (1990), which tended to be wider groups with a shared hobby or academic subject. The wider teacher community and student community are the types of discourse community Swales (1990) refers to, and the intersection of these two communities is the focus of this research. As the group of trainee teachers seems to meet these discourse community criteria, a discourse analysis of the communication as a group seems appropriate.

Methodology

The methodology used for this research was a discourse analysis, an examination of the use of language to create meaning (as compared to an examination of language out of context such as semantics (Cutting, 2002)). A discourse analysis seemed an appropriate choice of methodology as Gee (2005, pp. 11-12) suggests that discourse analysis can be revealing about the identities, relationships, and actions behind language, exactly the things this study set out to determine about the trainee community and its role in shaping professional identity. Discourse analysis does not have a clear set of methods that must be adhered to, but rather a variety of approaches that can be used. The scope of the research as well as methods that were chosen and the reasons for their selection are explained below.

Research Scope

The scope of this analysis was the evidence of communication on the trainees' discussion board messages. It is worth noting however that the trainees did not just communicate with each other using discussion forums as would happen with an entirely distance learning course, but they also communicated inside the classroom, face-to-face, and via phone and email. As recordings of these other forms of communication were not available, this analysis focused solely upon the asynchronous communication in the discussion boards, which was the primary university-recommended communication medium during placement periods when the trainees are physically apart. The trainees also used the discussion boards a little outside the placement periods, and these messages were included in the analysis as they still pertained to the community sense of identity.

It was decided to identify a useful representation of the messages based upon the communicative purpose and forums of the messages in order to make the analysis manageable. Identifying a subset of a larger body of text in this way is a method of sampling recommended for beginning discourse analysis by Gee (1999). There were a total of 985 discussion board messages in 202 threads by the 17 trainees and the tutor; too many messages for a study of this size to analyse deeply. To select the messages a process was followed. First, all of the discussion board messages were read. Those that focused upon other situated identities such as regional identities or social lives (e.g. 'pub for Friday lunch ???') were excluded as they did not help explain the development of trainee identity as teachers.

Next, threads were categorised into sub-genres based upon their communicative purpose and linguistic features. Genres identified in Irwin and Boulton (2009) in their study of trainee discourse in blogs were used

as a starting point. While Irwin and Boulton identified nine genres (Introduction, Re-introduction, Messages of Encouragement, Requests for Help, Emotional Catharsis, Resource Sharing, Detailed Report, Solicitation of Experiences, and Short Status Report), the categorisation of the discussion boards found that only five of these were appropriate for these trainees' discourse. Introduction messages were not used on the discussion boards, and the linguistic distinctions between Short Status Report and Detailed Report were less clear than in the blog research, as they were often intertwined in the same threads, so they were combined into a single Status Report. In addition, two new genres were identified: Polls, which were used for gathering opinions, primarily about social functions, and Setting Purpose messages, which were about setting expectations about appropriate communication methods. Therefore, the resulting genres of message types identified in the discussion board were Messages of Encouragement, Requests for Help, Emotional Catharsis, Resource Sharing, Status Report, Solicitation of Experiences, Polls, and Setting Purpose.

Posts were then selected to ensure representation from each of the five forums (General Issues, Placement 1, Placement 2, Assignments, and Getting a Job), each of the identified genres (with the exception of Polls which focused on social identities) and the inclusion of the tutor voice. In total, forty-nine messages from seventeen threads were selected for detailed analysis.

Choosing an Analysis Tool

Many of the traditional discourse analysis tools would have been only partially helpful in understanding the text. Unlike conversational speech, many of the messages were longer reflective or descriptive accounts, the equivalent of a spoken monologue. As a result, some of the existing discourse analysis methods such as conversation analysis and Grice's maxims (a group of communication standards used as a tool for understanding communicative intention (Sperber and Wilson, 1995)) are not relevant, as they focus on the underlying interactions between participants that occur during speech (Cutting, 2002). For instance, Grice's first maxim of quantity means that speakers should not give too much information, so a speaker who talks continuously for a length of time would be violating this maxim (Cutting, 2002). In a discussion board there is no way to judge if you are boring others and longer messages are more acceptable in writing as well, hence longer messages were commonplace.

Similarly, conversational organisation analysis methods such as Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF), which looks at linear classroom conversation (Cutting, 2002), are not suitable for the discussion board medium. This is because there are often many responses to one initiation over a lengthy timespan. This may result in there being less need for turn-taking given that each turn has a permanent presence in the conversation (Nguyen & Kellogg, 2005). These differences in the online communication of the trainees also reinforces the idea that online communication forms require new classification systems due to their different nature compared to traditional spoken and written communication (Herring, 2007).

Lexis analysis seemed to offer an appropriate method for this study. Examination of lexis (the vocabulary, phrasing and abbreviations used) can show identities being called upon in language (Ivanic, 1998). Analysing the lexis for indications of teacher and student discourse helped to reveal the identities expressed by the trainee community through the discussion boards.

Investigating pronoun choice can be a way to understand who is considered part of a community and who is outside that community (Holmes & Marra, 2002). For instance, the use of 'we' or 'us' indicates that the trainees include themselves in that group, while 'they' or 'them' indicates that someone is external to the group. Given that some pronouns such as 'they' can be used to represent an object (e.g. 'the assignments'), it was decided to focus only on instances where a pronoun is used to represent a person or people. This representing of a person is known as person deixis.

Critical discourse analysis, a look at power in discourse (Fairclough, 2003), was also appropriate in examining the role of the tutor in the process and its effect on the shaping of identities in the discussion boards. For this course the tutor took an active role in posting messages and setting the discussion board purposes. Analysing the role she played in the process of transitioning trainee identity towards a professional teacher identity was a useful approach to understanding the trainee community.

Analysis

It was decided that the messages should be analysed individually and as a group, looking at elements of grammar such as pronoun use for patterns across them in the areas of community boundaries, lexis, culture, and power. First the messages were scanned through looking for unique vocabulary and abbreviations as examples of lexis, and pronoun use as examples of community boundaries. Then the messages were examined more in depth as a collective body of text and analysed to determine the online culture of the group and the type of messages that were acceptable. Finally the tutor's messages were looked at critically in relation to the trainees' posts to understand what influence the tutor had.

Community Boundaries

In creating their community online, the trainees establish themselves as a distinct group from the teacher community, defining boundaries in their text. The community refers to itself often through the use of person deixis such as pronouns, but occasionally directly as well. For instance, the use of 'we' is person deixis that shows inclusion in the group (Holmes & Marra, 2002) and it is used frequently throughout the conversations to refer to the trainee community. During the placements, the trainee group uses language to extend their boundaries and include other non-ICT trainees, despite them not being members of the discussion boards. For example, Fiona and Lisa use 'we' to refer to all trainees at their schools, which suggests that the trainees feel comfortable speaking for the larger trainee community. More rare are references to 'we' which include teaching staff at the schools. There are only two examples of the use of 'we' in this manner: Fiona uses it to indicate the whole school will be inspected, and it is used elsewhere in a more vague manner which may indicate either the group of trainees, the placement student and classroom teacher pair, or the larger school. Overall, the dominant use of 'we' by the trainees in the discussion boards reveals a sense that the community does not include teachers, probably because of the position of trainees in the schools as learners who receive feedback and grades from the mentors.

Conversely, 'they' and 'them' are pronouns that indicate people outside the group (Holmes & Marra, 2002), and are primarily used for teachers and pupils. 'They' indicates a subject that is doing the action and is used for both teachers and pupils. Lisa says, 'they're big on prayers here', referring to an undefined 'they' which represents some or all of the school's teachers and pupils, or the school itself as an entity. Similarly, Oscar also uses 'they' where the subject is not defined. This use of a non-defined 'they' suggests an external

group that the trainees do not know the membership of, though they do not include themselves in that group. 'Them' on the other hand indicates an object that is receiving an action, and is used as person deixis for pupils frequently in the messages. The trainees use of 'them' and 'they' when referring to pupils shows they do not consider themselves as being the same type of student as the pupils they teach; a distinction that comes across quite strongly through numerous examples in the text. However, qualified teachers are referred to as 'they' and 'them' less often, possibly because interactions with teachers are more likely to be one-to-one or because the trainees identify more with teachers than pupils at the school.

There are also examples of the trainee group using language to differentiate themselves from others; a way of defining their own group. Noah refers to 'real teachers' as having different practice to the trainees, implying that the trainees do not feel like teachers or what they do is similar to qualified teachers. Noah defines a border for the trainee community which excludes the larger teaching community, essentially saying that is 'them' and this is 'us'. Georgia asks Noah what the 'teaching staff' at his school are like, using a term which implies Noah is not part of the school's teaching staff, rather than a term like 'other teachers'. In another example, at the end of her first placement Lisa comments, 'I popped into "my" GCSE class'. Her use of quotation marks around 'my' suggest a partial sense of ownership: she feels ownership though there is no official recognition of her as a teacher. Looking at the choice of language the community uses to position themselves as subjects reveals that the trainees see themselves as mostly separate from qualified teachers but clearly separate from pupils.

Community Lexis

Swales (1990) notes that the ability to understand a discourse community's lexis is one indication of belonging in that community. To this effect, an analysis of the trainees' choice of lexis, whether it is teacher lexis or student lexis, may help reveal their identification with a teacher or student community.

Throughout the year there is a use of teacher-specific abbreviations. For example, Chuck refers to 'DiDA', a school-level ICT qualification, and 'TES', the Times Educational Supplement. Fiona refers to a 'KS3 class', an indication of the educational level at which the class is working. 'OFSTEDed' is an abbreviation which has become a verb in general teacher lexis, and refers to being inspected by the government. These examples of teacher abbreviations being used by the trainees date from the beginning of the first placement period, which suggests that the trainees are absorbing them into their professional vocabulary from taught sessions and frequent use in the schools early on.

There is also evidence of a use of teaching vocabulary. Some, like Chuck's use of 'tutor group registration', are wider educational concepts that would be understood by others familiar with the British school system. However, concepts the trainees refer to, such as 'class control' and 'a behaviour management strategy', are primarily the vocabulary of teachers. These examples occur later in the year, which might suggest that the trainees are not given sufficient opportunity to apply these concepts at the beginning of their placements, or that these concepts are difficult to master and more easily learned later in the course.

The trainees also frequently refer to a student lexis, demonstrating occasional use of abbreviations such as 'Ass 4' for assignment 4 and 'SoW', a reference to a Scheme of Work assignment. More frequent than the use of student-related abbreviations is the use of student-related terms. For example, Chuck refers to 'the project we are doing collaboratively'; Lisa mentions 'our collaborative assignment'; and Fiona says 'this

placement'. These examples are related to the structure of the course, as set by their tutor. The trainees have adopted the vocabulary of their shared experience on the course and rarely construct their own abbreviations or vocabulary, possibly because of the small community size and short group lifespan when compared with the teaching community. The teacher community has had longer to develop standardised abbreviations and vocabulary to facilitate communication (Swales, 1990), though many of these may have been derived from names set by governmental and other external bodies, similar to the student vocabulary having been primarily set by the tutor.

There are some examples of the trainees merging these two lexes together, showing the integration of the teacher and student side of the trainees. For instance, when Chuck says, 'I was searching the TES forum for help on DiDA because I need it for both my SoW and the project we are doing collaboratively' he is relating teaching lexis such as DiDA with the student assessments. 'We're due to be OFSTEDed at any moment and certainly before the end of this placement' (Fiona) is an example of teaching being viewed within the time frame of the student experience. These examples help show that the trainees develop their own lexis which is a combination of the wider teacher lexis and student lexis, helping identify them as a specific discourse community. Outsiders, including qualified teachers, would have difficulty understanding some of the messages (Swales, 1990).

Community Culture

The community culture online seems to focus on sharing and support, as most messages are about sharing experiences with and asking for help from each other. The trainees share resources from themselves and the wider teacher community, with 37 threads about shared resources they found or created. For example, Chuck informs the group 'We are not alone!' and continues by explaining there is a larger community of resources created by teachers that the trainees can use. Chuck's statement implies a sense of the group having previously felt alone or isolated, which is interesting given the context that the trainees had been on placement for a month working closely with teachers in their schools, and may indicate a feeling of separateness from the wider teacher community. Despite seeming to belong to the larger teaching community as a result of being in schools on placement, the use of 'we' (as discussed previously) refers to the trainees, defining them as separate to that teacher community.

In another example, Oscar comments that the head teacher at his placement school 'uses the last class of the day to talks *[sic.]* to us (or at us) about a specific education topic'. 'At us' implies a negative connotation that there is no conversation but instead a monologue, suggesting that Oscar does not think this larger induction into the teaching community is useful. However, other information such as general educational policies are perceived as relevant to their needs and accepted as useful, such as Oscar later mentioning 'very useful' sessions on topics like special needs and inclusion. Another example is Mike's discussion with Anne and Chuck about available national curriculum resources:

Date: Mon Oct 31 2005 12:33
Author: Mike
Subject: Re: Research help

Hello Chuck
It seems that while there is lots of research on key stage three & four there is precious little on five.
This seems to be the case because I don't think key stage five is part of the National Curriculum.

It seems the more informed you are the less actual informing you do.

It seems that ICT isn't 'core' at any stage unless its choosen as a study subject at year ten by the pupil.

This said it must be implemented within a 'programme of study' throughout the other stages (except stage one) in all other subjects except PE.

This means essentially that ICT must be apart of tution in other subjects. Here's a link to the programmes of study.

http://www.nc.uk.net/nc/contents/ICT-4--POS.html

Attached is help on key stage three, though you probably don't need it.

Here's a link to the requirements at key stage four.

http://www.becta.org.uk/leaders/display.cfm?section=20&id=2127

Here's a link to download the National Curriculum for ICT

http://www.nc.uk.net/nc_resources/html/download.shtml

I think that at key stage five the 'statutory requirements' if there are any might be connected to the actual qualifications taken at this level.

Don't take that as gospel because I'm still looking into it anyway.

Hope this helps

Mike

Date: Mon Oct 31 2005 14:26
Author: Anne
Subject: Re: Research help

Wow Mike - well done there on your help
Can you cover my classes too ?
Nice one - see you tomorrow

Date: Mon Oct 31 2005 16:28
Author: Chuck
Subject: Re: Research help

Thanks Mike, you are an absolute life saver!
You know when sometimes you try so hard that you end up back at square 1?
thats me and this assignment!
See you tomorrow pal

The above examples show the trainee community rejecting resources which come from the personal experiences of teachers (such as the head teacher's stories), possibly seeing them as not relevant to their unique experience of being both teacher and student, while accepting as more relevant those resources that deal with more general educational issues and teaching practices.

This community culture of support and sharing has little appetite for conflict as evidenced by few messages which are argumentative or display opposing views. In Skulstad's (2005) analysis, trainees employed face-saving strategies such as hedging and humour to maintain politeness while critiquing each other's work online. However in this community, trainees were neither required nor encouraged to critique each other's work online, so this tension was not generally evident in trainees' postings. There is one example where the group has a fracture relating to the use of teacher's planners (lines are numbered below for reference purposes):

Date: Wed Nov 09 2005 14:48
Author: Lisa
Subject: Those Teacher's Planners that cost us a fiver...

1.... has anyone used them yet? I want to just so that I can justify the fiver, but I don't know what for yet.

Author: Chuck

2.Oh my god i really think i couldn't live without that planner anymore!
3.what did i do before i had it?
4.It's like some kind of shiny kevlar plated security blanket with a handy section for writing down everything you would ever need!
5.I use it pretty extensively as a surrigate brain, think i'm running out of personal storage space.

Author: Fiona

6.Likewise - mine has saved my sanity (and face) on a few occasions.
7.Brill for taking quick notes about what happened in lessons, where the kids are up to at the end of lessons, newspaper clippings that I want to show to my Y12s about new developments etc etc.
8.It's been worth it's weight in gold, so far.

Author: Denise

9.i've not used mine yet.... but now I'm thinking I should be....

Author: Noah

10.Me too, but i reckon if its only Chuck and Fiona that are using them then we've not so much to worry about (no offence guys you are just far more active and prepared than most real teachers i've met).

Author: Joel

11.I have used mine constantly (and am using it now)
12.Unfortunately, propping up a printer doesn't really justify the fiver :-)

Author: Tina

13.I'm with Lisa on this one, mine hasn't been out of my expensive school bag.
14.Maybe I should start using it, I am taking a Y8 (horrible), but only the starter, well actually, I'm not sure I've not seem my mentor in days.
15.He gives me the look of death whenever he sees me approaching.
16.Or maybe its just me, men and kids tend to run when I approach!!!!

Author: Joel

17.Yes Tina, but they are running towards you!
18.:-)

Author: Keith

19.I've got 2 planners now, the school produce their own, so now I'm doubly worried about not using either....off to fill in my name right now!

Author: Hugh

20.Maybe   those   that   do   could   give   us   some   tips   when   we   next   meet!
21.When is that incidently?

Author: Lisa

22.We're back in uni on Tuesday 29 Nov - with our collaborative assignment all done...

In this thread, Lisa asks if others are using teacher's planners (line 1), and Chuck and Fiona respond saying they constantly use them (2-8). Denise then worries that she should be using them too (9), prompting Noah to respond that Chuck and Fiona are doing more than teachers do by using them, labelling them better than 'real teachers' (10). Noah's response is a justification for the group who has not used the planners, and fractures the group along lines of how they believe teachers should act. Next Joel makes a joke about how he uses the planners (11-12) and Tina mimics him, using humour in her message and then changes the subject (16). Joel then responds to Tina with another joke (17-18). However, Keith brings the conversation back to concern about the planners (19). This leads to Hugh suggesting a compromise between the two groups, trying to turn the conversation into a chance to share information (an acceptable use of the discussion boards for the community) and asking when the next university session is, which returns the focus to the student identity (20-21). Lisa finishes the conversation by referring to the group as 'we' and making two references to the student identity: saying when the group meets next and referencing the assignment (22).

From this example, we can see that the conversation starts with a request for information, an acceptable type of communication in the forums. However, when differing teaching practices among the trainees creates a split in the community's shared identity as teachers, the response is initially to try to change the subject (16), and then to refer back to the shared student identity (22) as a solid grounding for the community. Since the student experience is uniform across the trainees, it provides a more solid community base than the teaching experience which differs between trainees. Humour is also used by Joel and Tina to try to pull the group back together, so its use on the discussion forums can be seen as more of a social glue than a hedging device as Skulstad (2005) found.

Community Power

The tutor Anne's power in the discussion boards is complex to analyse as her role is not a straightforward one. Her ultimate goal is to guide the trainees' transformation from being students to being teachers. She is part tutor, part mentor, part observer, part assessor and part friend to the trainees. In analysing her power, it is important to remember that she is the only one with administrative control over the discussion boards. She sets up the discussion forums and chooses their settings. Anne also has the opportunity to post the first message, which she does in all of the forums - something tutors are often given guidance to do.

One example is when Anne asks 'Are you all doing ok ?' for the start of the Placement 2 forum. This type of initial message, along with her choice of forum name, helps set trainee expectations about the type and level of formality (in this case informal) of messages in the forum. She is also establishing the type of messages acceptable for the forum, in this case the Status Report genre. For instance, below is a message from Anne early on in the Getting a Job forum.

> Date: Mon Feb 13 2006 10:33
> Author: Anne
> Subject: feedback requested please
>
> can we have some feedback on interviews, applications, negotiating pay etc please???

In response to Anne's prompting, status reports from Tina and Georgia came through, suggesting they have recognised the genre Anne proposed of reporting on interviews, applications, etc. These genres develop over the course and are in part negotiated by the group as a whole, but are often based upon Anne's initial prompts and encouragements.

The tutor also sets expectations for the trainees in the Getting a Job forum in several threads. The first thread includes an attachment of the previous cohort's comments on getting a job and what is helpful. This, along with the interrogative request 'can we have some feedback on interviews, applications, negotiating pay etc please???', helps set the expected behaviour for the group on this forum. In response to the tutor's promoting, Denise says that she got a job and gives a brief overview of what happened in the interview. Anne returns with a thread titled 'So, what happened at [SchoolName] then ? go, tell us...', an interrogative followed by a direct imperative without an additional 'please' or other device to lessen the effect of the command. The tutor is using a blunt request, probably intended informally, to elaborate that the original message did not satisfy the expected response for this discussion forum. Denise recognises Anne's authority in making the request and promptly writes a detailed one-page account of the interview. This approach of writing everything about an interview is later repeated by several other trainees, suggesting an implicit understanding of the tutor's expectations about the type of messages in this forum, and recognition of the tutor's power in asking for this type of message.

The way Anne refers to the trainees helps reveal the way she sees them, and this subconsciously affects the way they see themselves. For instance in the earlier quote about the National Curriculum, Mike sends Chuck a list of resources with an explanation. Anne responds with an encouraging message followed by a joke 'Can you cover my classes too ?'. Beneath the humour is an underlying message that Mike is acting

like a teacher, as only a teacher would 'cover' someone's classes. So in this case, Anne sends a message that though Mike is doing work for his student half (the assignments), he is thinking and acting like a teacher (in this case, like her). Anne's comment might also be interpreted as a subconscious challenge to Mike for the role of trainee tutor, as her comment suggests he is doing part of her job, which he may interpret as discouraging him from adopting a role as a teacher, although this has to be balanced against the informality of the messages on the boards from the tutor. Tutors should consider their role in the online discussion process and how that fits in with the developing sense of identity for the trainees, as it is possible that trainees will receive both encouragement and discouragement, albeit accidentally, from the tutor when adopting teacher roles.

The tutor must be careful not to send these mixed signals to the trainees regarding their identity. Starting in January, Anne writes on the Getting a Job forum encouraging the trainees to go to interview and 'get that first teaching post', an act which would mark the end of the transformation process from student to teacher, suggesting that she is encouraging this process. In April, in the Assignments forum, Anne writes, 'Some Schools are letting students do 1:1 tuition with pupils', referring to the trainees as 'students'. She probably uses this term unconsciously, but this may confuse the trainees as by this point in the year some have accepting teaching positions and probably are starting to consider themselves as more teacher than student.

The tutor also has power over the lexis of the community, at least in the beginning of the course. The tutor serves as the bridge between the teaching world and its many acronyms and the trainees, giving her some power over which abbreviations are used and what new vocabulary is taught. As mentioned earlier, the tutor also decides the names of the assignments, discussion forums, teaching schedule, and other core course information, meaning she may have initial control over the student lexis as well. In a community where the tutor does not play a strong role, the trainees may start to create their own discourse rules for the discussion board, as Rodrigues (1999) found when investigating a cohort of science trainee teachers. However, in this study's cohort the tutor had significant power in the initial shaping of the discourse conventions in many forums, such as when she set the expectations for the types of messages that were acceptable in the Getting a Job forum. However, this power did not seem to have a detrimental impact on the trainees' participation given the high level of activity in posting messages. This suggests that the tutor set the rules of discussion but did not dominate the conversation; a potential problem when moderating discussion boards which can lead to decreased participation (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003).

Anne's role as assessor also has an influence on the community. Posting on the discussion boards was not part of the assessments, but Anne's encouragements for continual communication between the trainees seemed to influence their levels of posting in forums, as there would be more posts after her promptings. However, she sets the types of assignments and rules around deadlines, formats, etc. The types of assessments and their timings could have had some influence on the shaping of the trainees' identities, as also found in Irwin and Boulton (2009). For instance, assignments normally prompted student discourse to be used. Towards the end of the year this seems counter to the goal of getting the trainees ready for the teaching positions they had secured, for which they will need to have a secure teacher identity.

Finding the right balance of power in a discussion is a challenge for any tutor: wanting to have some control over the discourse genres and purpose of the discussion, while not wanting to stifle student contributions. The use of power by a tutor is not wrong, and is in many cases expected by the students and

entirely appropriate. What is important, however, is an awareness of the potential effect of that power on the students and their discourse. In the example of trainee teachers, tutors will want to use that power to move trainees towards an identity as a teacher, and should be watchful that their use of power accomplishes that goal, rather than keeping trainees in a student identity.

Conclusion

To work as part of a discipline, one must learn how to think like a member of that discipline's community (Perkins, 2006), and consequently feel like part of that community. Thus, the development of an identity as a teacher is an important professional step. Analysing the online discourse of this community of trainee teachers provided insight into the development of teacher identity and the possible influences on its formation. This discourse analysis examined four key areas where the language and culture of the trainee community reveals their situated identities as teachers and students. The trainees establish boundaries for their community through the use of pronouns, creating a sense of "us versus them" in their messages, partially towards teachers but strongly towards pupils. The community lexis is a combination of teacher and student lexis which creates a strong sense of a new distinct community. The online culture of the trainees is one of a unified support community, which values sharing resources from within the community, as well as resources from outside sources which are relevant to their unique position as student and teacher. The tutor has significant, often subconscious, power in defining elements of the community, such as its lexis, genres, and culture, as well as encouraging the transition from student to teacher that the trainees must undergo.

The Role of Technology

The technology itself may have also had an effect on the community and their expressions of identity. Irwin and Boulton (2009) examined a trainee community on a shared blog, finding a similar culture of support but some different genres of communication and many fewer messages. More research and evaluation is needed to determine if the technology used is the primary source of these changes, or if other influences such as the trainee personalities and the tutor's role were the dominant reasons. It is also worth noting that without the existence of the online discussion boards or other technology, whole group communication at a distance would have been difficult. The use of the technology to facilitate the group communication and community building allowed the trainees to form a more solid identity as a group. However, it is unclear whether the group communication helped to reinforce a separate trainee identity, whereas not having the group communication might have led to closer feelings of connection with qualified teachers. It is also possible that the group discussion boards reinforced the teacher identity through social learning, such as sharing vocabulary and teaching terms. Research into the development of identity for trainees who do not have access to online communication technologies while on placements would be needed to clarify this.

The use of technology may also have impacted on the construction of teacher identity. For instance if it is not common practice yet for teachers to communicate about teaching using online discussion boards, this could mean the trainee's sense of being a teacher is lessened as a result of communicating in that format. Research into trainee perceptions would be needed to determine any possible effect on their perceptions, as this topic was not discussed by the trainees on the discussion boards. However, as technology becomes a mainstream part of compulsory education any potential identity conflict would lessen. It is also possible that the use of online technologies may empower the trainees in developing a 'future' teacher identity, one where technology is a more integrated part of the workplace.

Effectiveness of the Analysis

It is important to consider the effectiveness of this analysis and identify key areas for further research. This discourse analysis revealed many hidden features in the text of the trainee community, which were not first apparent upon a direct reading of the messages. However, it is difficult to make larger generalisations about trainee teacher discussion boards, given different purposes for discussion boards with different classes. For example Skulstad's (2005) cohort engaged in critical analysis of discussion posts instead of just support, which revealed different tensions.

The sampling method used to select messages for further analysis attempted to be representative of the discussion boards, based on message content (by including messages from all forums), the types of messages that the trainees posted, when the messages were posted and who posted them. It should be noted however, that it is impossible for any selection to be fully representative of all the discussion board messages which could have had an effect on the results of the analysis. This is especially true in the analysis of the use of lexis and pronoun use, where the content of the messages were analysed in detail. However, the reading of all the discussion board messages initially to ensure key points made were representative of the overall feel of the discussion board should have mitigated any sampling effect. Another approach that could help with this mitigation would have been interviewing or surveying the participants to better understand their sense of identity outside of their discussion board language.

Other discourse analysis approaches to the text and language used could also be useful for future research. One possibility for this includes corpus analysis, the use of a computer database to store and analyse massive amounts of text, could be used to analyse trainee communication across different universities, cohorts and mediums (e.g. speech, email) as larger corpora are considered more effective for corpus analysis (Biber et al., 1994; Xiao & McEnery, 2006). This could allow for more general findings about the use of language for trainees, though the context of a particular community would be lost. Another tool that could be effective for analysing the discussion is genre analysis, a look at the different types of messages used and their underlying linguistic rules. A brief genre analysis was done in this study for the purposes of selection, but a more extensive analysis of the communicative genres present in the discussion boards could help better understand the conversation conventions used by the trainees.

As a last comment on the analysis, the perspective of the primary author as an outsider has been helpful in evaluating the role of the tutor's power, but there is a risk that the context for some of the messages and experiences on the discussion board has been lost, as Norris (2007) argues that context is crucial when looking at the discourses people use to create identity. Gee however argues that discourse analysts should 'concentrate first and foremost on language' (2005, p. 34), suggesting that context is secondary to language. What is unclear is the amount of context that might be relevant in the online environment, given the lack of relevant gestures and other prosodic cues. A balance is required between maintaining objectivity but not losing sight of the context in which messages are posted and an analysis by more than one researcher may be the way forward with this: one who has no knowledge and can remain objective, and one who has knowledge and can add context.

Implications for Practice

Overall, the trainee teachers seem to identify with teaching but not being teachers. They discuss teaching experiences, use teaching lexis, and rely on general teaching resources, while separating themselves from the wider community of teachers through their unique combined lexis, use of pronouns, and rejection of resources coming from qualified teachers' personal experiences. The implication for this is teacher training courses should strive to not just convey how to teach, but also how to identify with being teachers by the end of the course.

The role of qualified teachers in the schools has to tread the fine line between giving feedback to trainees and recognition of them as developing fellow teachers. There is a risk that schools playing a dual role of mentor and assessor will create conflicting messages to trainees about their place in the school, suggesting the trainees are both fellow teacher and student. While this is certainly true in the beginning of the course, by the end of the course trainees have secured jobs as teachers and should feel more like a fellow teacher to help with the construction of their teacher identity.

University tutors should also be aware of the influence they have in determining how trainees shape their identity while on placement and in the classroom, and be sure the development of these identities progresses through the year. For instance, in the beginning of the year trainees need help learning teacher lexis so they can begin to incorporate it into their communication. In the middle of the year, trainees could be encouraged to reflect upon how much they identify with being a teacher, and what they can do to encourage this sense of identity. Towards the end of the year, tutors should avoid referring to the trainees as 'students' and ensure that assessments are more authentic teacher activities to encourage trainees to identify with being teachers (Irwin and Boulton, 2009). An awareness by tutors and school teachers of conscious and subconscious identity messages being given to trainees will also help promote the trainees' identity transformation from student to teacher.

Acknowledgments

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