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Risk-taking in thought and in deed: towards a new conception of the development of professional knowledge and practice

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Aristotle insists that the development of knowledge and understanding begins with experience. Sense experience is, however, unreliable. This is illustrated by the difference between the naked eye perceiving things to be "crooked when seen in water and straight when seen out of it", and a scientific understanding of the phenomenon of refraction (Plato 602c-d). Drawing on this analogy, this paper explores the tensions between broad based higher education practices and the pragmatic, technicist initial professional development programmes prevalent in Western Society. Wain (2006: 37) suggests that institutions, fearing uncertainty and risk, are far from confident in their "knowingness" (Smith 2006: 5) but are constantly seeking reassurance through "the language of skills and competencies, of measurable outcomes and transparent transactions in their decisions" (Wain 2006: 39). This paper argues for the reclamation of an inductive approach to initial professional development as an alternative to the increasingly deductive discourse of regulation, audit and continuous improvement facing many novice professionals.

Introduction

The author's own professional and research context is that of teacher training for those seeking to work in the lifelong learning sector in England, but the arguments presented here may resonate with any discipline that seeks to inculcate the processes and products of their academic and professional field in the next generation. Whether this is achieved through the normative affordances of academia, or the facticity of initial professional development the debate promotes commonality, connectedness and dissonance. Two conceptual strands guide this discussion: Excellence, and Risk.

In the UK there is a growing use of the term 'excellence' in professional development discourse. The shared spaces between the novice and the discipline are more than ever mediated by several agents: the curriculum or canon, institutional mores and the language contained in contextualised regulatory documents. Each of these agents seeks to inculcate different processes and outcomes, and these are often in conflict both with each other, and the needs of the novice. Is it possible for novice professionals to risk the preference for sense experience in the pursuit of excellence?

Repeated practice is action that forms out of the processes and products of professional development. This is in turn derived from the dominant discourses located in many of the codified standards interpreted by the curriculum that seeks in the main to reproduce educational and professional practices through a syllabus that itself is bound up with these standards. The dialectical nature of this phenomenon is in itself a constraint to risk-taking. It follows from this that the capacity to acquire knowledge and skills about and for professional practice is at the same time afforded by and constrained and controlled by the nature and function of the curriculum. For Aristotle the word Arete meant virtue or excellence, and was described as the fulfilment of a defined purpose, "being the best you can be" (see Kraut 2010) There is an inextricable link between effectiveness and knowledge within this definition, where context defines the meaning. In addition the visible manifestation of excellence (the doing of excellence) cannot be divorced from being excellent. Personal biographies and previous professional knowledge, expertise and skills are bound to the will of institutional mores in many ways within modern professional

practices, so that sense experience is unlikely to extend beyond the general principles and routinised practices acceptable to the organisation.

The final strand takes what Beck calls “a risk-fraught system of employment” (Beck 1992:143) to highlight the specific conditions prevalent in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) teaching workforce in the UK. It argues that the very constraints caused by insecurity can lead to a resourcefulness derived from personal biographies rather than collective identities. For the novice professional there are risks on both sides of what is increasingly seen as the divide between the broad based curriculum and the organisational mores. The potentially transformative potential of a critical engagement with professional knowledge, so vital to growth, agency and autonomy can easily be frustrated by increasingly standards-driven organisational culture and insecure labour market conditions. Aspiring to “excellence” is lodged squarely within the foreword to the professional standards for teachers in the LLS (LLUK 2007: 1), and in the national improvement strategy document (LSIS 2009). Both illustrate the rhetoric behind attempts to professionalise LLS teachers through improvements in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (see Fryer 1997; Kennedy 1997). Becoming a reflective practitioner is now a stipulated requirement of the statutory standards, and is also claimed to be a means to continuous improvement (LLUK 2007:2). Ottesen (2007:33), however, characterises professional practice as “embedded in and emerging from activity” and “not ‘copies’ of the world to be pondered upon in individual minds”. This highlights the double bind of reflection as induction and “student teacher as performer” in a ready-made world. Is it possible, therefore, for developing teachers to prefer sense experience through reflective deliberation, or is this risk-taking only in thought, rather than in deed? This paper critiques the term

'excellence' from an Aristotelian perspective and explores the tensions in the time and space available to either adopt and apply evidence based teaching (EBT) or to prefer the emergence of excellence through practice. The paper provides a counterbalance to the effects of inspection regimes and the prevailing discourses of the pursuit of excellence in the LLS. It is argued that while trainee teachers are called upon "to provide a universally excellent, relevant and responsive service to the nation" (LSIS 2009), space should be made for the pursuit of excellence through risk-taking.

Several agents mediate the shared spaces between initial teacher education and trainee teachers' professional practice: the teacher educator, the workplace mentor, the organisation and the language contained in regulatory documents. Each of these agents seeks to inculcate different processes and outcomes, and these are often in conflict both with each other, and the needs of the trainee. Conflicts surface as a result of the temporality of the curriculum, the classroom experiences of the trainee teacher, the workplace arrangements for mentorship and support, and the dual identity of trainee teacher as novice or developing practitioner on the one hand (while being assessed by the teacher educator) and competent practitioner on the other (while being inspected by internal and external audit regimes). Knight and Saunders (1999:146) invoke Geertz and Weber, as they perceive these agents operating in a "web of competing and complimentary cultures" at one and the same time fragmented and cohesive. Webs are both invisible and visible, depending on their function and the positionality of the agents involved (the spider and the trapped, unsuspecting fly), and in this sense the opportunities for trainee teachers and their teacher educators to bring a variety of knowledge and experience with

them when they share these spaces, presents opportunities to observe and explore the extent to which initial teacher education prepares teachers as professional practitioners in what is increasingly seen to be a “ready made world”.

Aristotle on Excellence

An Aristotelian perspective frames excellence within inductive reasoning, and this is set against the prevailing deductive discourse of regulation and control. Repeated classroom practice is action in the workplace that forms out of the processes and products of professional development. This is in turn derived from the dominant discourses located in codified occupational standards interpreted by a teacher education curriculum. Further, standards based curricula seek in the main to reproduce educational and pedagogical practices through a syllabus that is broadly aligned with prescribed units of assessment. It follows from this that the capacity to acquire knowledge and skills about and for classroom practice is at the same time afforded by, constrained and controlled by the nature and function of ITE. The capacity of knowledge to be derived from pure thought independently of sense experience is still contested by philosophers and scientists, so a resolution will not be found in this discussion. Rather, the two opposing debates between naïve or scientific realism and inductive reference form two buffers, or parameters with which to frame the nature and processes of professional knowledge and practice for developing teachers.

For a trainee teacher to gain a situated understanding of her classroom practice she needs to be informed by general principles, to reflect on and interpret these principles within her own context and setting, and unfold from novice to expert as a

professional practitioner. In addition she needs to wrestle with language in regulatory frameworks that require her to strive for excellence in her classroom practice. She may preface her developing subject specific pedagogy towards an “end-state” development (Hirst and Peters 1970:54), or she may concentrate on broader, holistic methods of general instruction in order to achieve these goals. The first makes the achievement of the learner the driver of her development. It allows for external valuation, and can be measured using benchmarks (retention, attainment and success data); the second places herself at the centre, as she constructs her repertoire of pedagogic practices over time. Whilst it may seem tantamount to sacrilege not put the learner first the second seems to provide for a consideration of the self as potential.

For Aristotle the word Arete meant virtue or excellence, and was described as the fulfilment of a defined purpose, “being the best you can be”(see Kraut 2010) There is an inextricable link between effectiveness, and knowledge, and its use was relational, in that the context defined the meaning. In addition the visible manifestation of excellence (the doing of excellence) cannot be divorced from being excellent. For Aristotle then to strive for excellence is to become excellent (Kraut 2010). Of course there is a proviso here, and that is that to achieve excellence one needs resources at one’s disposal (what one might call “back-up”), and for Aristotle these acquisitions can be inherited and gained but also lost. The responsibility for acquiring, maintaining and developing these resources remains with the individual. How might this analogy work for a trainee teacher who pursues excellence? These resources may include subject knowledge and skills, repertoires of teaching methods, theories, models and frameworks to describe, reflect upon and interpret

practice, mentors, colleagues and more slippery resources such as confidence, resilience, creativity, artistry and expertise. In one context these resources happily collide in a manifestation of excellence, in another they are diminished, depleted, denied or impoverished, and the “being excellent” is undermined by the inability to “do excellence”.

Discourse on excellence

Dilthey (2002 in Makkreel 2011) was concerned with how our lived experiences are bound up within cultural traditions and organisational norms. His response to the long history of contrast between idealised and empiricist accounts of what constitutes reality include the contention that external organisations mediate individual interactions where "enduring causes bind the wills of many into a single whole" (Dilthey 1989, 94 in Makkreel 2011). I take this to mean that although understanding derives from direct experience rather than inference from general rules (i.e. is inductive) those very experiences are predetermined, funneled and routine (i.e. deduced from general principles). In this sense I conflate both Dilthey's idealist account of lived experience and Aristotle's empiricist notion of sense experience to observe how the cultural and norms of LLS organisations serve to inhibit agency by imposing experiences upon trainee teachers. To step outside and view the organisation dispassionately requires a reflexivity that is often denied to those both working and learning in the same organisation. Personal biographies and previous professional knowledge, expertise and skills are bound to the will of the employer so that sense experience is unlikely to extend beyond the general principles and routinised practices acceptable to the organization (see Iredale 2012).

To set Dilthey's stance on in the context of this paper a trainee teacher developing their practice solely in one organisation, which itself operates under a bounded regulatory system, will experience practice that is both funneled and mediated by norms and traditions. She may fall within the double bind of on the one hand not be able use sense experience for reflective deliberation and on the other hand performing without access to resources, either because they were never inherited, not available, or sadly lost in performativity. This may leave her capacity for embodiment of personal values limited and impoverished.

From an Aristotelian perspective we can discern here the relational nature of the striving for, and embodiment of excellence, and what Berger (1980: 51) describes as the biography of "I am". The resources marshalled by trainee teachers include the development of a repertoire of professional knowledge and practice derived from repeated classroom experiences, increased confidence and frameworks by which to reflect on experience.

Risk and safety

Allen and Henry (1997) discuss how perceived flexibility in the labour market translates into risk for those employees faced with a relationship based on contractualisation (Standing 1992 in Allen and Henry 1997). While their research is about the contract service industry it is their assessment of Beck's characterisation of employment risk that resonates with the experience of trainee teachers as they face "precarious forms of employment" (Allen and Henry 1997:181). Both employer and employee can view their contracted labour as flexible on the one hand, and as risky and uncertain on the other, but when people work in what Beck calls "a risk-

fraught system of employment” (Beck 1992:143) the very constraints caused by insecurity can lead to a resourcefulness derived from individual biographies rather than collective identities. Avis (2009) invokes Giddens (1998) framing the teaching workplace as a process of reflexive modernisation “where restructuring has become commonplace” and more alarmingly still where professionalism based on the legitimacy of pedagogical and curricular expertise has been rendered untenable and replaced with a conditional trust. (Avis 2009:245). For the trainee teacher there are risks on both sides of what is increasingly seen as the divide between the ITT curriculum and the workplace. The potentially transformative potential of a critical engagement with professional knowledge, so vital to growth, agency and autonomy is frustrated by current HE teacher education that is increasingly standards-driven and competency-based and outcomes driven, insecure labour market conditions.

Practical wisdom

Trainee teachers develop their professional knowledge and practice through attendance in class, and through repeated classroom teaching experiences and interactions with teachers (Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986; Shulman, 1986 in Kim and Hannafin 2008: 1837; Iredale 2012). According to Kim and Hannafin (2008: 1837) Trainee teachers participate in classroom practice by developing firstly a situated understanding of the concepts and principles surrounding teacher knowledge, secondly strategies for using these in a future situation and thirdly assimilating, accommodating and negotiating their shared beliefs, identities and values from the practices of a situated community (see Iredale 2012). All of this militates against any suggestion that ITT alone is a sufficient grounding for a novice teacher. Michael Eraut

identifies the first two or three years after qualifying as being the most influential to gain what he calls “the particular personalised pattern of practice that every professional requires” (Eraut 1994: 11). The recent creation by the government of the Institute for learning (IFL) and its requirement for teachers to gain professional status (QTLS) may still afford more opportunities for trainee teachers to survive the “overcrowded” (Eraut 1994) ITE curriculum and use it to gain what Aristotle terms *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. A recent phenomenon arising from affordances in Web 2.0 technology is that teaching is more and more seen to be embedded in practitioner research enquiry, rather than as a vehicle of the acquisition of reified knowledge. The knowledge is distributed, sometimes viral, open to all and free from packaging. The trainee teacher finds, or seeks out colleagues as expert resources acting alongside other resources based upon teacher networks, mentors, coaches and workplace morays. Aristotle was concerned mainly with excellence in individuals, through their thoughts and deeds, whereas the shared spaces and communities surrounding the trainee teacher provide for dispersed risk unless or until the trainee teacher is isolated in their performance.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the tensions between broad based higher educational practices prevalent in teacher education courses for the lifelong learning sector and the neo-liberalist tendency to regulate and audit professional development programmes for teachers through the language of skills and competences. It has considered the two conceptual strands of excellence and risk within the mediated spaces for developing teachers, contrasting the inductive, reflective Aristotelian

approach with the counter discourse of standards driven organisational cultures and insecure labour market conditions. In one sense the purpose is to reinforce the current tendency for all agents in the process of initial professional development to separate the 'being' of excellence from the 'doing' of excellence. Routinised practices then prevail, (see Iredale 2012) leaving not only the new teacher impoverished, but also the domain and ultimately the learner experience. In another sense the paper attempts to reclaim the territory of excellence as embodied

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