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Teaching practice: some local perspectives on a global practice

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Introduction: teacher learning and teaching practice

Some form of teaching practice (TP), which we here define as the part of the initial teacher training period which student teachers (STs) spend teaching in a school, trying out what they have learned, is a component of initial (language) teacher education (ITE) curricula in most education systems. The 2016 scholars have taken different routes into teaching. However, apart from Mohammed and Abdullah, whose course as language graduates in Sudan did not include TP and who thus had to learn to teach through teaching, they all experienced some form of initial teacher training, and so a period of TP.

Although widely agreed to be important, the forms that TP takes in different education systems vary greatly, even between institutions in the same countries. A central factor influencing how TP is conceived, and thus what experiential

opportunities it provides or encourages, is how the national or institutional context responsible for designing teacher education views the process of learning teaching. Four (partly overlapping) models of learning teaching are summarised in Table 2.6.1.

Craft model	Applied science model	Reflective model	Sociocultural model
Learning teaching through observing experienced teachers and then trying to do what they do	Learning teaching though learning theories about language, learning and/or teaching approaches and then applying them	Learning teaching through thinking about/discussing one's own teaching experiences (reflecting), and over time developing personal classroom approaches that work	Learning teaching through understanding the context and community in which the teaching takes place, in order to be able to make appropriate choices

Table 2.6.1: *Models of learning teaching*

The model, or combination of models, an education system or initial teacher education (ITE) institution sees as the basis of learning teaching will affect the status, form and 'content' of the TP experience within their ITE curriculum. For example,

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if a purely craft model of learning teaching prevails, TP will probably provide opportunities for the ST to observe and be observed over time by an expert teacher. An applied science model, on the other hand, would need to provide a TP context that offered opportunities for STs to try out and become able to use the teaching and learning theories that their prior study promoted. A reflective model, which saw learning teaching as experiencing and thinking about experience, might structure TP time to provide both classroom teaching and opportunities to think and talk about teaching experiences with fellow STs and more expert teachers or tutors. Finally, a sociocultural model of learning teaching might emphasise the importance of using TP as an opportunity for STs to begin to understand the context of different types of classrooms (for example private and public/rural and urban schools) and how different contexts affect the teaching decisions that are appropriate.

Local versions of a global practice

Documents suggested that the broad aims and objectives of TP in the scholars' countries emphasised the need to provide STs with opportunities to:

- develop teaching and classroom management skills, knowledge, and attitudes appropriate to their educational setting, and so to begin to feel confident in front of a classroom;
- relate theory to practice through using a range of teaching and learning approaches, strategies and aids to plan and implement stimulating and challenging lessons in their special teaching areas;
- introduce new teaching methods or criteria agreed upon by the Ministry of Education; and
- reflect on their teaching performance as committed, resourceful teachers who are able to pursue CPD.

However TP differed between countries in four main areas:

- where responsibility for the design of TP lay: Bangladesh has national guidelines, but elsewhere TP design is left to individual ITE institutions;
- the point at which TP took place (usually towards the end of the ITE programme);
- the type and quantity of information that STs were given before their TP began; and
- the length of TP, which varied from less than 100 academic hours in Argentina, Indonesia, South Africa and India to 100–300 hours in Bangladesh, Brazil and Uzbekistan, and 540 hours in Thailand.

Iran was different, with little or no teaching practice taking place at any public universities. Almost all initial training for English teachers (including TP) is sponsored by approximately 8,000 private language institutes. These recognise the need to invest in their teachers to survive in a commercially competitive market.

Support for TP

While all TP systems emphasised the need to support STs during TP, the type and extent of support varied.

Support from prior training

Prior training during the ITE programme helped STs in their TP in different ways. All ITE programmes promoted a communicative approach to teaching English. Most scholars were trained to teach the four skills, although writing was ignored in Bangladesh, and Thailand emphasised receptive skills (listening and reading). Some ITE programmes tried to help STs relate theory to practice. For example, in South Africa ITE lecturers used case studies or videos to discuss the relevance of theory to classroom reality.

Before beginning actual teaching most scholars had opportunities to spend time in schools (often those where they would do TP later) observing teaching, noting how teachers used professional skills such as time and classroom management, and learning techniques for enabling interaction.

Once in schools, STs in Brazil, Bangladesh, and India found a mismatch between approaches promoted during their training and those used by classroom teachers, who could be resistant to their attempts to introduce new practices.

Support from the people involved

Scholars believed that a combination of support from the teachers whose classes they taught and their university lecturers was most beneficial for STs. In all countries except Bangladesh, STs were allowed to prepare their own classes. In Argentina, South Africa and Thailand they were encouraged to try to use the methods or practices they had learned in the teacher training course. In contrast, in Iran, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh and Brazil, STs were expected to adapt to the methodological norms of the schools they were in, and in Indonesia while they could in principle plan as they wished, the main emphasis was on covering the syllabus.

The greatest degree of personal support was provided in Indonesia, where the class teacher sat in and discussed classes with the ST throughout the TP, and in Brazil, where the lecturer was responsible for discussing a class with the trainee at least once in a week. In Argentina and South Africa, however, lecturers were responsible for so many STs that they usually observed few classes. In Brazil, Uzbekistan, Thailand, Bangladesh and Argentina the ITE provider organised seminars for STs to discuss their TP experiences. Peer support was another form of support in Brazil and Argentina, where TP was done in pairs, and in Thailand, South Africa and Indonesia, where some STs met informally to share TP experiences.

Assessment of TP

This usually consisted of a single (or occasionally several) checklist-based classroom observation by a university supervisor or a school-based mentor. Since supervisors could be responsible for up to 50 trainees, it is not surprising that observations were limited. However, scholars doubt whether this mode of assessment alone provides a valid picture of ST capacity.

As the iceberg illustration in Figure 2.6.1 shows, an observer can only see the immediate visible classroom behaviour of the teacher. Beneath the surface lie a range of other factors (experiences, beliefs, feelings and understandings) which may help explain observed behaviour. Genuine understanding of an ST's classroom behaviour

can only be achieved by discussing what was observed with the ST. Supervisors and mentors frequently did not do this.
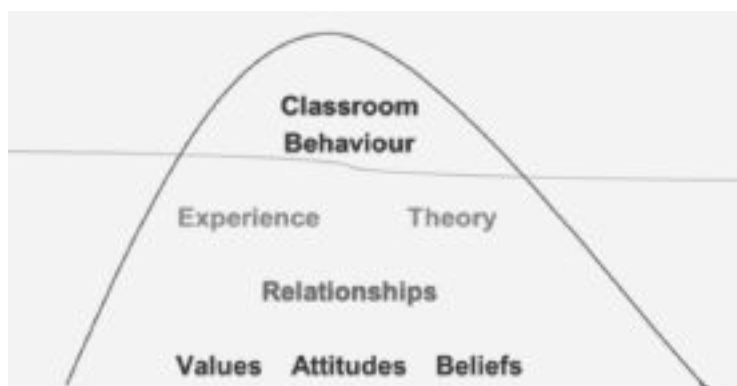

Figure 2.6.1: *Visible and invisible factors in student teacher observation*

Scholars suggested that two other possible assessment modes might better enable assessors to understand (more of) what is happening below the surface of the ST iceberg.

Reflective writing

Four scholars had experience of reflective writing as part of their TP experience and assessment. In the most developed scheme, in South Africa, STs were expected to make weekly entries throughout both their training and their TP, outlining what they found to be of value and interest in their lectures; they were also asked to consider what went well, and why, during TP, and how future teaching might be improved. The rationale for insisting on such reflective writing is that it is not sufficient to simply have an experience (for example, of teaching) in order to learn: without reflecting on an experience, it may quickly be forgotten, and its learning potential is likely to be lost.

TP portfolios

Particularly where it is not practical for teacher educators to carry out regular observations to assess STs' progress, TP portfolios (a collection of STs' best lesson plans, descriptions, observation notes, pictures, audiotapes and videotapes) offer a means of finding out more about how the trainee has understood the experience of learning teaching. In Bangladesh, portfolios are given one-third of the total weighting in the assessment of TP; some institutions in South Africa, Indonesia and Thailand also include portfolios in assessment.

Scholars acknowledge that STs may need to be 'trained' as reflective writers, and/or to understand how to put together portfolios which adequately reflect their teaching competencies. Assessing such writing and/or portfolios is also labour intensive. Both of the above make the use of these assessment methods less practical in contexts with few resources and large numbers of STs such as India. In addition, compared to direct assessment of an ST's classroom performance, they can be considered indirect, meaning that in some contexts their validity may be questioned.

Scholars believe that, ideally, two or three TP assessment tools would be used in combination, to provide teacher educators with a more complete appreciation of an ST's overall development. However, as with assessment more generally, the tension

between validity, reliability and practicality usually plays out in favour of practicality, and thus checklists remain the norm!

Conclusion

TP has the potential to play an important role in enabling STs to learn teaching. Its stated goals in most scholars' contexts refer to supporting the learning of teaching through providing opportunities

- to develop skills and relate theory to practice by experiencing classroom teaching; and
- to reflect on and better understand their teaching experiences to improve future practice.

For resource or cultural reasons the 'reflective' goal is rarely achieved, since little or no time is spent on it; where it does occur, it is carried out informally and is not assessed. Since TP is part of formal teacher education, assessment is necessary. However, only using an observation checklist, as is usual in most scholar's contexts, implicitly promotes an idea of 'one right way' of teaching, a model consistent with craft and applied science approaches to learning teaching.

Throughout education systems worldwide the nature of the TP assessment influences what is valued by both teachers (supervisors/mentors) and students (STs). If we really believe that reflective and/or sociocultural models of learning teaching are also important for learning teaching, then we need to reconsider the manner in which we assess TP in ways that explicitly acknowledge that importance.

Two final fundamental questions about TP remain unanswered:

- Why, if learning teaching is seen as a skill to be developed over time, and through practice and reflection on practice, is TP always situated at the end of the training process? Shouldn't it be ongoing throughout?
- Why do we continue to have such huge variations between the design, length of and support for TP in different contexts? Could we work to develop shared global guidelines for TP, which could then be adjusted to meet local realities?

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