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Revisiting Teachers as Learners

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ABSTRACT This article revisits the concept of teachers as learners within the context of radical changes that have taken place within the education system in England over the past 25 years. The concept of *professional courage* is discussed and examined in relation to questions and issues raised by Paulo Freire in a series of letters to teachers (1997). Further questions are raised about *professional courage* in order to provide a basis for a dialogue concerning this critical yet unremarked characteristic of outstanding teachers and learners.

It is now 25 years since I wrote my first article for *FORUM*. The article, entitled 'Teachers as Learners' (1983, pp. 79-81), focused on the work of a teacher researchers' group that I was involved in at the time. The work of that group informed much of my subsequent work with teachers – whether it was as a local authority adviser and inspector; or as a senior manager in higher education or, for the last 14 years, as an Education Development Consultant working in transitional and developing countries.

The opportunity to contribute to this 50th anniversary issue of *FORUM* has prompted me to reflect on the changes that have occurred since I first joined the Editorial Board in 1984. In this article I want to revisit the concept of teachers as learners within the context of radical changes that have taken place within the education system in England. I will then discuss the concept of *professional courage* – which is, I believe, a critical yet unremarked characteristic of outstanding teachers and learners.

Initial Aspirations

In 1983 action research was starting to make a significant contribution to the professional development of teachers. It provided a heady mix of new opportunities whereby teachers in classrooms were able to raise questions about their practice and articulate hypotheses based on direct observation of teaching and learning. At that time, the work of many teacher research groups was being

validated through support in the form of small-scale grants from the Schools Council. This meant that the findings arising from teacher research began to reach a wider audience through publication.[1] Regional and national conferences were held where teachers involved in action research were able to share their experiences.

Also, at around that time, higher education (HE) institutions began to incorporate action research into accredited postgraduate certificate, diploma and master's courses for teachers. These provided an opportunity for diverse investigations which were sometimes linked to more mainstream research initiatives. An important characteristic of both the teacher research groups and the HE courses was the way in which they empowered teachers by encouraging them to (i) be self-critical and (ii)work out what action they needed to take to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms. The classroom action research cycle is predicated on the assumption that reflective teachers continue *learning* about their practice through the different investigations and subsequent actions they undertake.

Action research provided a means whereby teachers could be rigorous, imaginative and creative – characteristics we shall return to later when discussing the concept of professional courage.

The Reform Agenda I: what have we gained?

Much has been written about the reforms that resulted from the 1988 Education Reform Act – particularly the introduction of a national curriculum; the imposition of a national assessment system and the delegation of financial responsibility to schools. One of the most significant, in relation to our discussion of teachers as learners, was the requirement for all teachers to become familiar with the new curriculum and its related assessment procedures. This, linked to the 1987 changes in conditions of service, meant that all teachers had five non-teaching days in each year when they could be required to participate in school-based training and development. For many, this was the first time they had undertaken any in-service education and training (INSET), as until then virtually all INSET was elective. This meant that teachers were able to choose whether or not they wished to become involved; and, as most locally provided INSET courses took place at the end of the school day, many teachers with family commitments chose not to do so.

The advent of the new curriculum and its assessment also coincided with rapid technological change, so that teachers started to become aware of the value of computer-based and computer-assisted learning. Since then, the electronic revolution in schools has been such that many teachers now find it difficult to imagine how they coped without Internet access and electronic whiteboards.

Since 1997, schools have received much greater resources to support learning – both in terms of materials, equipment and personnel. Class sizes in most schools have been reduced and the appointment of teaching assistants has

(theoretically) freed teachers to concentrate on the main professional priorities – albeit often determined by central government.

The drive to assure quality has resulted in a rigorous examination of what is required to improve schools. Teachers are now very adept at planning for improvement and are conversant with the need to be fully accountable. Responsibility and accountability can be looked at as two sides of the same coin where the greater freedom that devolution implies is matched by rigorous self-evaluation by teachers and other stakeholders within the school community.

The Reform Agenda II: what are the current realities?

The situation now in 2008 is that there is far more emphasis on the technical competence of teachers. It would seem that the debate, conducted in the early nineties, on whether initial teacher education was concerned with educating teachers to be professionals or technicians, has been won by those who are in favour of a purely instrumental approach to teaching. At that time I expressed my concerns in a *FORUM* article (Thomson, 1993, pp. 18-20) and asked, 'What kind of teachers do we want/need to give our children the education they deserve?' A question which is just as relevant today as it was then.

Many would argue that the plethora of national strategies, since the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy strategies in 1998, has made it impossible for teachers to break out of the box and do anything other than what the Government requires. Unfortunately, the constraints imposed limit possibilities for creative and imaginative teaching and this has resulted in a 'dumbing down' of the potential for exploratory teaching and learning.

The obsession with measurable performance and verifiable outputs is unrelenting. The target spiral is operational at all levels: local authority, school and individual teachers. If, for example, targets are not being met at local authority level, additional pressure is put on the schools; and if schools are not meeting their targets, additional pressure is exerted on teachers and students. The climate that is created is one of failure where individuals in each part believe that they are victims of the system.

There are of course notable examples of teachers who have the courage to take a stance and follow their convictions (based on experience); who are able to achieve high standards without sacrificing key principles. Alison Peacock's article in a recent volume of *FORUM* (Peacock, 2008, pp. 219-224) highlights what can be done when decision making is a shared activity between all those involved in the school community, children, parents and teachers. I first came across the story of the school's remarkable transformation from being in special measures, when Alison went there in 2003, to being regarded as an outstanding school in 2007, in an article she wrote for the journal of my professional association last year (Peacock, 2007, pp. 24-26). In it she set out the key elements of the transformation, which include:

- increasing children's (and teachers') expectation of what can be achieved;

- viewing mistakes as formative learning experiences rather than setbacks;
- fostering creativity and an entrepreneurial approach;
- creating an environment where 'anything is possible' (learning without limits);
- not labelling children by ability;
- teaching the skills of rigorous self-assessment.

When I visited Alison's school last December I was struck by how purposeful the children were – they knew what they had to do and got on with it. The visit reminded me of the importance of being able, as Alison can, to articulate not just what you are doing, but why you are doing it – whether it is as a head teacher, teacher, parent or child. As a teacher researcher and member of the Longsearch Group [2], Alison did not just benefit from her own experience as a learner but was also encouraged to articulate, explore and extend the possibilities with others in the group. Her article focused on creating a culture where it is safe for children to take risks; something which I believe is just as critical for teachers as learners. The key elements, highlighted above, could also be said to apply to all of us as learners, particularly if we want to be able to

> demonstrate to students the importance of imagination for life. Imagination helps curiosity and inventiveness, just as it enhances adventure, without which we cannot create. (Freire, 1997, p. 51)

It is ironic that the kind of freedom to explore and test the limits of what is possible is now more likely to be found in the private sector, where schools are not required to be part of the measurement and results treadmill.

Professional Courage

> … those wanting to teach must be able to dare, that is to have the predisposition to fight for justice and to be lucid in its defence of the need to create conditions conducive to pedagogy in schools; though this may be a joyful task it must also be intellectually rigorous. The two should never be viewed as mutually exclusive.
> (Freire, 1997 p. 4)

Freire's statement about daring to teach raises questions about why we choose to become teachers. It is an interesting concept in this country where in the past those who became teachers were often regarded as having taken a 'soft option'. This would not necessarily be true today when there is far more acknowledgement of the pressure and stresses that teachers face. However, it is important to recognise some cultural dissonance between the above statement, which is related to the kind of cultural action for freedom that Freire promoted during his life [3], and the cultural context in this country. In this country we have gone through radical changes where the professionalism of teachers has

been substituted by technical competence. A marked difference between now and 1983 is that then I was looking at ways in which teachers were being encouraged to become active agents in the development of their own learning, whereas now the whole concept of continuing professional development is largely related to external agendas for change that are usually imposed by the latest government initiatives.

Freire was a passionate advocate of the need to relate theory to practice; he said that 'The continuing training of the learner, which implies the critical reflection on practice, is founded exactly on the dialectic between practice and theory' (Freire, 1997, p. 83). I am convinced that it is the synthesis between theory and practice (praxis) that provides the strongest foundation for effective teaching and learning. I know from my own experience, both in terms of postgraduate study and through my involvement as a teacher researcher, that my ability to articulate has been strengthened and enhanced by my developing understanding and awareness of that relationship.

Earlier I referred to a question I raised in an article I wrote for *FORUM* in 1993: 'What kind of teachers do we want/need, to give our children the education they deserve?' At the time this question prompted me to raise the issue of whether we were educating teachers to be professionals or technicians. I then asked:

> Do we want teachers who are compliant operatives, technicians who carry out required tasks?, or Do we want teachers who are able to renew and recreate their professionalism; thereby demonstrating a capacity to transform, generate and be creative within and about the learning process?

I went on to say:

> In espousing the case for theory, I am looking at that which is not only illuminated by practice but emerges from it. To eliminate the processes of observation, reflection and questioning through adopting a functional, instrumental view of teaching and learning, will, I believe, ignore the *quality of mind* which is vital to all of us in our work with children. (Thomson, 1993, p. 19)

It seems to me now that professional courage is required in a whole range of circumstances, particularly when we need to stand up for beliefs and principles that are grounded in experience and practice. Paradoxically, whilst professional courage may require you to stand up and be counted, to put your head above the parapet; it can also mean that you will be strong enough to resist pressures and influences that you know will reduce your capacity to be an effective teacher. Professional courage requires you to take risks, to be an open-minded learner, where you find that your learning will take you in unexpected directions. Professional courage is not irrational but is based on the security, strength and self-awareness that are gained through the ongoing processes of reflexivity and action.

I would hope that more opportunities could arise for learning teachers to establish a community that recognises and values professional courage. Perhaps one way forward would be to look at the concept of a Community of Enquiry. This is a concept that the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) in Scotland has developed, based on findings from its Learners, Learning and Teaching Network (LLT) (AERS, Research Briefing Paper 1, 2008).[4] The Briefing Paper looks at the concept as a possible model for educational research and sets out key features for its realisation. These are:

- Dialogue and participation
- Relationships
- Perspectives and assumptions
- Structure and content
- Climate
- Purpose
- Control

Finally, when thinking of taking risks, I think of the handicapped spastic child, John Clement Sumner, in Ivan Southall's book *Let the Balloon Go*, who encountered a stranger on the street in Sydney:

> John had been standing there trembling, trying to fight off the shakes ... The man's head had come down, his eyes had come down, and then his voice like a quiet fire: 'You'll do it, son. Don't let anything stop you from being the boy you want to be. The answer's inside you. *A balloon is not a balloon until you cut the string and let it go.* (Southall, 1968, pp. 38-39)

So, perhaps we do need to be able to cut our metaphorical strings in order to enrich our learning as teachers and experience the multilayered complexity and richness of what I believe is an honourable profession.

Notes

[1] Examples of publications supported by the Schools Council and published by Longmans included: *What Learning Looks Like* (Ed. Liz & Alan Thomson, 1984); *A Room Full of Children Thinking* (Charles Hull, Jean Rudduck, Alan Sigsworth & Gudi Daymond, 1985); *Teachers in Partnership* (Ed. Jean Rudduck, 1982) and *Issues in Teaching for Understanding* (Ed. Dave Ebbutt & John Elliott, 1985).

[2] The Longsearch Group was the group I wrote about in my first article for *FORUM*. It was established in 1980 and continued meeting for over 20 years. Annabelle Dixon was a founder member and also wrote about the work of the group in an article for *FORUM* in 1994.

[3] Freire's work was in response to traditional formal models of education where the teacher imparts information to students who are passive recipients. It has since formed the basis of what is now known as participatory action research

(PAR) and has emerged in recent years as a significant methodology for intervention, development and change within communities and groups. PAR is now promoted and implemented by many international development agencies and university programmes, as well as countless local community organisations around the world.

[4] As well as the cited work in Scotland there are other emerging websites for teacher research. Most of these emanate from work that has been done through BECTA and Bath University – further information can be accessed through: http://www.teacherresearch.net and http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/schools/education/cpd/pdf-docs/07docs/08-tchrs-as-rsrchrs-bklt.pdf

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