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Preparing student teachers for Teaching Practice: early placements in Initial Teacher Education

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Ian Neal

Professor Ian Neal is Associate Dean of Education and Society at the University of Sunderland, UK. He has been a Senior Teacher in a number of UK schools and has worked for the University of Cambridge developing the UK's first International Student Centred Review scheme. He moved to Sunderland University in 1992. He has travelled widely, providing educational consultancy in South America, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and most countries in Europe. Contact: ian.neal@sunderland.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper reports a pilot project of ten initial teacher training students engaged on a three-year undergraduate programme leading to BA(hons) in English with QTS. In the first two years of their programme, student teachers normally receive academic input only, embarking on a one-year practicum stage in the third year of their programme. The project allowed student teachers to become closely associated with one of the University's partnership schools to enable them to understand the daily life in schools and begin to engage with teaching. In addition they used secure social networking through the Mahara e-portfolio system to exchange ideas and experiences. The project proved highly successful in reducing isolation, enhancing communication and it helped student teachers to decide which kind of school they wished to work with in the future.

Note: Throughout this paper, 'student teacher' refers to university undergraduate students engaged on a programme of study of initial teacher education, and 'school student' refers to pupils in school.

Introduction

Two factors together led to the project:

The University of Sunderland's secondary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision is varied and includes a large Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme in several subjects and a smaller provision of undergraduate programmes leading to an honours degree in subject education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Most of the undergraduate programmes are of three years' duration and the arrangement of delivery is that the first two years of these programmes are wholly University based, covering the subject itself up to degree level, with very little 'education' input. In the third year, undergraduate student teachers join the PGCE cohort and undertake the same programme, covering the subject application and practical work. This arrangement leads to some student teachers commenting that while they are on an education programme, they have no "practical education" input until the Block School Experience (BSE) work begins in the third year.

The University has a very large partnership of schools, some of which are challenging as one would find in any conurbation. One school is particularly challenging and, as well as the issues created by the catchment area, also has a large staff turnover. 'Exit interviews' of

departing staff usually identify the issue of their expectation as a reason for leaving. The school is a new-build and at interview applicants for jobs are very taken by the appearance, resources and quality of the physical environment. It is only after working there for a while that some find that the challenge of the school students is not for them. The school governors identified this as an problem to be addressed and it was suggested that by getting student teachers in beforehand would give them a ‘proper’ idea of the school in the hope that some would apply to work there and stay.

As well as these two factors, it has long been recognised that student teachers can feel isolated on BSE – they are in school without much opportunity to exchange ideas with their peers. (Britzeman, 1986; de Lime, 2003 amongst many others). For this reason, a University-based social networking and e-portfolio system was used in this project to allow interchange of ideas, along the lines of previous blog projects (for example, Dickey, 2004; Gleaves & Walker, 2010). The system used was the *Mahara* ePortfolio system.

Operation

Student teachers from the first year of the University’s BA (hons) English Education (with QTS) programme visited the school as a whole group as part of their regular studies and were introduced to its ethos and operation. Following this introduction, student teachers were teamed with practising teachers and attended the school on a weekly basis. During these times they engaged with school life, worked side by side with teachers and school students and supported youngsters with their project and examination coursework. The experience and learning was discussed and logged through the *Mahara* e-Portfolio system, and was discussed in regular meetings of the group at the University. The project continued into a second year with the same group of student teachers continuing their experience, in most cases making a weekly visit to the school to engage in group and individual teaching under the supervision of school teaching staff.

During their time on the project, student teachers developed *Mahara*-based portfolios of discussion, ideas and experiences. Since they were off-site and going into the school at different times, this approach proved invaluable (see evaluation below) as well as being innovative.

Undergraduate student teachers in the early years of our secondary initial teacher education programmes rarely get the opportunity to “get their hands dirty” in the classroom on a regular basis, working side by side with practicing teachers. The first years of their programme are academic, concentrating on their subject with some generic education too. While they may have opportunities for one-off group visits to schools and maybe one or two micro-teaching sessions, they do not normally get the chance to experience the classroom on a weekly basis before their final year block experience (or ‘teaching practice’).

The project afforded student teachers the opportunity to develop a “feel” and understanding of the characteristics of a school without the pressures of having to teach a timetable and undergo continuous assessment which forms the bulk of their final year. Schools are different, and many newly qualified teachers find that their first teaching post is in a school of a character that they do not get on with, and move to another school in a short time (Capel et al, 1997). By allowing student teachers the opportunity to gain an understanding of the diversity of education, this project goes some way to alleviate that problem.

Impact of the development.

1. While the University has excellent relationships with its partner schools – those who provide teaching practice placements – this relationship often does not develop into a full working partnership. The Principal and Governors of the school have already expressed their appreciation of the project and the way in which it develops a mutual understanding and respect between them and the University. Further feedback is given below.
2. The student teachers completing the first year of the project were asked to provide feedback, and all of them expressed appreciation of the opportunity. That in itself is useful, but more importantly the student teachers have formed a very useful working partnership with the school. They attend regularly, take part in out-of-school activities such as drama and sporting events and generally have become associates of the school. The original concept of the project in providing an understanding by student teachers of the school is working.

Feedback from the school

The school has reported that the work of the student teachers has had a *direct* impact on the GCSE grades of the school students at the school in July 2010. The 1:1 and small group work that the student teachers' involvement allowed meant that coursework was of a significantly higher standard than it would otherwise have been. It is very rare in their experience that student teachers' involvement in a school has such a *direct* impact on school students' results. The school further reported that they have seen a continued enhancement of the school students' achievement at GCSE, especially as a result of the student teachers' support of school students' coursework.

As a result of the initiative, the school now offers school experience placements for several Graduate Teacher Programme students from other schools, and intends to offer placements for Block School Experience (or Teaching Practice) in a number of subjects.

The school summarised that it has been really useful for the school and that they were keen to continue the project in the future, perhaps to other subjects.

Feedback from student teachers

While an important aim of Initial Teacher Education is to enhance the education in schools, the more immediate intention is to enhance the learning of its student teachers directly, through innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

Feedback from the student teachers involved included the following comments:

- I have found the experience extremely valuable and know it will help me greatly when I begin my teaching practice in September.
- The department have allowed me to be an active part of all of the lessons I have been in so it hasn't just been a case of observing lessons.

- I have been involved in certain projects that the academy has taken part in such as the BBC Schools Report and recently I have helped year 9s set up a pen pal system with some school students in Japan.
- I think it has been of tremendous value. Without it I would have only the limited knowledge of an observer.
- I have used *Mahara* to put some of the experiences in my CV.
- This has literally been one of my highlights this year!
- For once *Mahara* was better than Facebook!
- They have helped us to understand lesson plans etc. and we are beginning to embark on our own lessons.
- Working with *Mahara* was really good to swap ideas.
- The visits [to the school] gave me the opportunity to actually teach, which has served to reinforce my desire to get into the profession, and allay any fears or doubts I had about what it would be like.

Student teachers were able to draw from the University based theoretical work in their subject based sessions to feed into the support they gave to the school students. For example, their undergraduate studies includes a module in poetry, and student teachers were able to run sessions in school for small groups of school students, putting into practice the theory that the student teachers had learned during their theoretical University work. This experience was then fed back to the whole student teacher group in the subsequent University based seminar. This was an additional and unexpected bonus – the project had the aim of allowing student teachers to gain an understanding of the workplace that they would be entering the following year, but the interaction between the second year undergraduate work and the immediate practical application was worthwhile and useful to reinforce the student teachers’ learning at University. It also enhanced the subsequent learning for all the student teachers taking the poetry module, not just those taking part in the project.

While the use of *Mahara* was useful, it did not take off as well as it could have. Some student teachers used the e-portfolio function to store and exchange lesson ideas, and where it was used in this way it worked well. If the project continues, this aspect will be encouraged more. All student teachers were able to use the CV function (*Mahara* refers to this as a “resumé”) to include their classroom experience, and this will be passed through to the Faculty placement office to inform the student teachers’ teaching practice placement schools. Being able to keep the CV immediate and up to date enhances it significantly – it’s always difficult to think back later on. On-line discussion facilities were utilised very well to arrange meetings, share ideas for lesson input and swap experiences – while the participating student teachers were also users of Facebook, they clearly did not want to share their experiences in school there, indeed they were expressly forbidden to do so. Instead, they used *Mahara* to swap ideas and experiences in a secure (and confidential) environment. This negated the isolation that can sometimes arise when student teachers are out of the University on placement (Gratch, 1998; Rogers and Babinski, 2002).

A further value to our student teachers is that they have been able to experience first-hand what working in this type of school is like. All schools are different, and they all have their idiosyncrasies and their own issues. Two student teachers who took part in the project have decided that they would prefer not to work in this type of school (although clearly might be placed in one). It is so much better to find this out now, than in their or, even worse, in their first post.

One of the intentions of the project was to allow student teachers to gain and understanding of the school itself, and during the course of the school activities student teachers were able to form their own evaluation of the school. As one student teacher said, "Great school, but I wouldn't want to work here". Gaining the ability to make such evaluations is important, since student teachers must do exactly this as they search for their first job. Discussions with the student teachers showed that they were well able to look at the school critically and make a judgement about what its strengths and challenges are, from their own point of view. This part of the project was highly successful.

While the University set up the opportunities and the support mechanisms, the student teachers themselves took ownership of the activities, making their own arrangements for visits and lessons. The University's part was to provide the opportunities and the support infrastructure, and monitor the student teachers to ensure that they made the most of the project.

In summary, the project has allowed undergraduate student teachers who would not otherwise be able to experience working in school to do so in a supportive way. Combining the school experience with the support and construction of a portfolio of experience that could be shared with each other asynchronously through the on-line e-portfolio system has enhanced the student teachers' experience significantly. In addition, the on-going development of the project in close partnership with the host school, has allowed our student teachers to gain an excellent experience that has prepared them for their Professional Year significantly and allowed them to gain the skills of judging whether a school is "for them" or not. In addition, the value to our student teachers of bringing practical experience of theoretical degree work to the academic modules through seminar discussion and assignments work has been invaluable.

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