Promoting teacher–learner autonomy through and beyond initial language teacher education

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Context

With the growing international market for pre-experience MA in ELT/TESOL programmes, a key curriculum design issue is how to help students develop as learners of teaching through and beyond their formal academic studies. We report here on our attempts at the University of Warwick to address this issue, and consider wider implications for research and practice in initial language teacher education. At the Centre for Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick, we run a suite of MA programmes for English language teaching professionals from around the world. Most of these courses are for students with prior teaching experience, but our MA in English Language Studies and Methods (ELSM) programme is designed for students with less than two years' experience and, in fact, the majority enrol straight after completing their undergraduate studies in their home countries.

Promoting teacher–learner autonomy

Within the confines of an academic MA programme, we are not really in a position to develop students' practical teaching skills in the way that a pre-service teacher training course with teaching practicum can do. Instead, our strategy has been to develop our students' autonomy as learners of teaching – that is, to develop TEACHER–LEARNER AUTONOMY. By this we mean fostering our students' ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for themselves as teachers, and their ability to evaluate and continuously develop their teaching into the future (see Smith 2000).

We have sought to promote teacher–learner autonomy by engaging students in a process of reflective practice and learning through an action research cycle during the spring term (January to March). In pairs, students plan an English lesson, teach it to a group of their peers, and then evaluate it on the basis of feedback from peers, discussion with their tutor, and analysis of a video and audio recording of their lesson. Based on this evaluation, students each identify a particular aspect of their teaching they would like to improve. They go on to investigate this research area using a variety of methods as well as reading relevant academic and professional literature in their topic area. Drawing on insights from their research, students then plan how to improve their lesson, teach it again and evaluate their

second lesson. The whole cycle thus models the process of action research. Throughout this process, students also write a conventionally-assessed 6,000-word assignment, but in stages corresponding to the successive stages of the action research cycle, and concluding with a substantial piece of reflective writing (1,500 words) in which they evaluate what they have learnt for themselves and what they will take from this action research experience into their future professional practice and development as teachers.

As an integral part of our own reflective practice, we have researched the effectiveness of this course design, using conventional course evaluation mechanisms as well as tools of inquiry such as I-statement analysis of students' reflective writing and repertory grid techniques to explore students' personal constructs. Our research has shown empirical evidence of growth in teacher–learner autonomy among our students through this action research cycle (Smith et al. 2003; Brown, Smith & Ushioda 2007; Smith & Erdoğan 2008).

Re-engaging former students through an online community

Recently, we have extended our research to explore teacher–learner autonomy beyond the MA programme as students graduate and begin their teaching careers. We secured funding for a project to set up a dedicated social networking site for current and former MA students. We used a NING platform (http://www.ning.com/), which is a free Java-based platform that enables people to set up their own online social networks for a specific membership base, with many of the tools, features and visual feel of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, including personalised pages, blogging, live chat, forums and the creation of sub-groups. A specific feature we included was vodcasting – that is, uploading brief video podcasts reporting on current news and activities in our Centre, as well as insights from experts in the ELT field, as a way of re-engaging alumni with their former academic learning base at Warwick, and with issues of theory and research in relation to practice. Among vodcast material we made available were digests of talks given at Warwick University by Dick Allwright on exploratory practice and by Fauzia Shamim on teaching and researching in large classes, as well as an interview with Dave and Jane Willis (Willis-ELT) about task-based teaching.

The main project phase spanned the period from 1 August 2008 to 31 July 2009. Following initial planning, we launched the project in mid-October 2008 by emailing former students (around 200) dating back to the year 2000 and inviting them to join our online community. Over the twelve-month project period, our total membership was 97 former students spanning eight successive year groups (2000–2001 to 2007–2008), 15 students enrolled in our MA during the project year 2008–2009, and 17 prospective students due to begin their MA studies with us from October 2009. In short, there were 129 members in total, based in 17 countries from Albania to the US, with the largest group (36%) in China. The online community thus connects three distinct 'generations' of students – former students, current students, future students – and four tutors and a research assistant at Warwick.

Aside from posting vodcasts, we encouraged alumni to blog their teaching experiences, problems and insights, and we created professional interest groups based on current MA

students' action research projects and invited discussions around these topics. We also encouraged prospective students to pose questions to current and former students about their learning and teaching experiences. To round off the project year, we organised a live online conference on 9 July 2009 on the theme of 'Teaching in difficult circumstances and large classes' involving all three generations of students, tutors and guest participation by Fauzia Shamim (University of Karachi).

Evaluative and research outcomes so far

In the broad terms of our goals of establishing a visible and shared sense of community among past, current and future students and of reconnecting with former students, we believe that this kind of online network is effective. Indicators of success include membership size (roughly half of former students whom we tried to contact have joined); overwhelmingly positive feedback and responses from those who have joined; possible impact on MA recruitment through integrating prospective students into the online community (MA recruitment saw a threefold increase in the year following the project period, though many other factors may also have contributed).

A key research issue for us is whether an online community of this kind can help support and re-engage alumni in the kinds of reflective learning skills and practices they developed while they were with us as students. Our findings so far suggest that much depends on how former students choose to exploit the opportunities and affordances provided by the online community. CJ, for example, graduated in 2006 and is now an English teacher in Taiwan. She has been the most active member of our online community, who has reported in detail on her teaching experiences and practices, personalised her page with a link to her own teacher's blog, uploaded pictures of her students' work and some of her teaching materials, and posted vodcasts of her students doing presentations and of her personal reflections on her professional development. All of these contributions to our online community have attracted considerable interest among current and prospective MA students and prompted various interactions revolving around classroom practices, teaching experiences and career development. Analysis of CJ's case suggests that, through her active participation in our online community, she has been enabled to share and thus make explicit to herself as well as to others what she has learnt and how she has developed as a teacher; how she has built on the insights and experiences she gained during her MA work; and how she is continuing to learn and explore. The alumni community gives her a forum in which to share her experiences and reflections and also to engage in 'mentoring' type interactions with an upcoming generation of learner teachers, thus perhaps consolidating her own growing sense of professional expertise. Regarding this sense of growth and changing relational perspective, moreover, CJ has also shown her autonomy by teaching us how to exploit our website to best effect. By this we mean that, through the way in which she has personalised her page and added web-links and materials related to her teaching, we too have learnt how this kind of online community may be used to support her ongoing professional development and that of others.

Conclusions

In her analysis of the sociocultural turn in the human sciences and its challenges for second language teacher education, Johnson (2006: 239) notes how language teacher learning is viewed as 'emerging out of and through experiences in social contexts', whether as learners in classrooms and schools, participants in teacher education programmes, or later as teachers in specific sociocultural and professional settings. As she argues, the notions that teacher learning is situated in physical and social contexts, is emergent, and is distributed across persons, tools and activities, challenge language teacher education to redraw the boundaries that have typically defined professional development. In the case of INITIAL language teacher education, our ongoing research suggests that this process of redrawing the boundaries of professional development may well entail 'stretching' the virtual boundaries of the teachers' academic learning base to offer possibilities for continued contact, support and engagement beyond their MA studies. Such possibilities may serve as a means of encouraging reflection on and helping to make transparent their personal developmental trajectories and changing relational perspectives as they grow in experience as teachers. In this sense, our online community might be said to function as a kind of interim space or site for teacher learning – one that is established by and is directly connected with beginning teachers' former academic learning base, yet has the potential to be shaped and exploited by those teachers themselves in ways that meet their needs and can help to sustain their ongoing professional development. In short, such an online community can help support their AUTONOMY as learners of teaching through and beyond their MA studies.

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