EXPLORING THE USE OF THE CRITICAL INCIDENT AS A WAY OF ENCOURAGING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SETTINGS

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This study examines the use by student teachers and their supervising senior teachers in partner secondary schools of critical incident analysis, as part of a required directed task for all student teachers on the one-year postgraduate education course at Leicester. Systematic analysis using evidence from students' reflective writing about critical incidents, and one-to-one interview data, was carried out at the mid-point and end of year. Critical moments and their analysis emerge as professional 'turning points' for many student teachers. This is particularly so when professional learning conversations in relation to the critical incident also take place. Individuals' choices of different writing structures as scaffolding devices for supporting the narratives and their analysis indicate high levels of personalization in learning. As an outcome, more structured support has been developed for many of the supervising teachers to raise their awareness of the importance of, and their skills within, professional dialogues, in order to enhance and deepen reflective practice.A 'Reflection Framework' used in the analysis of the written narratives shows considerable potential for further academic work in finding ways of supporting understanding of deeper reflective practice, which should be of interest in a variety of professional and vocational settings.

1. BACKGROUND

In the academic year 2006-7 a team of six PGCE secondary tutors wrote a new course book

Reflective Teaching and Learning (edited by Dymoke, S. and Harrison, JK, and published by Sage, 2008) which was designed as a flexible learning resource book for student teachers, working partly in professional settings (schools) and partly in the university. It was also designed as a new resource to encompass the particular needs of student teachers who, for the first time at Leicester, from September 2007, would be working at M rather than H level. A central feature of these new materials was that for professional learning to take place, reflective practice lies at the heart of effective teaching. The Introductory chapter aims to develop students' understanding of reflection as a critical activity. The remainder of the text aims to develop the art of critical reflective teaching in all parts of new teachers' professional work. The whole text combines theoretical background with practical reflective activities. These course materials are now available to the wider audiences in other HEIs nationally, and internationally.

We know that the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' in professional settings is a contested one: exactly what is meant by 'reflective practice' and what evidence is there that it can enhance professional learning? What part do the processes of reflective writing and reflective conversations play in supporting professional learning (Harrison, 2004; Harrison, Lawson and Wortley, 2005)? More specifically, what types of writing and what types of professional conversations do student teachers engage in (e.g. with each other, and with their university and/or school tutors) when carrying out particular types of reflective activities?

In 2007-8 the secondary PGCE course introduced a new Directed Task to its course requirements for students: it required an autobiographical approach in noticing and recording some 'critical moments' (Critical Incidents - CIs) on four occasions during the training year. The task was set as an 'open' activity with choices to be made about what constitutes a CI for them and how they approach the descriptive writings and conversations. Students were asked to record these CIs and to have follow-up professional conversations with one senior teacher in each of their two school placements. Some PGCE tutors asked students to use learning environments such as Blackboard, and associated wikis, and with other electronic means, to assist in logging these reflective activities. Other tutors wished to rely on more traditional methods of writing and recording details. The Activity itself was explained to the students in more detail within the course book (Dymoke and Harrison, Chapter 1, Activity 1.4, p.23).

2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

These were two-fold:

1. A systematic analysis and evaluation of two years' evidence of students' reflective writing in relation to this Directed Task.

Critical Incident (CI) 'products' (written narratives) had already been collected from all students across the course (2007-8), n=170 (sample 1). We planned to collect Critical Incident products in the same way for 2008-9 (sample 2, n= circa 180).

An analysis of the samples should allow an examination of the range of formats adopted by students in tackling this Directed Task. No specific 'scaffolds' were provided for the Task. Students attended an introductory lecture on reflective practices in October 2007 and in October 2008, and had personal access to the Introductory chapter in the course text book.

The products of Sample 2 (cohort 2008-9) would be examined at two points in the academic year: February 2009 and June 2009. These dates coincide with the end of the two school attachments and should allow us to know more about the related professional conversations that take place between each student and their senior teacher, for each phase of the course – see section (3) below. Changes in depth of reflection as revealed by this Task can be monitored across the year.

The data in both samples can be examined in multiple ways: the particular formats use for presentation of the CIs; the chosen content of the CIs; the writing style; the range, type and level of criticality of reflection (e.g. technical, practical, critical) (; level of responsiveness to the Task (e.g. gender, age, subject area).

2. Development of this Directed Task in order to:

 (i) create 'scenarios', based on CI products

A scenario is intended to generate critical thinking about teaching and learning processes to help students think about their own beliefs and values in relation to teaching. Our definition of a scenario is a text that has been put together from a narrative (here, the written description of the Critical Incident). The scenarios would be explicitly constructed by us as researchers. They could be used as a catalyst for discussion, reflection and action by wide audiences. We envisaged that these audiences would include school tutors and university tutors (as part of our school tutor training and staff development programmes), and subsequent cohorts of student teachers. The scenarios could be used as stimulus for exploring the levels of reflection. We would examine the students' and teachers' responses to the scenarios in some creative ways, in order to explore the different levels of thinking that might emerge (categories such as 'descriptive', 'analytical', 'evaluative' and 'synthesis' might be applied) (Bloom et al, 1956). These scenarios should be of interest to those lecturers in the University who work in other (non-teaching) professional settings.

(ii)   introduce later cohorts of students to particular 'scaffolds' for their reflective writing

A scaffold can be defined in a number of ways. In relation to constructivist learning theory, a scaffold can provide structures for recording the CI (e.g. description of event, description of feelings), evaluation of the experience, analysis, summary of professional learning, and so on).

3. access what happens during, and as a result of, the professional dialogues with the senior teacher in the school following the writing of the CI.

An important part of the evaluation of the work of sample 2 would be to gain more information about the number, type and nature of these 'professional conversations'.

We planned whole-course questionnaires for both placement schools and target student teachers and senior teachers to gain further information about the conduct, content and perceived outcomes of these meetings to both students and their senior teachers.

We identified a stratified sample of schools, and target the student teachers and senior teachers in those schools for one-one semi-structured interviews to find out more about the frequency and arrangements and actual outcomes of these conversations in relation to the recorded CI.

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

A full electronic copy of our project report is available from Jenny Harrison (jkh4@le.ac.uk) and has been forwarded to the Staff Development Centre.

A major achievement has been the insight the course leaders now have of the value attached to this Directed Task by the student teachers themselves. Critical moments emerge as professional turning points for many students, particularly when professional learning conversations can take place. These moments are often emotionally charged. They can provide opportunities for insight and change, or not. Almost all students are concerned with finding solutions or resolving professional dilemmas in the workplace. Some seem to move further to resolve underlying issues and think about the wider implications of what they are trying to change. A sizeable minority appears to stick as non, or reluctant, reflectors by the end of the training year.

Provision of a variety of scaffolding structures to provide scope for individual expression was found to be important. We have revealed that more might be done to support their awareness of the possible different levels of reflection. The Reflection Framework used in our own analyses of the written narratives should have a place in this awareness raising and has some considerable potential for further exploratory work as an assessment tool in relation to reflective practice. We have also revealed that more support is needed for the supervising teachers in developing their awareness of and skills within the professional learning conversations.

4. EVALUATION

The full report referred to above provides these details. Here we give the key recommendations:

1. Share the finding that student teachers and many supervising teachers value this Directed Task highly and rate it above all others as useful to the students.

2. The Directed Task requires early introduction both at the university (by course tutors), and in each Phase of the course (by the senior supervising teachers), It should be placed at the start of the Directed Task booklet. It would be useful too if all the school tutors could have access to the first chapter 'Professional development and reflective practice' of the core text (Dymoke and Harrison, 2008).

3. Targeted training about the learning processes that underpin the Task, and about what we understand about increasing levels of reflection, is needed for tutors and supervising teachers in both Phases. Training should be structured to:

-- more clearly define what is meant by Critical Incident and Critical Incident Analysis.

-- make links between CI analysis and critical reflective practices more generally (including lesson evaluations and the encouragement of wider reading of the education literature),

-- illustrate how professional learning conversations can support the development of CI analysis, and to suggest different ways of conducting and facilitating conversations with students in either 1-1 situations, and/or within small peer groups, and /or through electronic discussion boards.

4. Some students need supporting by the provision of writing frameworks to scaffold their thoughts, descriptions and their analysis. develop writing and conversational templates that might support students in different ways to describe/analyse in more depth

5. Difficulties can arise when new personnel in schools are unaware of their particular role in the Task. Steps are needed to reduce this variability of opportunity in schools; it seemed particularly acute in Phase 2. Some excellent practice amongst the supervising teachers should be shared more widely.

6. Where resources are available, VLE s, involving all parties, should be encouraged.

7. Use of the Reflection Framework (Figure 1 in the full report) for training purposes to support tutors, teachers and student teachers in identifying the level (depth) of reflection that is being engaged in, with respect to Focus, Inquiry and Change.

This framework can be used in school tutor training to raise tutors' awareness of how the Task can be used to:

help students be proactive and to use the framework for themselves in both written CI analysis, and in their lesson evaluations,

help students to move off a plateau to reach the next level of reflective practice,

help students who are reluctant reflectors.

The framework can also be used by university tutors with student teachers to support the introductory sessions on CI analysis and reflective practice in order to raise student teacher awareness of the underpinning processes when writing and talking with others.

We believe all these points could prove useful in professional settings other than schools and Initial Teacher Education.

5. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

Our report has been shared with a number of audiences including the Staff Development Centre.

At the School of Education, the report has been used as evidence of Impact Study within the Quality Assurance procedures required for the secondary PGCE course. The report is being circulated to all Partner Schools, and is to be used at a training conference for school partners in November 2009.

As a result of our findings some changes to the Directed Task for the current cohort (2009-10) have already occurred: the Task has been enlarged and supported with further written guidance for students and for school tutors. The Task is now the first one in a set of several and this raises the status even further of this part of the course. Some of the narratives are to be presented shortly on a Blackboard Site, with annotations indicating the depth of reflection in relation to Focus, Inquiry and

Change (this should highlight how the Reflection Framework can be used for self-analysis of level of reflection).

The processes which can support deeper (critical) reflective practice is currently being embedded in the developments to do with the Masters in Teaching and Learning here at the University of Leicester, and has been used to influence the development phase of the MTL nationally (Jenny Harrison is currently a member of the Writing Group for the Teacher Development Agency Coaching specification for the MTL.

The work has formed the basis of a conference paper at ECER (European Conference for Educational Research, Vienna, September 2009, presented by Jenny Harrison. A further conference paper is planned for the IPDA (International Professional Development Association), Birmingham UK, November 2009, by Jenny Harrison.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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