

Learning to Teach: on being a teacher

GILL MULLIS

ABSTRACT This narrative is one teacher's attempt to represent a personal (political) and professional journey from becoming a student teacher to being a teacher, whilst always remaining a learner. The author offers her record of significant experiences, influences, debates and dilemmas, pausing to reflect on the principles which have informed her work with students and staff and to share her hopes for future learning and learning relationships.

Do you ever get that Sunday evening sense of dread? Have you differentiated enough in those lesson plans ... will the queue for the photocopier be long ... will it work? Will the laptop talk to the projector? Or that pre-autumn term telephone conversation with a fellow teacher: 'I can't teach!' followed by reassurances from aforementioned colleague who is feeling exactly the same way and is now reaching for a bottle of wine or beer. How about the last three scripts of 27 to be marked when it's approaching midnight? The imprint on your forehead at 1 a.m. when you discover you've used them as a pillow. Bus duty or gate duty or break duty when it's raining and you've forgotten your umbrella and the pathetic fallacy dictates that it's the students who are stormy. Worst still ... it's 3 p.m. and you still haven't managed to get to the loo due to constant interruptions on the journey to get from the Block Z (edge of playing fields) to the main block. The sandwiches now with curly edges are still on your desk (you have a desk?) and someone's nicked your mug from the cupboard which means it won't resurface for at least a term. SIP, SIA, SEF, SATs, Ofsted, QCA, AQA, OCR, ECM, DfES, NUT, LSC, NQT, OTT, TGIF – great opportunity to catch up on work at the weekend.

So Why Do We Do it?

So why do we do it? When I first chose to be a teacher, the imperative was my love of English literature and the belief that I could share that enthusiasm with others, influenced by memories of particular English and drama teachers from

my secondary school days who had communicated their like of students and subject through exciting lessons, the sparkle in their eyes and their willingness to give of their own time. I recall looking forward to receiving back my stories where my English teachers would scribble responses in the margin and demonstrate that they'd really engaged with the narrative. And I still have one of the papier-mâché strawberries I made for the production of *Oliver!*

Talking to fellow initial teacher training (ITT) students and teaching colleagues about early days, it's interesting to hear the diverse autobiographical details which brought them into teaching: being expelled from school, experiencing poor teaching, experiencing good teaching, love of subject, enjoying working with young people, a career change due to a desire to make work meaningful by contributing to a better society, not knowing what else to do, political conviction, pleasing parents, displeasing parents – from this the staff mix is created:

'School can be seen as the arena in which opposing definitions of the school compete.' I nearly always remember this quote from Colin Lacey when in the midst of an educational debate with colleagues. When at my best I remember and seek to understand and quietly challenge, at my worst I argue and sulk, in moments of despair I go home and cry.

PGCE as Critical Thinking, Not Meek Acceptance

The Sussex University Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course built upon the idea of teacher training as in part 'personal journey' where 'the teaching practice and the University work are kept in continuous dialectical play' (Peter Abbs) and I believe that from these early beginnings came my interest in the significance of dialogue and the creative tensions between academic research and discourse and the realities of schools and classroom interaction. The course challenged my vague thinking about subject 'delivery', explorations of English as a 'literary-expressive discipline' making me think more critically about traditional subject boundaries, offering a new pedagogical framework. When this was informed by research on the impact of class, race and gender on students' experience and achievement, the political dimension highlighted the centrality of social justice and the role of education in challenging individual and institutional 'isms' and constructing a curriculum around key concepts and knowledge of the learners. Ultimately, it was the students who were at the centre of all this and they had me hooked. Learning about them, with them as individuals, learning how to teach through their responses and reactions, firmly placed relationships at the heart of the learning process.

The PGCE was a learning journey which encouraged critical thinking rather than meek acceptance of an increasingly prescriptive curriculum. It also enabled me to appreciate the meaningful subtleties of classroom interaction. Workshops which addressed tone and pitch of voice, volume, eye contact and 'eye feeling' – the soft rather than the hard look – body language, listening

skills, proved invaluable in learning how to teach. In learning to continue to learn.

'Dialectical play' has been a recurrent theme. Stantonbury Campus, Milton Keynes was a thinking school, a place filled with creative and often unconventional practitioners who worked hard because they cared. Consistency came from caring about other human beings and a belief and optimism about their ability to succeed.

It was through the campus's links with the Open University and work with Rosemary Deem that I encountered research by Ann Oakley based on feminist research methodologies and the move towards a dialogic model which challenged power relationships, a model which was based on mutual trust and reciprocity. This was at a time when the 'Mutual Support and Observation' programme introduced by Michael Fielding at Stantonbury, and shaped by participant teachers, encouraged observation of lessons as a means to improve practice. The 'triangulation' model involved students as part of the observation and feedback process. This was not a 'cosy' process lacking Ofsted's rigour; it was more rigorous and probing because you reflected on your own practice, you identified an aspect of your teaching you needed to improve and you invited a colleague to observe your lessons over time. Makes you feel pretty vulnerable, but enables you to learn from those whose opinions you value, from those whom you know have a meaningful stake in the organisation and in identifying solutions, not just problems.

Dialogue

It was not until I invited students to become part of the process that it really made sense. I began working with a male student whose behaviour had been challenging. In observing other students' behaviour, he began to comment on his own. In discussing aspects of teaching and learning with myself and my colleague, there were subtle shifts in our relationship and the beginnings of understandings of different perspectives. Where my teacher colleague might identify observable strengths and weaknesses, she could not get inside his head and tell me that he had been compliant but bored out of his mind, or that lack of breakfast had contributed to poor behaviour. I think it was then that I realised I would never get it right for all students all of the time, but I needed to continue to explore and develop ways to understand and value students as individuals and to never stop interrogating my own practice. More than this, I had to make time to listen – not just to the answers to literary questions, but to the narratives/lives of the students I taught.

Then, to work with students to act on the listening. To get to the point where students could act effectively without teacher intervention and scaffolding. To improve their understanding of factors influencing their learning. How far could you change the power relationship? How far could and should you challenge definitions of novice and expert? What conditions are needed for voices to have the choice to engage in dialogue?

I learned a lot about students during residential experiences when we were all in it together; there's nothing quite like the shared experience of being eaten by mosquitoes in Cumbria on a late-night adventure activity, or learning new songs around a campfire, or trusting students to row you out across a lake when you're scared of capsizing. These are the experiences you remember and that feed back into interactions, understandings and confidence(s) in the classroom. You know.

I still recall 25 students waiting patiently at a gate when a student who had never seen a cow before spent ten minutes slowly creeping across a field so as not to disturb the herd, so he could reach out without scaring them and touch one. The round of applause and smiles on his return said it all.

Challenging Boundaries

And so it goes. You find that teaching and learning are far more complex processes than you ever thought when you first entered the profession. You find that it's harder to switch off. You read more and are forced to acknowledge the gap between what we know about learning, what resources and new technologies are available and what is offered in schools between set hours to set groups during set terms. Schools which challenge such boundaries are seen as innovative, when really they're just being sensible. Businesses and governments which remain critical could invest more first and remove some of the restrictions which have a stranglehold on students' and teachers' experiences and achievements. Key Stage 3 tests? Reliability? Usefulness? Timing? Motivation? Challenge? Inclusiveness? Value? You observe skilled teachers feeling deskilled by the number and nature of initiatives which make nonsense of educational sense.

In every school there are teachers who are expert at teaching, but where does the current curriculum framework – with its narrow system of assessment and reporting (and those tables) – provide the capacity and encouragement for teachers to enable all students to become expert learners?

If anything, teachers and students remain innovative *in spite of* constant and shifting external demands and constraints, determined to create opportunities for dialogue. There are schools transforming the nature of the environment, increasingly involving students at the planning and design stage and creating spaces which promote learning; schools experimenting with creative timetabling, challenging the old constraining constructs – creating blocks of time for enquiry and new teaching and learning relationships; schools working with students to introduce more varied and flexible groupings and programmes to meet individual learning needs; schools inviting students to develop their choice of 'student voice' initiatives, such as peer mentors, students as researchers and peer educators; schools addressing how the curriculum might be reinterpreted and reshaped to enable students to understand how to become effective learners; schools raising questions and inviting questions about teaching and learning.

Perhaps this is the one thing they have in common – they are listening to and responding intelligently to students as individuals and as members of a learning community. From this begins a dialogue and those subtle shifts in relationships which promote trust and shared understandings, which enable challenge to be creative rather than destructive.

What Does it Mean to Be a Teacher?

So, to return to my original brief: what does it mean to be a teacher? Twenty years on from my PGCE, attempting to capture what was once seemingly simple, but has, though experience, become increasingly complex, I'd say – for me – it's about:

- Being principled: having 'touchstones' which guide decisions and actions.
- Being caring: knowing and wanting to understand students and staff.
- Being intelligent and brave: knowing what to fight for and where to draw the line. Who said the one-hour 3-part lesson repeated 5 times in different rooms on different subjects was motivating for 30 students?
- Being inspired: people (adults and students) and papers you can return to in moments of doubt or celebration or reflection (I count Michael Fielding, Jean Rudduck and Penny Westwood as significant voices here).
- Being inspirational and aspirational for others: so that students want to learn with you and beyond you.
- Being creative: making a scheme of work from a bucket of cross-curricular criteria, a roll of wallpaper, fat felt pens, blue tack, an enthusiastic team with criteria of their own and a big block of time.
- Being instinctive: responding in a particular way at a particular time because you just know it's the right thing to do.
- Being a reflective practitioner – always learning.
- Being hungry: you know there is rarely time to eat during the school day ...
- Being Victorian: bells, blazers and timed exams?
- Being humorous: you've got to have a laugh!
- Being able to switch off.

GILL MULLIS is an Assistant Headteacher and is currently on secondment from a school in Bedfordshire. She has also taught in comprehensive schools in Sussex and Buckinghamshire, throughout this time working with others to define, develop and embed 'student voice', most recently through initiatives supported by the Economic and Social Research Council 'Teaching and Learning Research Programme', the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and the Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership. *Correspondence:* Gill Mullis, Student Voice Co-ordinator, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 16th Floor, Millbank Tower, 21-24 Millbank, London SW1P 4QP, United Kingdom (gillmullis@yahoo.co.uk).

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