Threshold Concepts and Practices in Teacher Education: professional, educator and student perspectives

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Introduction

The metaphor of a programme of professional education as a portal or threshold to a profession is a very apt and powerful one. Professional education programmes are both the gatekeepers of a profession and its door stewards facilitating entry and initiation. The concepts and practices, or ways of thinking and acting, of a profession provide the structure and path for the passageway from novice to initiate within the profession, often governed by requirements of the appropriate professional body. The domain of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Ireland is currently undergoing radical change with the launch of new requirements for ITE programmes by the statutory professional teaching body, the Teaching Council, and a governmental review of provision of ITE across the country underway. Within this context of change, this paper focuses not on key competencies, skills or knowledge for teaching but rather on ITE as a portal and the nature of the transition and transformation inherent in student teachers' successful negotiation of this portal, from the perspective of the student teachers themselves as well as the profession and teacher educators.

Context of Research

The work described in this paper has emerged from our previous research on transformative experiences during initial teacher education which pointed at a number of concepts in teaching, for example, learner empathy, which seem to be part of a hidden curriculum of teacher education and not explicitly articulated in programme descriptors or statutory requirements (Devitt, Oldham et al. 2011). The learning identified by student teachers was a shift in perspective, an ontological transformation, transforming their view of themselves and their purpose. Upon examination, these concepts fulfilled the criteria for threshold concepts, being transformative, troublesome, integrative and potentially irreversible. While "beginning teachers typically conceptualise the process of learning to teach as a cumulative acquisition of concrete technical and organizational skills." (McLean 1999, p. 59), it is the development of student teachers' identity as professionals which is perhaps more critical to successful negotiation of the liminal space between student and professional within which they find themselves at ITE. It is worth noting that the student teachers carry out their teaching practice alongside attending lectures for the full academic year and so student teachers' are continuously moving between the two roles of teacher and learner for the duration of the ITE programme.

The current study aims to explore the relationship between the ontological and the epistemological change that takes place during ITE, as discussed in (Atherton, Hadfield et al. 2008). Threshold Concepts provides a powerful and integrative framework for investigating professional development focusing as it does on transformative aspects of learning (Mezirow and Taylor 2009), the nature of conceptual change (Carey1991, Ohlsson 1999), the importance of communities of practice (Wenger 1998). The potential for threshold concepts to change not only the learner's knowledge but also their sense of self links to existing work on teacher identity and the role of the self in teacher development (Lipka and Brinthaupt 1999; Day, Sammons et al. 2007).

The eclectic nature of the literature underlying threshold concepts

Hard and soft disciplines (Atherton, Hadfield et al. 2008)

Our paper, Atherton paper Cove et al paper, student teacher identity work, teacher and the self.

Transformative learning (Mezirow)

Conceptual Change (Carey, Ohlsson)

Teaching for Understanding (Perkins)

Communities of Practice (Wenger, Lave)

Language and Learning (Habermas to Halliday)

Adaptive Change (Heifetz, Grashow, Linksy) – change that entails a change of belief

Method

This study seeks to answer the following questions, which focus on the troublesome and transformative nature of learning during ITE, with a focus on ITE for the secondary education sector:

- What are the critical moments of learning and/or transformation for teachers along their career path, in particular at ITE?
- What are the conditions, encounters or contexts which generate, facilitate or challenge the integration of this learning?

The study involved eleven student teachers on an ITE programme in Ireland, eight teacher educators on the ITE programme and six practising teachers (two at early career,

two at mid-career and two at late career). All participants were drawn from across a range of disciplines taught at secondary level in Ireland to include arts, humanities and science. All participants were volunteers and gave informed consent to participate in the study. Half of the student teachers provided weekly structured reflections for the second semester of their ITE programme and all participated in focus group and/or individual interviews at the end of the programme. The teacher educators and practising teachers participated in interviews which were structured loosely as personal narratives focusing first on individuals' own professional journeys and subsequently relating this to a discussion of ITE. The weekly reflections and post-programme interviews investigated key points of learning for student teachers and the triggering or facilitating events or conditions for this learning as well as on areas identified as problematic or troublesome by student teachers over the course of the year. The interviews with teacher educators and practicing teachers addressed what they had come to believe was the fundamental knowledge underlying good teaching and how this develops, from their own experience and observations and what they felt should or could be achieved at ITE.

Findings: Key learning

We found that regardless of the range of competencies and knowledge listed in course requirements for ITE, teachers, teacher educators and student teachers consistently identified one element as central to the development and integration of professional competence: a learner-centred perspective. This was articulated not in the abstract as an orientation to establish for effective teaching but rather in a thoroughly practical and constructive way as the driving force behind improved exploitation of the professional toolkit of planning, methods and reflection. For student teachers, this was articulated as the single most important development or point of learning over the course of the year. For early career teachers, this was identified as both the reason for and the product of greater confidence in themselves as professionals. For later career teachers, this was a source of continued motivation and for some developed into an expanded vision of themselves as educators in the broadest sense of the word. Teacher educators expressed this as the single most important outcome of the initial teacher education programme without which student teachers would not progress or sustain their career.

This shift in perspective, as expressed by student teachers and supported by professionals and educators, was not an epistemological change based on new understandings of how individuals learn and how best to teach them but rather an ontological change grounded in a new vision of what it meant for them to teach.

Teaching is social, relational and responsive.
Release of control
Learners as individuals with other interests and lives

In answer to the question "what brought about this change", student teachers almost uniformly stated that "being in the room" with their pupils was the source of this change, getting to know their learners and appreciate them as individuals. On further probing and in weekly journal entries, it became clear that while this shift in perspective was experienced as a change in the classroom, the instigating factors were multiple and varied and occurred in school and university contexts, through reflection, dialogue or interaction with theory. :

specific encounters or incidents with individual students;

new techniques or methods tried at the suggestion of peers, colleagues in the school, through interaction with theory in lectures or reading and an analysis of their effects;

extra-curricular activities

Taking Brookfields notions of credibility and authenticity, the majority of the student teachers focused on establishing their credibility in the classroom but came to value the authenticity of their relationships with their students as the core for successful teaching, learning and classroom management. Two student teachers expressed a very clear position in valuing the authenticity of their teaching over credibility. One noted that she did not see herself as a teacher of her discipline, perhaps because she was indifferent to her discipline but was interested rather in her pastoral role and in developing her learners creativity and transferrable skills. Another clearly positioned herself as the kind of teacher who prioritises good relationships in the classroom. In fact, in a challenging teaching practice supervision, a clash with her supervisor over the degree of authority she needed to enforce reinforced her conviction that she "didn't want to be that kind of teacher".

This underlying ontological threshold or transformation was linked to threshold concepts identified by Cove et al. (2008) (relating to classroom management, teaching methodologies, language facilitating understanding, professionalism and informed and considered choice, relationships matter, the impact of broader community) but whether the ontological change must happen before the other concepts are integrated or the integration of other concepts lead to the change was not conclusive in our study. Both student teachers and early career teachers noted the difficulty in identifying the cause and effect relationship of a stronger learner focus and knowledge in the classroom and improved classroom management and teaching-learning method skills. This was expressed as a chicken-and-egg phenomenon by two student teachers. Others felt they were very much moving in tandem with the underlying driving force of mutual respect for everyone "in the room" together as part of the learning process. Furthermore, student teachers and teacher educators identified necessary and sufficient conditions for development of student relations was a level of classroom facility and order within which a student teacher could find the space to consider and develop relationships with students. For some student teachers, this was something which was part of their identity as a teachers, where establishing an open and cooperative classroom was fundamental to their image of good teaching. For others, this entailed a release of control and a shift in role that it took some time to envisage and even longer to embed.

This ontological shift has resonance with the literature on teacher identity and indeed some student teachers expressed this very clearly as a struggle with their view of themselves as teachers. Brookfield's notion of impostorship (2006, p. 91) was articulated by two student teachers in relation to their relationships with colleagues in the school and to their actions in the classroom

In the personal narratives of teachers, the notion of ontological transformation as both the cause and effect of new conceptualisations or knowledge formation over the course of their careers was also very strong. All of the mid to late career teachers spoke of a change in their view of what it meant for them to be a teacher at very specific points in their career. For one this was as a result of taking part in master in education programme. For the others it related to a change in role within the school which allowed them to view other aspects of their students welfare and life development than they had been previously aware. For two this was a more pastoral role which broadened

their perspective of themselves as teacher to themselves as educator in the broader sense with consideration of the sociological aspects of education. For the third, this was taking on a final year exam class in a new subject for the first time which led her to re-evaluate her role with respect to the student academic achievement as distinct from their personal development, the reverse of the route for other teachers.

""cognitive" threshold concepts do not feature much in the experience of the learners, unless and until (we conjecture) they have engaged with the ontological challenges associated with the transformation of identity implicit in taking on a working role" (Atherton, Hadfield et al. 2008, p.6)

As noted in Atherton et al (2008, p.3), "the significance of these threshold concepts lies much more in their significance for ontological than epistemological change"

Aspects consistently identified as difficult for student teachers and on into early career: differentiation. While student teachers felt they were better able to observe and manage to a certain extent the different needs and interests within the classroom, they did not feel more able to cope with the demands which this entailed by the end of the ITE year but rather that was expressed by all practicing teachers as something which took a number of years to develop. Furthermore both student teachers and early career teachers identified the integration of classroom teaching with the demands of the curriculum through long-term planning to be a problematic aspect. This

"moments where the teacher signalled an instance of heightened awareness, perhaps a moment of tension where s/he was awakened to bumping up against some new possibility in the passing parade … in relation to an encounter with a child or situation on the school landscape, other times they drew on storied experiences from off the school landscape" (Clandinin, Huber et al. 2006, p. 115)

"Self as narrative" (Freeman 1992)

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