

# From structures to stories: understanding the experience of a flexible teacher training route.

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Flexible training programmes have been introduced by the Teacher Training Agency in England and Wales to try to increase the recruitment of mathematics teachers. The course at Sheffield Hallam University parallels the full-time one year postgraduate route but the very different mode of delivery has allowed more flexible pedagogies to be developed. The students have opportunities to craft their own learning experiences and in making choices they become aware of their own needs and progress. It seems unlikely that the route will make a significant quantitative contribution to the problem of teacher shortages but perhaps these mature and well prepared teachers will stay longer in the profession?

The shortage of teachers in many rich, developed countries (e.g. England, USA, Australia, and The Netherlands) has led to governments encouraging new routes into the profession. There are now a plethora of such routes in England and Wales which vary; in their cost to the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), their ease of organisation for universities and partnership schools, and more fundamentally in the nature and length of preparation that the beginning teachers experience. I have worked with students on full-time one and two year post graduate routes, the flexible postgraduate route, two and three year undergraduate routes and a school based training route. Inevitably I have been drawn into comparing and contrasting. In this paper I will draw on the work I undertook for a Masters dissertation (Angier 2004) in which I used a narrative methodology to explore the learning experience of students on the flexible mathematics.

## The Flexible PGCE

The flexible Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) was introduced by the Teacher Training Agency in 1999 as one of a series of measures to try to increase the supply of teachers. The route is flexible to students' needs and circumstances. It allows exemption from parts of the course where prior academic study and/or relevant teaching experience can be evidenced. The route is able to take account of students' circumstances by allowing them to set their own pace, complete the different parts of the course in any order, and organise their school placements to fit around constraints such as childcare or paid employment.

The flexible PGCE at Sheffield Hallam has the same entry requirements and components as the full time PGCE. Students must have a degree in mathematics or a mathematics related subject. They study the same academic units (unless exempted) in subject pedagogy and education (now replaced by general professional studies). They undertake the same statutory requirement of 120 days school based practice (unless exempted) and must pass the three online tests in numeracy (!), literacy and ICT set by the TTA. The flexible PGCE however is delivered completely differently. Whereas the full-time students have a set programme, must attend teaching sessions in the University and submit work for assessment on certain dates the flexible students have none of these constraints. They work through their study units at home

and can complete them in any order they choose. They decide when to submit assignments. They can negotiate the timing and to some extent the organisation of their placements. Once a term the mathematics cohort is invited into the University for a Saturday workshop. Apart from these workshops students maintain contact with me and each other through an email system and a web based learning environment.

## Teacher Education Research

The motivation of teacher educators to research and make sense of the process of becoming a teacher through different routes is not necessarily in line with that of government departments whose prime aim is to ensure schools are staffed.

The pressure on teacher education due to the shortage of teachers leads to a situation of pragmatism and where there is no room and time for critical reflection, careful consideration and balanced quality. ... There is a strong need for research... The ministry is mainly motivated by the need of short and flexible routes, taking into account prior experiences and schooling, while the institutions are mainly motivated for the development of flexible and individual learning routes by the wish to make students self responsible and capable of managing change. (Snoek and Wielenga 2001 p.42-3)

There is some evidence from the United States that the length and nature of pre-service teacher education does affect both the attainment of students in school (Darling-Hammond 2000) and the beginning teachers' perception of their own preparedness (Darling-Hammond et al 2002). Whilst there is little comparative research into different routes into teaching there is a vast learning-to-teach literature. One of the most comprehensive reviews of the teacher education literature was undertaken by Kagan who found a number of common themes one of which was the issue of identity.

In sum, knowledge of self, classrooms, and pupils does not appear to evolve separately. In this sense, a novice's past and present experiences are ultimately merged, as professional growth encroaches on the novice's most intimate knowledge of self. (Kagan 1992 p.148)

This theme of identity has continued in the literature where the frequent use of case studies and personal histories reflects the view that becoming a teacher is an intensely personal journey during which a shift in identity occurs that then has to be reconciled with a person's past and present.

When teachers talked about their work, they also talked about themselves; the events were filtered through the person of the teacher. (Hasu 2002 p.11)

Whilst this area of the literature is rich it is not unproblematic. The telling of other people's stories and the description of their developing identities is fraught with methodological and ethical issues. Korthagan (2002) working within the context of 'realistic mathematics education' describes the process of teacher education as highly personalised and one in which the students are guided to reinvent theory for themselves so that no 'gap' is ever allowed to appear between 'theory' and 'practice'. It is analogous to the idea of using open ended investigational learning to allow

students to find e.g. Pythagoras' theorem. He brings together the centrality of biography and the importance of pedagogy.

Olsen who worked for two years with four beginning teachers experiencing four different teacher education programmes concluded, 'learning-to-teach is simultaneously an individualized biographical process, a product of sociocultural constructions and constraints, and the result of generalisable epistemological principles' (Olsen 2003 p.2). I think the identification of these three strands is very helpful. It resonates with the wider teacher education literature and provides a framework within which to undertake and evaluate research. It suggests to me a way of understanding learning environments which I recognise from all my teaching experiences; that the teacher, whilst attending to the 'background' in the widest possible sense of her students, has the potential through her decisions and activities to enable transformative learning.

In my Masters dissertation I choose to explore a narrative methodology and write stories about each of my students. In telling stories I have learned a lot about my students and about myself. It reminds me of writing reports as a school teacher where the process of reflecting and writing about each child gave me insights both into their learning and my teaching. In many instances, now just as then, I have realised that the story is not quite working out as it should. There are flaws and gaps and I am aware that I have misunderstood and made mistakes.

It is in the knotty points and moments of disagreement and unpredictability that we gain insights into each other and ourselves and generate the spaces and intersections that are simultaneously uncomfortable and yet satisfying and productive. (Nixon et al 2003 p.93)

I think the power of narrative research lies in the potential to attend to the individual and the local, whilst carrying larger themes which we might recognise as theory. The stories are not themselves the knowledge or the theory nor are they the raw data. They are a resource to be drawn on rather like a rich mathematical task which is known by a teacher to engage her pupils and enable them to deepen their understanding and construct new knowledge. In this context I am not able to give the reader that resource but only to report how these stories have enabled me to understand my students' experience better.

This search for a different kind of knowledge, knowledge which empowers rather than making possible prediction and control, is a significant re-conceptualisation of the purpose of educational research. (Elbaz-Luwish 1997 p.78)

Having worked with the stories I have become aware that the flexible route is more than just the full-time route delivered by distance learning. It embraces a flexible pedagogy where the students have a great deal of choice and the opportunity to craft their own learning experiences. I think this flexible pedagogy is apparent in the Saturday workshops, the use of e-learning tools and the organisation of school based experience.

*Saturday workshops*

The Saturday workshops provide an unusual learning space for the students because the whole cohort meets together and everyone is at a different stage of the course. I chose to work this way for pragmatic reasons so that I could avoid working only with two or three people at a time and it has turned out to be very beneficial. The days consist of a variety of mathematical and pedagogical activities. Working on mathematical tasks together allows me to model different teaching styles and provides the students with a limited but important opportunity to reconsider their own experience of learning mathematics. I make use of the fact that the students are at different stages of the course. For example a student may give an account of their placement. Students who have not yet undertaken this part of the course can interrogate the presenter whilst students who have completed a placement can offer their perspectives. Because the experience is relatively recent the post-practice students are able to make sense of where the pre-practice students are 'coming from' and they become more aware of how their own ideas have changed and developed. They are experiencing a learning environment which has some characteristics in common with a mixed attainment classroom. The students come to the pedagogy tasks with different prior experiences which they share to help them understand key issues such as lesson planning and differentiation.

The students make a lot of decisions about their own needs. They spend a lot of time during Saturday workshops comparing and contrasting their progress and questioning each other. There was much talk about Usman's difficult mentor and David applying for a job before he had even begun his first practice. They become aware of each other's priorities and take seriously the task of supporting each other. The cohort has, not surprisingly, developed socially. Lynne grew up and still lives in an all white community and struggled with the parts of the pedagogy units which addressed race and schooling. Becoming part of a very small multi-ethnic cohort has given her a gentle opportunity to get to know and work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Sarah is a conscientious and under-confident student. She has chosen the flexible route because she wants to fit her study around the needs of her two small children. Sarah chose to keep a diary throughout her first placement. It was a very detailed and personal account of her responses to the challenges she faced. She was not asked to do this but I think the experience was so overwhelming she needed a mechanism for clearing/storing each day's thoughts. When she fed back her experiences to the cohort during a Saturday workshop she brought her diary and invited the other students to read it.

### *E-learning tools*

This route would be very difficult to manage without the aid of web based tools. Students are given access to an email system which enables them to contact their tutor and each other. An email conference has been set up for the cohort where public messages and announcements can be posted and at several points in the study units the students are asked to post responses to activities onto this conference. With such a small number of students it is very difficult to stimulate and maintain discussion. As student numbers have risen gradually the conference has started to be used more often. Meeting each other at Saturday workshops may well have helped and there have been some examples of very interesting asynchronous discussion in response to the study units. I take an active role on the conference organising postings into folders and I am the only person who can move or delete postings. The conference site has been used for many different purposes by the students; telling their personal

news, giving updates on their progress, describing job applications etc. I have taken cues from the students and started to post messages when assignments are successfully passed through exam boards or when I have visited students on placement. This year the newly revalidated course has been uploaded onto a web based learning environment with many more utilities.

Bob decided to post a regular weekly update of his placement on the email conference. By the end he had posted six sides of A4 detailing his problems and successes and how he was making sense of them. No one had asked to him to engage in this public reflection but he clearly felt comfortable to use this virtual space to offer a very honest story of his classroom struggles.

The most drastic decision a student can make about their own needs is that they should leave the course as David did. I asked him to post a brief message on the email conference to let the other students know his decision as I did not feel I should speak “for” him. This prompted three replies the last of which I then responded to. The first two were from Usef and Jane who made it clear in their replies that David’s decision had caused them to rethink. I suspect that the same was true for some of the other students who did not post responses.

Hi everyone

Maybe it wasn’t your cup of tea, but I’d like to say this to the rest of the group: just thought I’d write something about my experiences.

I’d start with WOW. I love maths, I love explaining maths, I remember why I liked maths; being able to understand and appreciate concepts ... amazing ... I want other children to be able to gain this ... have fun.

Fun doesn’t mean you crack a few jokes, fun means finding learning enjoyable ... this is what teachers need to achieve ... I think now that the best quality a teacher should have is the love of their subject.

I’ve enjoyed my lessons at my current placement. Some classes have been challenging ... behavioural wise ... but that’s where my development lies.

Actually today I was talking to some kids from year 7 I haven’t even taught and guess what? They said “we’ve heard you are a very good teacher<sup>2</sup>, they actually gave me the impression that they would be sorry to see me leave.

I’ve never really thought about this ... but I think I like kids...

When I started the placement ... truthfully my stomach turned ... I was nervous ... but now I think I’m gonna miss W High

I hope the rest of you are enjoying it as much as I am... Usef

Hi Usef,

I’m so glad you submitted this to the conference. I must admit when I read David’s very eloquent explanation for leaving the course, it did make me question what sort of person he thought teaching might make him, and would I become that person too. Having read your words however, and related them to my own teaching placement, I can say with confidence that I am doing the right thing and happy to be doing it.

I agree with your opinion that love of your subject is important. On my placement, the biggest surprise came from the amount I enjoyed the maths. I loved rediscovering work I hadn’t even thought about for years, and finding ways of teaching it that I hoped the kids would respond to. I got really excited by a

neat way of doing things like converting recurring decimals to a fraction. The best feeling was when some kids said of a subject I had just taught “oh yeah, I’ve never got that before.” Thanks, Jane

I have begun to explore and evaluate the use students make of e-learning tools as part of a project funded by the TTA. One of the conclusions I am quickly drawing is that as the tutor I need to be actively involved and very visible. This may seem overbearing or anti-democratic but it seems to be necessary just as displays on a classroom wall need to be managed and changed regularly. “A key finding from the evaluation is that communication was much more successful when the tutors had a strong moderating role” (Owen et al 2000 p5). Having such a small number of students, all at different stages I am beginning to realise how important it is that I keep the story the going and act as a narrator linking the characters and providing a sense of the journey moving on.

### *School placement*

Many of the students have negotiated non-assessed school experience where they are essentially volunteers. This time contributes to their statutory 120 days in school but is not part of a formal placement. Working in school without the pressure of being assessed is I think a very valuable experience. It enables different relationships to develop with staff and it provides a safe space for trying different approaches to teaching. Before his first block practice Bob took advantage of his flexi time system at work which, along with the use of some holiday time, enabled him to take one morning a week off. He arranged to visit a school as a voluntary classroom support. This resulted in him working regularly with a small group of disaffected boys who were causing classroom management difficulties. Bob’s attitude towards the boys and his understanding of their needs in school has changed significantly over the time that he worked with them. He was influenced by the reading he had been doing for the course and the discussions he has had with fellow students and the staff within the school. Visiting as a non-assessed volunteer one morning a week is very low key compared with the pressures of a full-time PGCE placement but it was a rich learning experience. It gave him some space within which to make sense of young people’s attitudes to schooling. Bob grew up in a very poor household and understood that success at school was the route to a secure future. But he did not find school an easy environment and is sympathetic to young people now who don’t. He has been challenged and frustrated however by their lack of aspiration or any sense of their own possible futures. This is not a minor issue of classroom management of challenging behaviour. Bob is trying to reconcile his intellectual understanding, his own personal history, and his classroom experiences.

Sarah struggled with classroom management on her first placement and when I observed her I found her very distant from the pupils. As she neared the end of the placement she decided that there was one Year 10 class that she had particularly benefited from working with. She had developed a good relationship with the students, and the class teacher was giving her support that she felt helped her make progress. Sarah arranged to continue teaching just this group after her formal placement was over until their next public examination. I was deeply impressed that she had negotiated an arrangement that would allow her to enjoy, and bring to a more natural close, a good relationship with a teaching group. She had a strong understanding of why this was worthwhile. Sarah knew that developing productive

relationships with students was a challenge for her and chose to spend more time in the place where she felt she was doing well.

## Discussion

The flexible route seems to predispose the beginning teachers to offer storied accounts by giving them so much responsibility to assess, and organise to meet, their own learning needs. I think the students experience a blurring of the boundary between 'this is what I need to do for me' and 'this is what I need to do to complete the course'. Having begun to articulate their own relationship with learning these beginning teachers are in a position to consider that their peers may be very different. By establishing a vertical cohort the flexible mathematics PGCE makes these differences more explicit and recasts them as an advantage to the learning community. This is a new model to draw on when they are working in school classrooms. The flexible route allows this meta-cognitive process to be taken one stage further by offering the students some scope to organise their own learning experiences. This is a model not just for their school classrooms, but also for their own ongoing professional development.

It appears at first sight that the highly personalised and individual flexible route could not be as cost effective as the streamlined intensive full-time route. What we cannot take into account because the analysis is yet to be done is the long term contribution these beginning teachers will make to the profession. If those who have had more time and space to prepare for teaching turn out to be those who sustain a long career and become curriculum leaders, whilst those who are rushed into the classroom are found to be most likely to rush back out again, then we would need to rethink our strategies for increasing the supply of mathematics teachers. There are features of the longer and flexible routes into teaching which enable beginning teachers to deconstruct themselves as learners and gradually reconstruct themselves as teachers. In doing so I believe they will have acquired skills and dispositions which will equip them to anticipate and enjoy the complexities and challenges of teaching.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Hilary Povey for her help and support in writing this paper and for her supervision of my Masters dissertation which it derives from.

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