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The Trainee now standing: notions of individual “otherness” in a performative place.

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Abstract

This paper draws on findings from a longitudinal study of 101 part-time final year trainee teachers attending a Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) teacher education course at a new university in the North of England. Provoked by an interest in trainee teachers' notions of what is educationally desirable in their subject specialisms and contexts, the study spanned the 2010-11 academic year and works within deconstructive paradigms to further examine participants' declared philosophies and to promote new directions in educational practice in the sector. In doing so, through analysis of the place and use of language in both trainee teachers'/respondents' and the teacher educator's/researcher's reflective and reflexive spaces, this paper considers the twin notions of sameness and otherness in respondents' dispositions and argues for critical and careful consideration of how language is used and interpreted by teacher educators as they seek to develop professional knowledge and practice in the sector.

Introduction

The study has already examined a small sample of trainees' reactions to post-teaching observation dialogue and potential against the juxtaposition of emancipatory education and the neo-liberalist agenda that currently pervades the sector in England (Rushton, forthcoming). Here, four of the small sample of five participants from the larger study felt constrained when emancipatory potential was introduced to the post-observation dialogue and gave a sense of preferring not to think of their teaching in critical and possibilitarian ways, a selective mutism which I argued as being born from a fear of wider cultural and institutional factors and which seem to be the “norm” also in the wider sample. Yet, the fifth respondent in the sample (Samia) challenged some of the institutional barriers which constrained both her pedagogical approach and the potential for learning under her tutelage, an emancipatory endeavour that was singularly at odds with the rest of the sample and which deserves consideration in this paper as a notion of “otherness” in her cohort, although not generally in the sector. Specifically, this paper seeks not so much to examine otherness or sameness in trainees' language and dialogue as polarities, but to theoretically consider what might be happening between trainees and I when both notions are brought together as a reflexive discourse against the hegemonic backdrop of the sector, particularly when invoking a dialogue of pedagogical risk-taking.

Literature review.

Dominant discourses avoid “Otherness”, otherness being that which is not only subtle and hidden but, as Cole (2008: 22) suggests:

...doesn't fit in with what was being framed in the first place; in education the normative concerns are the narrative forms of conformity, regulation and control that exclude otherness.

It is the educational concern of both the post-structuralist and the critical theorist to deconstruct the master or dominant narratives or discourses at work in the sector and to explore how language, and here I offer reflective practices into the mix, speaks of identity. Yet this is no easy reconciliation since there are tensions in writing about oneself or another where language, being a socially constructed concept, is constantly and critically in play or movement. Whilst the theoretical standpoints of both philosophical perspectives have their separate traditions, there is a recent literature (Burbules, 2000; Blumenfeld-Jones,

2004; Gur Ze'ev, 2005; et al.) which suggests that both paradigms share a good deal of common ground, a commonality which, I suggest, might be embraced in order to advance a counter-hegemonic structure for teacher educators and trainee teachers in the sector which offers something by way of useful knowledge and praxis.

Atkinson (2004), working with a similar sample from a different context, suggests that reflective and discursive perspectives are useful interrogatory tools for beginning to examine emancipatory projects against the idealised rhetoric of the professional standards (LLUK, 2005) which drive trainee teacher competence in the English system. Specifically, he challenges the governmental assumption that the trainee teacher be able to adopt a subjectivity that can both *look outward toward the world and inward towards the self* (p. 381) and makes an interesting and robust case for trainees substituting fantasy for rational thought when they feel unable to be subjective. Here, he draws on Carr & Kemmis' (1986) work which suggests a taxonomy of three levels of reflective practice which offer a framework for conceptualising trainees' reflective accounts, and to a lesser extent their knowledge, through their use of language where:

Reflective practice is a basic level of rational, hermeneutic practice to evaluate one's classroom practice.

Reflexive practice also includes considering institutional factors and personal value systems (which I will refer to later as "goods" [Higgins, 2011]).

Critical reflection (after Elliott, 1993) is a further development including interrogation of the particular nuances at work in the context, for example grand narratives and power relations.

It is important to note that trainee teachers, whose average age upon entering the sector is 37 years (Fazaeli, 2010), bring with them a set of values and histories gleaned from a myriad of life experiences and which inform that which is "good", or educationally desirable, in their subject specialisms and contexts – an individualised set of dispositions that the sector employers seem keen to embrace as they scour business, industry and the uniformed services for new teaching stock. Yet here we are immediately at the crux of what is, I suspect, one of the uncertainties for the trainee teacher. Not only are they unsure about what can be said, by whom and when, they are equally unsure about what constitutes morality and ethics in their context and/or organisation. Like the grand narratives of quality, equality, diversity and inclusiveness, et al., trainees, I suggest, "travel with the herd" whilst trying to conceptualise and contextualise what they mean. Further, trainees are finding themselves suddenly having to question their own "goods" and notions of what makes for morality in their small space whilst juggling a cultural, societal or institutional (i.e. normative) notion of morality that is constantly unfolding and developing as they become enculturated into their employing organisations – strangers in a strange land.

Ball (2003: 215), I think, recognises this when he argues that there is little room in the modern, performative educational structures for personal values and individual identities and histories in the Neo-liberalist LLS:

Performativity, it is argued, is a new mode of state regulation which makes it possible to govern in an 'advanced liberal' way. It requires individual practitioners to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations. To set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation. The new performative worker is a promiscuous self, an enterprising self, with a passion for excellence.

This is a political perspective that echoes one of the central emancipatory themes of Freire's work (2005: 129) where he announces:

Let's repeat, then, that the educator is a politician. In consequence, it is absolutely necessary that educators act in a way consistent with their choice – which is political – and furthermore that educators be ever more scientifically competent, which teaches

them how important it is to know the concrete world in which their students live, the culture in which their students' language, syntax, semantics, and action are found in action, in which certain habits, likes, beliefs, fears, desires are formed that are not necessarily easily accepted in the teachers' own worlds.

Thus, in seeking to “know the trainee teacher” and the small space of their contexts, the barriers that form their boundaries require lifting, if only momentarily and in this paper, in order to reveal some of the deeply embedded processes which exclude otherness and which might encourage an alternative way of being.

One of the major difficulties I face is the realisation that language and dialogue fail in many ways. For example, the selective mutism or refusal to know that I encountered in the sample where trainees are uncertain about what can be said when, where and by whom; that some things cannot be made visible through language (reading a reflective account of a session never seems to give me a clear sense of having been there); trainees (and I) often cannot articulate what we mean, therefore some things, like the origins of individual dispositions, either get left behind or remain unexamined and we can be tempted to fill in the gaps through assumption or extrapolating meanings from elsewhere; consequently, our own reflexivity reaches “early” limits when data is incomplete; there are myriad ways of reading, and being read, in discursive and dialogic structures; and the professional standards for teachers in the sector (LLUK, 2005) amount to a set of centrally devised, improvement focused competence statements that fail to capture the artistry and dynamics of teaching and learning in, I argue, any context. This is particularly so when attempting to understand difference or “otherness” where there are inherent tensions even in what constitutes the “norm”. Burbules (2000: 264) echoes these sentiments as:

The power of such social processes (classroom discourses in communities of practice) may restrict lines of enquiry, distort dialogical interactions, and silence perspectives in ways that conflict with the explicit purposes of education.

He does not say what he perceives those purposes to be, although he earlier mentioned *altruism* (p. 256) as being a goal of universality, which I understand to apply to both teacher and learner. However, I am working with the principle that, as a teacher educator, one of my purposes should be to develop trainee teachers' practice as an emancipatory endeavour, or even as a liberating approach to pedagogy, whereby they develop the confidence to step outside a narrow blend of tried and trusted pedagogical strategies and try unconventional or “risky” approaches to invigorating learning in their contexts. In echoing this sentiment and exhorting teacher educators to at least try to move trainees' practice forward, Freire (2005: 125) positions the emancipatory endeavour alongside the notion of goods and values as:

The importance of the identity of each one of us as an agent, educator or learner, of the educational practice is clear, as is the importance of our identity as a product of what we inherit and what we acquire. At times in this relationship, what we acquire ideologically in our social and cultural experiences of class interferes vigorously in the hereditary structures through the power of interests, of emotions, feelings, and desires, of what one usually calls “the strength of the heart”.

Discussion

Firstly, when engaging trainee teachers in post-teaching observation dialogue I am susceptible to falling into the trap of assuming that they are autonomous enough to have the ability to adopt their own reflective, reflexive or critical interrogatory position on their teaching practice. As Atkinson (2004) suggested, trainee teachers cannot form subjectivity through that which is unconscious or imaginary, a notion that sits well with the small study (Rushton, forthcoming) where trainees seemed wary and unsure of the political and ideological structures that govern both their organisations and the fields in which they operate, structures that often seem at odds with trainees' rationality. I have been mindful that I have not helped them with this and have, therefore, adopted a more questioning perspective in my role as their teacher educator this year by encouraging them to address the questions that their performative contexts raise rather than attempting to answer them. These written questions or "points of potential" left on the TP2 (observation feedback form) offer a social means of disrupting the symbolic and imaginary inconsistencies and when trainees reflexively respond to them as possibilitarian questions on form TP3 (their reflective journal), I find that language fails yet again because some things get either left behind or unexplored or the written word does not fully articulate their feelings or thoughts. Thus, whilst trainees in the sample give a sense of being both reflective and reflexive practitioners, it is understandable that their written accounts seem to balk at examining dominant voices through higher order critical reflection.

Secondly, although structuralist, there is something Lacanian (1979) here where the trainee never fully knows him or herself, but only as a subject of the symbolic or imaginary, and which offers another lens through which to examine their practice. In Lacanian terms then, Samia's problem with the mobile 'phones (the Real of teaching) can be taken as an interruption of the symbolic order of teaching although our subsequent dialogue and her risk-taking efforts to turn it into a pedagogical strength could not be accurately captured in her TP3. I am implicit in this whenever I complete a TP2 since written feedback and commentary of an observed session represents the trainee not as a being but as an individual according to signifiers embodied in the formulaic and instrumental professional standards that are ostensibly teacher-led. So, whilst TP2 is a political form of surveillance which both eludes the "Real" and the "Other" whilst maintaining the dominant discourse, reflective practice (in the TP3), being one of the grand narratives of ITE programmes, seeks answers to the Real through the symbolic although the answers are, seemingly, always lacking.

Thirdly, and also from a Lacanian perspective, Samia is seen by me in the symbolic structure of the teacher, yet sees herself in the duality of the learner when discussing the session during the break, and again as a teacher when provoked to explore potential solutions. Subsequently, when she approached the head teacher for permission to have the students use their mobile 'phones as resources, she was then operating within the structures of the neo-liberal agenda which informs and policies both the organisation and the sector; a further structure concerned with resources; an institutional structure; and a cultural structure. This cannot be easy for her – being positioned within multiple normative structures of meaning whilst being provoked to critically reflect her way out of them. Little wonder that the others opted for selective mutism that marked reflexivity as the boundaries of their interrogatory positions. Alternatively, I suggest that Samia may have been driven by forces which compelled her to explore her class out of necessity, to confront disruptive and energy-sapping behaviours from her students in order to promote more equitable and socially just sessions for her students and herself. If this is correct then I offer the notion that, as a result of emancipatory and critical discourse, Samia possibly adopted either the Habermasian (1981) project of language and rationality or revealed a (seemingly rare) critical reflective practice. Then again, and equally Habermasian, she may have been seeking to negotiate her way out of dialogue through enabling a consensus that "satisfies the observer and gets him out of the building".

Fourthly, whilst Samia obtained the necessary permissions and turned a pedagogical problem into an embedded strength, the reflective journal failed to capture the enormity of what she and her students achieved as a result – the "other" cannot, it seems, be captured by language. I offer this as an example of where I feel the critical or emancipatory project falters: when critical analysis of a situation or discourse can examine a trainee's dispositions and contextual tension, but it does not lead to a truth of a situation; where

a language of potential can be grasped and embraced as a pedagogical good, yet still makes assumptions regarding who knows what; where dominant voices are maintained because those in positions of power do not hear of the success stories that are the (possibly) reality of the sector in trainees' small spaces. Perhaps Burbules (2000: 270) was correct when he posited the notion that, *if one believed truly that such encounters (dialogue) always fail, it is unclear what meaning "education" could ever have.* A cursory glance at the professional standards might lead a reader to question the kind of education intended for the sector yet, paradoxically, the dialogue with Samia invigorated subsequent teaching and learning that the same reader-turned-observer might celebrate as a small victory over a dysfunctional system.

Fifthly, from my own perspective, there are no certainties here and neither trainees nor I can know a future. I concede that I can never fully know them since they seem to adopt what Atkinson (2004: 386) calls, *imaginary identifications of self and other* as part of the process of becoming, yet I can at least try as Freire (2005) and Trifonas (2000) et al. urge. In attempting to examine trainee teachers' dispositions, goods and the potential for emancipatory projects, I am mindful that I position and construct them in certain ways – not an easy reconciliation as I am also a teacher, learner and researcher – multiple positions where there are many gaps that call to be explored while I also seek to construct myself. For example, when I ask any trainee a question relating to what I have observed in their class, I am equally guilty of adopting a stance harboured in the same normative framework that I seek to critique.

Likewise, when engaging trainees in dialogue I am invading their small space and, possibly, threatening to take away their sense of independence and autonomy, if they have any. Yet there is a further tension here in that Neo-liberalism shifts responsibility from the state to the individual, as Ball (2003, op. cit.) implies that it does, and I could also be accused of perpetuating the same slippery, faceless, dominant narrative.

Finally, for the moment, there is a hanging question regarding what time does to do my recollection and reflection on the many dialogic exchanges over the last year. On one hand I can lose the immediacy and strength of a discussion which explores both problems and prospects, yet on the other hand can dwell on events in critical reflection or, as I have begun to do each time, construct my own hypothetical responses as if the questions for potential had been handed to me – a reflexive exercise that should be enhancing my own teaching practice.

Conclusion

I am asking difficult questions of uncertain students and teachers in dark times and, consequently, it is difficult to conclude these discussions at this moment in time because they are contingent, interpellatory and constantly being reconfigured. However, I have tried to give a sense of some of the ways in which teacher educators in the English LLS can begin to reflect on their practice, in its many and varied forms, and consider the ways in which both their own and their trainees' language is used and interpreted. Similarly, I have suggested that teacher educators can give trainee teachers in a difficult and neglected sector a small voice, but a voice nonetheless. The difficulty with the critical or emancipatory project, I suggest, comes with giving "Otherness" a voice but we owe it to trainee teachers and their students to at least try.

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