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"Developing a Professional Learning Academy"

Introduction

This paper examines the nature of 'professional conversation' conducted in the context of the online 'tutor groups' which form the heart of the new Master of Teaching (MTcg) programme at the Institute of Education, University of London (Daly, Lambert Pachler 2002). This innovative, 'practice-based' degree is specifically designed to support and enhance early professional learning of primary and secondary teachers in London. It has attracted the support of the government in its current White Paper "Achieving Success" as a means to develop newly qualified teachers (NQTs) capacities in challenging circumstances *(para 6.12), and in its current (pilot) year has recruited 50 NQTs. What is exciting is the way 'learning from each other' has provided the means to create rich, experience-based learning communities, which are able to interact with wider perspectives, gained from the literature and research.

The paper is structured as follows.

♦ It briefly outlines the current contexts regarding teacher retention and suggests that the MTcg (www.ioe.ac.uk/mtcg) is timely in its content, design and pedagogy to possibly achieve improved retention and development of newly qualified teachers.

♦ It examines the 'Understanding Teaching' module, explaining the structure, rationale and the model of online tasks that has developed.

♦ By using 'case study' examples from one tutor group of their work in this module it discusses and analyses their development as new teachers. This section focuses on the nature and content of these 'professional conversations' in an online environment.

♦ It attempts a tentative conclusion of progress with using an online environment in one module during the 'pilot' year of the MTcg.

The Context: Teacher recruitment and retention, issues.

The UK over the last five years has seen a well-publicised teacher shortage. One issue is the need to encourage new entrants to the profession, which to a certain extent Government policy has been

successful in addressing via training salaries and other enticements. Perhaps the more important issue is the need to retain and develop these new entrants. Currently the percentage of teachers that qualify but either do not teach or leave in the first three years of work is as high as 50% (Smithers, 2002). Also large numbers (up to 59%) of teachers are over 40 years old (OECD 1998). This combination of a relatively 'old' profession approaching retirement and high wastage within the younger age profile means there is a real danger of the profession not renewing itself. The reasons behind this retention problem are historic, multi-faceted and complex possibly including UK teachers feeling undervalued with ever increasingly workloads (Smithers, 2002).

The Master of Teaching

The MTcg is a timely and innovative programme, which specifically focuses on the development of teachers in the challenging early phase of their teaching careers. The Institute of Education course primarily attracts recruits from the London area, which has seen higher than average teacher turnover and wastage. In part the course can possibly address the problem of teacher retention and of as much importance perhaps shape future educational 'leaders'.

It aims to provide a framework of 'support for talented new teachers in urban schools' (DfES 2001: para 6.12). It enables and encourages high level professional learning to take place and accredits this at Masters level through the use of portfolio assessments (containing a number of 'evidence studies'), nurturing an enquiry approach to 'understanding teaching' and raising levels of 'research literacy' and practitioner research capacity. It is well recognised that the early years of teaching are particularly hard work and potentially stressful which undoubtedly contributes to the retention problems during this phase. The tendency can be for teachers to follow a survivalist approach and indeed for schools and the wider profession to actively promote this (Tickle 2000). The MTcg is designed to counter this, to provide deep engagement with teaching and to develop their interest and enthusiasm for their own and their students learning. Though developed entirely independently, it demonstrates a number of similarities, at least in ethos and intention, to the 'professional masters' programme for teachers reported by Selke (2002) in the USA. The methodological innovation of the MTcg lies in the formation of what we have called the 'professional learning academy', which has at its heart a number of linked online learning communities (in effect MTcg tutor groups) consisting of programme 'participants' from up

to 15 schools, a university tutor and in time (we hope), other personnel who share an interest in early professional learning and the development of scholarly teaching in the participants' schools.

In essence, the MTcg requires participants to provide public accounts of several aspects of teaching – the establishment of goals, the management of learning environments, the design of materials, the evaluation of outcomes, the assessment of learning – all of which receive critical review from peers and tutor. Much effort is expended on asking and refining good questions and pursuing investigations and enquiries. This is certainly designed to provide the basis for productive professional conversations across the 'academy', but perhaps more fundamentally to engender a sense of responsibility in each participant and the acceptance that the source for their professional learning (and of meaningful professional knowledge creation) lies in their classrooms.

The Understanding Teaching module

This section will look specifically at the *Understanding Teaching* module, which has at its core a series of online tasks. These tasks attempt to encourage discourse of knowledge building qualities, we have developed for the MTcg what in Rüschoff and Ritter's words might be called a 'template-based' approach to learning about teaching which is not dissimilar to Ausubel's notion of 'advanced organisers'. Rüschoff and Ritter (2001: 226) rightly posit that appropriate tasks, which engage learners in the construction of something shareable and which make both the content of requisite knowledge, skills and understanding as well as the process of learning transparent, are key cognitive tools. For Rüschoff and Ritter (2001: 228) learning templates encourage the 'on-the-fly' recording of thoughts and impressions whilst examining learning materials and they provide a framework for information gathering, the stimulation of recall of prior knowledge and the guiding of knowledge construction. One of the 'templates' specifically models the 'case in point' methodology developed by Lee Shulman (Shulman, 1996).

The learning templates used by the MTcg are best seen as problem solving in orientation, encouraging MTcg participants to 'go meta' about their teaching (see also Hutchings and Shulman 1999: 12). The *Understanding Teaching* module is constructed around a series of so-called online discussions (see figure 1).

	Online discussion/task
1	Starter task
2	Classroom interactions
3	Learning, progression and achievement
4	Evaluating teaching
5	Developing pedagogy

Figure 1: Online discussions

Each of these discussions, accessible to participants on the password-protected MTcg website, follows a pattern (cf. learning template), which has been developed by the team of course tutors: an opening page/section delineates briefly the aims, purpose and context of the discussion within the module in which it is located. From this, participants can move either to the task itself or to a background paper written specifically by course tutors drawing on key literature in the field and listing carefully selected, recommended background reading. The task usually offers a choice of questions as well as links to two or three digitised core readings. Participants are encouraged to read the background paper before they choose the task and to engage with the digitised readings before composing their response to the task (usually 300-500 words) by a specific date. In a further step, they are required to submit at least one further posting by a specified date per online discussion in response to the contributions made by their peers. Usually the task page also offers a sample response authored by a course tutor as well as a sample follow-up posting for exemplification. Course tutors then summarise participants' contributions and, thereby, 'close' the discussion.

Unlike a traditional MA module, experienced in the form of a short course and rarely extending over more than 10 weeks, the *Understanding Teaching* module is steered or moderated by a tutor over a period occupying the best part of an academic year.

In the *Understanding Teaching* module there were five of these online tasks between September and June along with limited (but crucial) opportunities for face to face (f2f) tutor group work (see figure 2).

Timing/Tasks	Programme/Module activity
September	Inaugural evening (f2f)
1	Starter task
November	Saturday conference (f2f)
2	Classroom interactions
3	Learning, progression and achievement
February	Twilight tutor group meeting (f2f)
4	Evaluating teaching
5	Developing pedagogy
June	Saturday conference (f2f)

Figure 2: Timing of online discussions/tasks

The content, focus and timing of these tasks have been carefully designed by the course team to be relevant and pertinent to the issues Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) encounter in their schools and classrooms.

What happened in practice?

This section will use extracts of contributions to a selection of the online tasks by one tutor group to tentatively analyse the following questions:
♦ how successful have participants been in fostering critical engagement with key aspects of their teaching?
♦ how significant is online interaction and discourse in achieving this engagement?
♦ what form of pedagogic relationships seem to be evolving through the MTcg?

The initial 'starter' task had the dual aim of getting everybody connected to the electronic tutor group and to use the e-group to share specific experiences they had encountered in their teaching so far. Salmon (2000) suggests a five-stage model, which is very useful, when setting up and running online learning groups especially when made up of individuals with a variety of ICT skills. The model stresses the importance of accessible appropriate technical support throughout. The stages are as follows:
♦ Access and motivation
♦ Online socialisation
♦ Information exchange

♦ Knowledge construction
♦ Development

The 'starter' task provided an opportunity for the achieving the first three stages. The task may have been extended beyond these stages, for although at an embryonic moment, several participants raised important issues, which would re-surface in later discussions at a knowledge construction level. For example one teacher shared with the group her concern about the lack of motivation of a particular student in her class. This elicited the following response from a fellow tutee.

> *(Laura)* [1] *I believe the schools careers service, general attitude towards expectations and the parents home background plays a huge part in the aspirations of students. Is there anything there, which you could tap into to motivate him? e.g. a higher education open day.*
> *It might be useful to break down parts of your course into smaller targets to which he can see a short term goal that he is willing to try for, particularly if you lay it on thick with your whole class how important it is.*

The second task focused on classroom interactions the work was more substantive than the starter task. Background reading was required (via digitised readings) and participants were encouraged to 'problematise' an aspect of their practice within the complexity of classroom interactions.

A focused debate seemed to develop around participants classroom practice and experience. They were able discuss and raise many of the variables involved (school ethos, room lay out, individuals, levels, motivation, course requirements and so on). They also reflected and tentatively analysed the situation to inform future strategies/planning. Participants quickly seemed to develop an ability to 'set the scene' and structure their contributions to assist each other's engagement and understanding with what they were trying to recount. Even during the short time the classroom interaction task was online it was evident that there was experimentation with each other's ideas and a progression in terms of their own approaches. There also seemed to be the widening debate from the question of classroom interaction towards a bigger picture even to questions about the purpose of modern schooling. The following extracts give an insight into the level and direction of some of the professional conversations.

> *(Nomso)* *Perhaps controversially, I would argue that `teacher talk' is a more effective teaching tool than the other points we were asked to consider – pupil grouping, pupils' talk for learning etc. I see effective `teacher talk' as*

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[1] These are real names and permission has been obtained from the teachers concerned.

being a teacher led activity that not only encompasses explanation and targeted questioning, but also guides discussion – it helps to create a framework for the other learning tools to be effective.

I would also argue that effective `teacher talk' is a reassuring factor for the kids. It allows for the clarification of new terms and gives clear reasoning behind new concepts.

(Laura)   I was interested to read the significance of "teacher talk" you had in your lessons…………………………………………………….However, I do not fully agree that teacher talk is the most effective teaching tool. After reading the Quarshie (2001) article where it states that pupils cannot "only learn when interacting with the teacher.", I believe that students need to articulate what they have understood with other students to get the maximum amount of learning in a lesson as was discussed in the Wells (2000) article.

(Chris)   I found your point about reassuring students through teacher talk a very important one; my own experiences have taught me that, to a certain extent, students do not want to explore for themselves to find the correct answer to a problem, but want to be told and explained the answer from the outset so they have more time to learn it and practice using the concepts involved. I personally believe that this stems from the increased pressure to achieve good exam results, and find it a terrible shame, as students natural curiosity is suppressed by the stress on getting the answer right. (I know I'm making some rather sweeping statements here, so please come back at me if you disagree.) I feel this may have had two effects; firstly, this is helping to perpetuate the cycle of producing ever higher achieving students who are unable to be independent learners, and secondly, it has probably gradually, but drastically, changed the format of classroom interactions. In an education system aiming to continually improve the academic achievements of society, whilst broadening the curriculum so that it includes more material than ever, there is less and less room for students to explore their understanding of concepts and more pressure on teachers to teach didactically.

The third task was of a similar size and format the previous one; it asked participants to focus on the ways they assess the learning that is taking place in their classes.

It was interesting to see how participants had 'moved on' from the previous debate, in which classroom management had been an important underlying issue. In this online task it rarely surfaced which gave a tangible and positive peer group feeling of just 'how far they had come' as NQTs. A number of key discussion points seemed to emerge around assessment. In particular the importance of formative assessment, this was seen in many guises, where participants shared their ideas, approaches, successes and failures. Below one teacher shares her frustrations (and ideas) of getting to grips with assessment on a new course, with a lack of resources.

(Donna) Assessment is very prescriptive (as laid out by the exam board) and the difficulty lies in trying to adequately inform students of the exact requirements in order to reach certain grades. The use of sample material is not always possible as the course is so much in its infancy and although we have access to a widely used on line GNVQ resource, I've found that for pupils with poor literacy skills, this resource is pretty much redundant. This means pupils are left feeling frustrated and as a result are falling further and further behind.

As this course is the equivalent of 4 GCSE's it is fairly labour intensive and does not really leave a lot of time to include alternative forms of assessment to assist pupils, which I personally find very frustrating. I've tried to employ different ways to get around this by:
a)Printing out the assessment criteria at the start of each unit of work
b)Encouraging pupils to look at it at every opportunity, in order to familiarise themselves with the requirements, and
c)Bringing their attention to relevant points, depending on the stage they may have reached in the unit.

My main reason for this was as a result of finding that pupils viewed the assessment criteria, which is available on line, as an irrelevant page of the resources, and therefore could not see the relationship between the criteria, their work and the grades they were receiving. Most pupils failed to understand the whole picture. They were so engrossed in completing individual tasks; they were unable to see how the tasks were related to each other.

(Paul) I was very interested on the piece written by Donna on the assessment of GNVQ levels and the explanation to her year 10 class of the mark schemes. As I based my piece on the difference in teaching and learning styles adopted for these courses I thought I would explain my experiences regards mark schemes on GNVQ.

He goes on to outline his experiences in detail and ends with the following.

I have taken them through the mark scheme explaining what they need to do, written an extra report layout suggestion and, finally to some success, got students to mark an anonymous piece of work with me. The last activity worked as we used the mark scheme and we went through the criteria and found where (if they had) it had been met. However, this was with a year 12 class and I am not sure it would work with year 10.

What was significant was that participants were facing common challenges in their attempts to assess their students, sharing these but also offering each other examples of approaches -'what had worked for them'. So practical ideas were being shared and importantly engagement with relevant theoretical perspectives was integrated within this discussion.

This is illustrated by the following response to one teacher's frustrations and concerns about how much she is helping one particular student with his coursework.

> *(Nick)*   *The things you have done sound just right for him, but I completely empathise as you have spent time focusing on him and this has taken a lot out of you. It seems from what you are saying that you want to be able to feel it is genuinely coming from him and how can you assess him sufficiently if this is not the case.*
>
> *This seems underpinned by the Vygotskyian ideas of pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil ideas. You are doing the metacognition steps where you are taking a pupil's basic understanding and improving it above the level, which would be reached if he were left on his own. But in doing this you are left exhausted and the pupil will probably feel he needs you for the next assignment. There is a fabulous book called `Assessment for learning: the black box theory' and `Beyond the black box' both written by Dylan Williams.*

An interesting aspect of the contributions is the ways that within the same task subsets of discussion develop. In this case assessment became an overarching focus but with many strands flowing from this into areas such as target setting, feedback, self-assessment, peer assessment, coursework versus exam assessment, expectations, criteria of assessment, developing students evaluative and analytical skills. The asynchronous nature of the online discussions allowed this to develop fruitfully where participants could pick up on areas that were particularly relevant and important to them. Compared to a traditional seminar group this mode incorporates greater thinking time and thus more complex reflection.

Discussion

Although it is the first year of the course (and not yet complete at the time of writing) the above extracts and examples of teachers' online work provide insights into how this particular module is achieving course aims. It also serves to indicate the pedagogy that seems to be evolving. These teachers are talking about their classrooms. They are talking electronically, sharing their classroom experiences in a one-to-many context as part of an electronic tutor group of MTcg students, using email to capture and cultivate their excitement about their pupils' learning. What is significant is that they are not discussing *what* their pupils are

learning, but trying to understand *how* it is happening. They are, at the same time, excited about their own professional learning. They are interested in how knowledge is constructed in these classrooms, and, crucially, how this articulates with their own 'knowledge-making' about what it is to become effective teachers in their first posts. For both tutors and participants, what is significant in this type of professional discourse, which makes it central to achieving the aims of a course like the MTcg, is how learning is socially conceived within such narratives. The potential of CMC for 'knowledge construction' in early professional development can be examined within the contexts of these teachers' narratives. Their 'voices' tell us something about the relationship between the electronic mode and the professional learning, which takes place. They indicate the inadequacy of conceptualising CMC as 'facilitating' learning: they reveal rather how it is material to how teacher learning articulates with pupil learning in participants' classrooms and how this impacts upon teacher 'capacity building' in current political contexts.

Participants in the MTcg are constituting – authoring – a body of knowledge via the electronic forum. A corporate professional assessment of an issue emerges (by no means a consensus), but also, and crucially, individual significance develops from the group activity. Face-to-face seminar discussions can do something similar (and have different benefits), but in moderated email discussion a corpus of knowledge is being constantly redefined. This is not unusual in terms of web-communication, but in terms of teachers constituting Masters level work about learning in their classrooms it offers a significant alternative to other professional engagement available through INSET on government initiatives. CMC acts as a medium of learning, but it is also constitutive of that learning, affecting the construction of ideas, through its provisionality, yet tangibility. The knowledge is not based in the Institute of Education, nor in the 'set' readings, nor in the tutors, but in the interactive environment of the electronic forum itself. A (semi) virtual learning community has implications for who owns the knowledge – it is not handed out from the university, it is not from central government. It is knowledge, which is both, founded on and informs the development of practice, for "it is precisely the intersection between interaction and reflection that is of critical importance in cognition" (Warschauer, 1999: 5). What happens if we accept Warschauer's notion of CMC as "a potential intellectual amplifier" and apply it to the context of professional development? Most important seems to be: the contribution of CMC in provoking metacognitive discussion about the processes of developing practical teaching expertise; its role in helping teachers to redefine professionalism as something which is rooted in both intellectual

enfranchisement and actual experience, and how it validates knowledge which has been built collaboratively. Starkly, Warschauer (1999: 21) claims, "the nature of pedagogical practices and school reform will contribute to who becomes the *interacting* and who becomes the *interacted* in the network society". Teachers themselves are entirely implicated in this vision – and they can be readily identified as the *interacted* in most contemporary contexts.

Conclusion

This paper outlines how the Institute of Education's new Master of Teaching degree for teachers in their early professional development is timely in the current context of teacher recruitment and retention. It argues that the programme design incorporating a mixed mode approach is innovative and develops social interactionist perspectives on learning and the notion of knowledge construction. Although the course is in its first year by investigating practice in one online module it is evident that teachers are using CMC to share their ideas and practice. Crucially they are engaging in a critical way with theoretical perspectives and are challenging the status quo both in their classrooms, schools and beyond. The CMC seems to encourage a thoughtfulness behind their contributions less attainable in face to face (seminar) environments. The meaningful creation of the professional learning academy which is demonstrated in the final section is one way in which new recruits can be encouraged to engage intellectually with the fierce challenges faced by teachers - and stay for the struggle rather than be worn down and morally defeated.

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