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Enhancing Assessment Practices

Inducting English graduates into the academic discipline of Education via a small-scale empirical research project as part of their teacher-training

Cite as;

Description | What was done?

The Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) English pathway (EDU7207) is a one year programme designed to prepare English graduates to deliver the English and English Literature curricula at Key Stage 3, 4 and 5 in post-primary schools. Assessment to pass the programme comprises both that of professional competences, developed primarily on placement in schools, and the development of academic knowledge and understanding to support professional practice, assessed via formal assignments marked by the PGCE English Convenor. Prior to 2016 the assignments were a mixture of traditional essay, creative tasks and evaluative and reflective practitioner reports. In 2016 the new Co-ordinator of the course, Dr Sheila McConnellogue, took the opportunity to revise the assessment regime to include a piece of small-scale research.

The rationale for this was in part to develop research literacy. Participants in the PGCE English programme enter with existing research skills honed within their initial degree; in the main this will be in the form of document study, assessed via dissertation. The PGCE course is, for most, their first foray into study in the academic discipline of Education. The introduction of the new assignment was designed to develop understanding of how knowledge is created and interpreted via research in this social science discipline. Teacher research literacy currently features in the professional standards in many jurisdictions, including NI. The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland states that 'the notion of the teacher as researcher is complementary to the Council's concept of reflective practice' (GTCNI, 2015:12). In addition, enquiry-based, research-rich school environments are the hallmark of high performing education systems.

Motivation and Aims

The motivation for introducing a piece of empirical enquiry was to achieve multiple aims, one of which is the development of teacher research literacy, which has been defined as the extent to which teachers are familiar with a range of research methods. The British Educational Research Association led an enquiry into research in teacher education which led to the recommendation that research capacity should be built in the teaching profession so that practitioners can understand why research is important and what might be learnt from it (BERA, 2014).

To be able to begin to take an insider perspective and be confident enough to engage with the findings of empirical research, you benefit from being able to carry out research using similar research methods to that of the academic discipline underpinning the teaching profession. To be research literate is to 'get' research and maintain a sense of critical appreciation and healthy scepticism (BERA, 2014:40). There has been an era when research findings in Education have been superficially and sometimes erroneously interpreted, bringing about questionable practices in our schools, such as learning styles and brain gym, which have now been debunked (Newton and Atharva, 2020). So developing this critical stance is particularly important now.

Research as a form of professional development and reflective practice has long been advocated (Stenhouse et al, 1985). It has been found that common elements of high-quality teacher education programmes include teacher research applied to real problems of practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The selection of a 'problem of practice' for the small-scale piece of research for EDU7207 was, therefore, designed to '[empower the trainee teachers] ...to

better understand how they might enhance their practice and increase their impact in the classroom' (BERA, 2014:6) in respect of a major component of the statutory English curriculum – reading.

Reading has a significant impact on young people both as a skill that can be measured but also as an active process with the potential to make a difference to readers' lives (Cliff Hodges, 2015). Pupils in NI reported reading online materials far more frequently than printed materials (Sizmur, 2017). The increasing prevalence of digital texts has resulted in qualitative differences in how we interpret and evaluate meaning (Jenkins et al, 2006), an increased requirement to synthesize meaning, increased opportunity to contribute meaning (Kajder, 2010), as well as the need for skills to engage safely and responsibly in online spaces. As a result of rapidly changing demands for reading ability in our digital age, one of the roles of the post-primary English Teacher is to understand the relationship between changing literacy practices and the implications for pedagogical practices (Kalantzis and Cope, 2015).

Methodology

To foster understanding of the processes by which knowledge is produced via empirical enquiry (Jenkins & Healey, 2005) an assignment was designed so that student teachers on the PGCE English programme are assessed in a way that closely resembles the research practice of the academic discipline of Education (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). Student teachers carry out a small-scale piece of research exploring reading practices in this digital age and disseminate their findings in a research report which includes recommendations for practice, including their own emerging practice.

During the module teaching inputs on reading and associated pedagogical practices are delivered by the programme convenor. Inputs on the changing view of reading are then supplemented by a teaching session from a recent doctoral graduate from QUB's SSESW, Dr Judith Riddell, a practising teacher who has herself completed research on the digital literacy practices of her own pupils (Riddell, 2016). Informed by this learning the student teachers are required to devise and administer a short survey to investigate the reading habits of a small sample of post-primary students (6-8) and a small sample of student teacher (English) (6-8). The programme convenor delivers teaching inputs on the required research method equipping the student teachers with the ability to design a simple questionnaire using frequency and likert-style items to capture data about reading behaviours and attitudes including preferences, and levels of difficulty and enjoyment. The research methods and preparatory work is done in advance and the data is gathered during the final school placement.

The student teachers must collate, present and interpret the data they gather in a report which places the findings in the context of a short review of relevant academic literature. BERA (2018) ethical guidelines must be adhered to through provision of participant information to enable informed consent from parents as well as individual participants. Suitable permissions within the school placement context must also be gained.

The assessed report is structured according to the academic conventions of a social sciences research article with the questionnaire, recruitment materials and a brief description of the setting for data collection in appendices. This is a different form of writing from both the traditional essay format and the evaluative and reflective practitioner account of the other academic assignments for EDU7201. Writing in this social science genre is modelled and scaffolded before students write their final report. For example, advice is given on how to visually present the results using tables, graphs and/or figures.

Having gathered data allowing them to become conversant with the reading habits of pupils and beginning English teachers, the student teachers are encouraged to consider both the challenges and opportunities afforded by the fact that the repertoire of literacies is expanding. In respect of challenges we know, for example, that digital reading involves complex and overlapping comprehension processes (Coiro, 2020) suggesting that meta-skills might need to be taught to address task-switching and narrow-casting inherent in how pupils read in their pleasure time. And given the growing popularity of reading online texts, the status of traditional print texts may be weakened, particularly aesthetic texts, and English teachers may need to think critically about developing motivation to read print texts, particularly longer linear texts (eg novels/plays).

By way of contrast, many digital literacy practices have seen shifts in authority of expertise and agency (Kress, 2010) rendering many digital formats more participatory, collaborative, and distributed than conventional literacies, and less expert-dominated (Buckingham, 2006). This might enhance motivation to read.

In keeping with the masters' level assessment criteria for Education, the research reports are marked according to the extent that the student teacher demonstrates a good range of background reading with depth of analysis and engagement with theories concerning reading processes. Cogent argument should be offered which interprets findings in light of the literature and which integrates recommendations into this discussion. Overall understanding of how research can contribute to professional reflection and change in practice should be shown.

Successes | Challenges | Lessons Learned

The aim of this piece of research is to enable the student teachers to engage with theoretical and practical implications of teaching and learning issues in English and to demonstrate an understanding of how research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in Education.

This brings student teachers into the world of research, giving them the confidence to interpret the educational research of others as well as identifying themselves as potential producers of knowledge (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). This also represents best practice in teacher-education as teacher research should be applied to real problems of practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006) and facilitates an introduction into the academic community of Education as a discipline.

The reports which the students teachers have produced demonstrate clearly that the findings interpretation thereof have been translated to practice in a way that is meaningful and manageable, successfully promoting a critical pedagogical stance (Evans, Waring, Christodoulou, 2017). Insightful understanding of the challenges and opportunities afforded by changing reading habits, as well as engaged reflection on the nature of English as a curricular subject per se, have been developed as a result of the assignment. Module evaluations indicate that many student teachers thoroughly enjoyed carrying out the research projects and a great sense of pride and ownership in the generated data was evidenced in many reports. In the first iteration of the Assignment, two students were given the opportunity to present their research to members of the Education and Training Inspectorate as an example of innovations to the PGCE English programme. The student teachers in the 2018-19 cohort were asked for their opinions about the assessment arrangements for the programme; many respondents commented in this evaluation that they highly valued the research project in terms of the quality of their own professional learning and the results indicated that the vast majority of students felt that the assignment should be kept.

The External Examiner reported that 'the new assignment - multi literacies - is an excellent innovation and an example of excellent practice'. They commented that 'it is very useful for the students to develop an understanding of the principles of educational research in terms of understanding research-based teaching, and also, this particular piece of research provides them with insight into the current reading practices of their potential pupils in schools'.

However, the main challenges are the short length both to the course itself and the report, arising from the fact that the PGCE is a one-year, 60 CATS point programme. For example, were there to be more time available, it would be preferable to introduce student teachers to a range of research methods used in Education and allow them to select the most appropriate. Teacher education programmes in many countries, including the south of Ireland, have been increased in length to two years. An increased duration to the programme would allow students to engage in a more substantial piece of research. However, in spite of this, the assignment has been deemed to be 'a challenging and thought-provoking piece of work for the students to undertake' by the student teachers, the programme convener and the External Examiner.

Scalability and Transferability

In terms of transferability the aim is that student teachers will continue to do their own research when they are qualified teachers in school. This will inform their own reflective practice. The benefit of including small-scale practitioner research projects in training for a range of professions in courses which take longer than one year is well-established. Those shorter courses that do not currently include a research element could easily adopt the truncated and highly selective method of promoting research skills in this case study where there is not sufficient time, nor CATS credit points, for a full-scale dissertation.

References

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Further Information

Insert details of any additional links, or studies resulting from this work.