



articles

teacher development

TRAINING, DEVELOPMENT AND HOW TEACHERS LEARN

By Katie Head

Very little of the knowledge and skill that experienced teachers use when they go about their day-to-day practice is learned in formal training. The kinds of answers that teachers find to the questions and problems that they encounter in the classroom are far more likely to drive from their own developing sense of 'knowing what to do' and sharing with supportive colleagues who know the situation, than with training or academic study. Of course, training is a very necessary preparation for teaching. It provides models of good practice and introductions to techniques, materials and the accumulated expertise of others, which are an essential starting point for the inexperienced teacher starting out on a career. Added to this, as techniques, materials and methods change, there is an ongoing need for training which keeps teachers up-to-date and informed about the changing demands of their profession.

Some would include this kind of training within the compass of what is called 'teacher development'. Some may be justified in doing so. But training is not developmental unless the trainee makes it so. Development does not have to do with the acquisition of knowledge so much as with a questioning attitude, an intention to open the mind to every situation as an opportunity to learn, to reassess existing habits and explore alternative ways of doing things. In this sense, it is complementary to but separate from training. I set the agenda for my own development and, therefore, I can choose whether or not to embrace the ideas presented on a training course, and whether or not to integrate them into the way of teaching that makes me the teacher I am.

I have always liked Adrian Underhill's description of the 'developing teacher' as one who keeps himself or herself *'on the same side of the learning fence as the students'*. In this phrase he seems to me to capture the excitement of being in a profession where there is always something new to learn, and of that learning taking place in the midst of the routine of work, in the school and alongside my learners and colleagues. It also reminds me that the classroom does not have to be a 'them and me' sort of a place, in which I have to know everything in order to be able to teach; but that on the contrary, it is a place where we all learn together, teacher and learners, in a shared enterprise of questioning and discovery.

The kind of teacher learning that can happen in this way, requires a basis of self-confidence in which I am not afraid

to reassess established beliefs and patterns of behaviour or to open up feedback channels by which students and colleagues can criticise and comment on my effectiveness as a teacher. In order to explore questions such as *"How can I become the kind of teacher I would really like to be?"* *"What stops me from being this kind of teacher?"* *"How do I appear to my learners and how can I know that they are really learning what I think they are learning?"* I draw on sources of information from my own past and present experience as well as what others can tell me about my teaching. As a learner myself, for example, I had teachers who impressed me as 'good' or 'bad', who inspired or bored me. These 'ghosts' from the past are likely to evoke echoes in my own teaching and attitude to my learners. Try calling to mind a teacher from your own past. See what memories and feelings are aroused; and then consider whether you see anything of this teacher in your own teaching.



In a similar way, through eliciting feedback from my learners (and from other colleagues who teach the class), I become aware of the dynamics of process operating in the classroom, of the learners' expectations and feelings about the content of the lesson I am teaching, and of the kinds of changes that are needed. This information from others completes the picture of myself as a teacher which I cannot see fully for myself, and balances my own over-subjective view of my performance and capabilities. It enables me either to confirm or to deny that what I think is happening - is really happening - when I am teaching, and to begin to consider alternative ways of doing things. With this information I can decide what questions I need to concern myself with in order to become a better teacher, and what



articles

processes of investigation might lead me to resolve them satisfactorily.

As Donald Freeman and others have pointed out, teachers possess an immense amount of knowledge and skill in order to do what they do. And since this knowledge is for the most part not acquired through formal training, it follows that experience, through trial and error, accounts for most of what we know and that we are largely unaware of what exactly this knowledge is. This is why, when asked to explain in principle how a particular classroom situation or problem should be dealt with, teachers so often find it hard to articulate a response despite knowing instinctively the appropriate way to act in such a situation, should it arise during one of their lessons. As a result, the knowledge we have is often devalued and considered too imprecise to be of general interest. Nevertheless, this instinctive knowledge of what to do in what Donald Schön calls 'situations of unavoidable uncertainty' is the most important source material for teachers' own professional learning and development. I progress to deeper understanding of my practice and the beliefs that lie behind it by recovering into conscious awareness the knowledge and behaviour that have become automatised through years of experience. I develop and move forward in my professional thinking by examining this knowledge and behaviour, by making explicit the underlying beliefs and attitudes exemplified in my existing practice, and by then asking how much of it is really serving me well, and how much is, in fact, acting as a block to the kinds of change that would liberate me from old habits and allow me to move on.

The steps I can take to develop this kind of awareness are such as I have indicated above. Information from my own past and present experience, together with that provided by learners and colleagues, can be accessed and examined. Through this process of conscious reflection on practice, some starting points for desirable personal change will emerge.

At the behavioural level, change is an easy concept to put into practice. John Fanselow wrote a book called *Breaking Rules* in which he advocates deliberately breaking some of the 'rules' that have become ingrained in our teaching, and noticing what happens. But this is not likely to be enough to move me on in any significant way. If I am to gain significantly in my development as a teacher from experimenting with alternative ways of doing things, it is important to reflect on how and why I come to prefer one choice to another. If a behaviour or technique is not working well for me, it is probably because at a deeper level I have some doubts and anxieties about its validity in terms of

teacher development

my own set of values and beliefs about teaching. There are two ways of resolving this dissonance: either abandoning the technique and holding on to my existing beliefs, or taking up the challenge to re-examine those beliefs and risk the possibility that I might need to change them.

We sometimes convince ourselves that there is nothing we can change in our teaching situation, and that everything that creates problems for us is outside our control. However, this is rarely true. We may not be able to change external structures and regulations, pay and working conditions, but we can be responsible for the way we feel and act in relation to our work. It is important to differentiate clearly between those things we can change and those we cannot; and then not to waste energy on the latter.

Any problem, puzzle or question arising from my own experience and that of my learners can provide a starting-point for exploration and new professional learning. To the extent that it motivates change which deepens my personal understanding of myself as a teacher and learner, I am developing myself both personally and professionally, and (I would hazard) becoming a better and more interesting teacher.

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