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## **Mentors' use of theory in a Secondary teacher training course**

### **ABSTRACT**

Mentors on teacher training courses in the UK are required to train and assess student teachers in addition to fulfilling the supporting and encouraging roles more usually associated with mentoring. Using Handal's (1987) Model of Practical Theory, this study analyses data from interviews and non-participant observations and shows ways in which five Secondary school music mentors draw on both their personally-constructed theories and their knowledge of educational theory to fulfil their training function.

### **THE PLACE OF MENTORING WITHIN THE SYSTEM**

#### **Mentoring as an element of a teacher training course**

Since 1992, teacher training in the UK has been carried out very largely in schools. The most common route into teaching is the 36-week, PGCE (Post-Graduate Certificate in Education) course. The PGCE course for Secondary school teachers includes, by law, a minimum of 120 days (24 weeks) in school. The prime agent for training during these weeks is the teacher/mentor.

Mentoring in a PGCE course is therefore different from mentoring in other contexts. Mentors are generally understood to fulfil roles such as role model, teacher, sponsor, encourager, counsellor and friend (Anderson and Shannon, 1988). Mentors on a PGCE course are also required to, 'train[ing] students to teach their specialist subjects, to assess pupils and to manage classes; and for supervising students and assessing their competence in these respects' (DES, 1992). The UK government sets out detailed statements (Standards) against which trainees are to be assessed and the arrangements under which courses must be approved in England and Wales (TTA, 2000); there are slightly different arrangements for teachers in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

#### **A PGCE course described**

As a teacher educator, I have researched into mentoring in a PGCE course, which was based in a partnership of one university and approximately 70 Secondary (11-18) schools. The PGCE course I investigated included two main school placements in which a mentor was involved, and two short placements without a mentor, when the focus was on observation teaching and learning. In the first term of the course (September-December), trainees were placed with a mentor in a school for a ten-day 'serial' placement (two days a week), followed by a 'block' placement of five weeks. After Christmas, trainees were placed with a different mentor for a further ten days serial placement and a thirteen-week block placement.

There are two types of mentors involved in this training; 'Professional' Mentors (PM) and 'Curriculum' Mentors (CM). Each school has one PM, usually a Deputy Head of the school. This person takes overall charge of the teacher training in the school. In addition, each trainee has one CM, usually a Head of Subject. For example, a school which trains students to teach English, History and Music will have four mentors: the PM plus three CMs, one for each curriculum subject. Roles and responsibilities are set out in the PGCE Handbook.

In each placement the mentors are required to provide support and challenge for trainees. In particular CMs are required to observe their trainee teach once a week and complete a Lesson Observation Form describing the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching observed. They are required to hold a weekly meeting for 30 minutes with their trainees. In addition, they are required to complete proformas, judging the performance of their trainees against government-set standards, and to grade them on a 3-point scale. PMs are required to meet with trainees from time to time, and to manage the work of the CMs.

Schools operate PGCE courses in partnership with universities. Arrangments vary slightly between subject areas, but many CMs are involved in designing courses and interviewing trainees. They attend meetings twice a year, usually at the university and also undergo one day's 'mentor training', during which they are shown how to observe trainees, how to complete the relevant paperwork and how to support trainees in the weekly meeting.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I studied the mentoring of music trainees. Bannan & Cox (1997) suggest that music mentoring brings specific problems not always apparent in other subjects. Music teachers are often required to lead musical groups during breaks and after school, and association with the wider community demands additional time and organisation. Day-to-day life for a Head of Music often involves her liaising with peripatetic instrumental teachers, conducting rehearsals and organising musical events in addition to class teaching and, in recognition of this, her post is sometimes described as 'Director of Music'. Despite this, Bannan & Cox remind us that music departments are small ones, often consisting of only one full-time member of staff.

Mentoring music trainees can be seen, therefore, as uniquely challenging and, because there is evidence that Secondary school music teaching is unsuccessful (Ross, 1995, Harland et al., 2000, Ofsted, 2003,) research into music mentoring is important if the trend of poor Secondary music teaching is to be reversed.

The research question was, 'How do teacher/mentors train music teachers?' A multiple-method case study methodology was used. Data were collected by observing some of the weekly, timetabled conferences between the mentor and the trainee. Trainees and mentors were interviewed, and documents relating to the course were studied. Data were analysed from a psychological perspective, informed by Eric Berne's theory of Transactional Analysis, and also from a social constructionist perspective.

Five mentor-trainee relationships were studied, from the same PGCE course, in Secondary (11-19) music. Twelve mentor-trainee conferences were observed and recorded on digital audiotape, and transcripts were made. Each trainee and mentor was interviewed once, so that their individual perspectives on the mentoring could be explored. The transactions between mentors and trainees were first analysed as to their content, and further analysed using Handal and Lauvas' (1987) model of Practical Theory.

## **FINDINGS**

A very large range of curriculum content was discussed. This included,

- Teaching the meaning of musical terms
- Playing keyboards with given fingering
- Playing a bass part to a melody
- Playing various melodies
- Playing music from memory
- Knowing that percussion instruments can be described as 'tuned' or 'untuned'
- Comparing two versions of the same song
- Aural exercises (e.g. hearing how many notes are played in a chord)
- Drawing colourful pictures of musical instruments
- Learning the names of some jazz musicians
- Composing within given limits
- Making a dance track from a given melody
- Discovering the structure of a song by questioning
- Counting the number of beats per minute in a song
- Learning to sing songs
- Learning how to play percussion instruments correctly

Mentors and trainees also discussed a range of teaching methods. In this study, these included, questioning, creating wall displays to teach vocabulary, repeating information, breaking the learning into chunks, providing musical demonstrations, using performance to motivate pupils, isolating problem pupils from the rest of the class, and producing worksheets. Across the cases, there is ample evidence that mentors actively teach their trainees, not only what they should teach but also, how to teach.

## ANALYSIS (1)

In analysing these data I used a model suggested by Handal and Lauvas, who, drawing on the work of Løvlie, have investigated teachers' use of 'practical theory'. They start from the premise that,

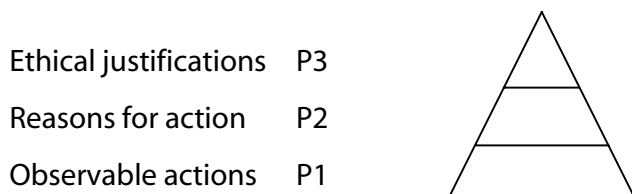
Every teacher possesses a 'practical theory' of teaching which is subjectively the strongest determining factor in her educational practice.' (Handal and Lauvas, 1987: 29.)

This practical theory governs actions and is, in turn, governed by ethical considerations. It is not a static theory; rather,

'practical theory' refers to a person's private, integrated but ever-changing system of knowledge, experience and values which is relevant to teaching practice at any particular time. (Op cit.: 10)

Reflective practice can therefore be considered on three levels. The lowest level (P1) consists of what is actually done; observable actions. The P2 level, practical theory, is concerned with either practice-based or theory-based reasons for actions. The highest level (P3) is concerned with ethical or political justifications; the moral basis for acting in accordance with one set of reasons rather than another.

Handal and Lauvas represent the relationship between the three levels as a triangle:



They see mentoring in terms of counselling and say that,

the main objective in counselling is to provide the teacher with feedback for the improvement of her practical theory. This is what counselling is about. This is how the teacher's theory can be elaborated, expanded and corrected; then made more relevant, useful and ready to hand for her. (Op. Cit.: 107)

The three-part model of practical theory has been used by Handal, in researching teachers' practice in schools in Norway. He found that,

[Teachers] were used to talking about their work and deciding what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, i.e. planning at the level of action, but rarely explicitly referring to reasons for this (P2) or the justification for the work itself (P3). (Handal, quoted in Day, 1993)

He suggested that the reason for this was that, 'reasons and justifications for action are not highly in demand in the 'busyness' culture of schools' (Op. Cit.: 85).

Applying this model to my research data, I find that much of the talk is on the level of action (P1); often in very considerable detail. For example, this is how one mentor (Mentor C) told her trainee to lead a peer evaluation of pupils' work:

You asked the others to say what they think, and their response was, 'Oh it's very good.' And I think you can be really specific with the whole class with that. 'Did that note really . . . Okay, just play that bit again. Did we really like that note? Okay, what can we change that to? Why didn't that work? Why did that work? You know, put it on the overhead projector, play it on the piano, sing it, get them to sing it.

There is also discussion at the P2 level. These practical and theoretical reasons for action relate, naturally enough, either to their need to accommodate their teaching to those in authority or to their pupils. With regard to authority, mentors tend to phrase their reasons in terms of satisfying requirements, which might be real (i.e. the authorities have demanded them) or perceived. Here are two pieces of advice relating to the KS3 Strategy, which requires that all Secondary teachers pay attention to teaching literacy in their subjects:

Mentor A: Ofsted do like having round the classroom various words [indicates posters with musical terms]

Mentor C: As long as you're explaining words, writing them up, saying, giving a method of remembering it, then you're including your literacy thing.

In both cases, the advice is to satisfy the real or perceived requirements of external authorities.

Talking about pupils, mentors tend to give reasons that relate to gaining and maintaining their interest or enjoyment. For example, Mentor D steered his trainee away from doing a whole lesson of singing, not because this is bad for a fundamental, educational reason, but because the pupils aren't used to it and presumably wouldn't like it:

M: Do you think singing is a good thing to do, for a whole lesson?  
T: I'm starting to think it's not,

M: I wouldn't do that, not personally. I'd steer away. Because they're not used to doing a lot of singing here.

Mentor E, similarly, justified his advice by reference to what his pupils would enjoy:

M: I'd caution against spending too long on any one project with the class. Half the term maximum I would say because otherwise, even though you're approaching it from lots of different angles, the children will ultimately get tired of it.

Taken together, these extracts show a particular construction of teaching; simultaneously responding to the twin pressures of satisfying authorities and motivating pupils.

These P2 reasons are practice-based, drawn from the teachers' experience. There are also some theory-based reasons for action. For example, this was how Mentor

C explained, why pupils should be silent when listening to instructions, with reference to her knowledge of dyslexia:

M: When you asked them to write the date and you told them what it was, there were loads still talking and playing instruments. If you had a slightly dyslexic child – and you may or may not have noticed if they're dyslexic at that point – their brain can't cope with sound going on and an instruction.

There were also several instances in this study of mentors explicitly recognising 'issues' in practice; questions to which there might be several possible answers. In addition to the discussion of issues, there were two examples of interactions in this research which I could assign to what Handal and Lauvas describe as level P3. For example:

I see our role as partly playing music to the kids that they won't hear anywhere else, so that, there are occasions when, if they bring a CD I will put it on. . . but I think that's music they're used to; they hear it anywhere. If we play music that they don't hear, I think that's crucial. Whether they like it or not, it's exposing them to different types of music. And if they get to like it, and get to have a wider experience of music, that's really what it's all about. (Mentor B)

This is a statement of values. It is not simply a matter of applying theory, nor does it come purely from experience. It is a justification for his practice; 'what it's all about'.

Although Handal and Lauvas say, 'every counsellor should make his own practical theory explicit to himself (sic)' they stress that,

The counsellor cannot limit his task to the transmission of his own understanding but must take the skills, knowledge and values of the learner as the point of departure. (Op. cit.: 7)

This is akin to the notion of entering the client's 'frame of reference' in counselling (Rogers, 1951). There is no evidence in my data that the mentors attempted to do this. The closest a mentor came to discovering the aims of the trainees was in an exchange between Mentor B and his trainee:

M: Which type of lesson do you prefer? I mean, forget the type of kids. Here or [your previous school], in terms of the whole structure of the lesson?

T: Here.

M: Because of the written element?

T: Yeah.

M: Because it's easier on you, or because . . .

T: Not necessarily because it's easier on me. I just think maybe they, I'm not knocking [the other school], because they've got really good music going on there, but I think that giving them something written first gives them more information. They learn more from it.

This can be understood as a P2 statement by the trainee. (Pupils acquire more knowledge if they do written work as well as practical work). But it can also be read as a story, which the mentor invites the trainee to construct. (The music curriculum at his school is better.) This resonates with the fears of Handal and Lauvas, who suggest that trainee teachers might be led to adopt a 'chameleon strategy'; changing their approaches to fit the views of their assessors, rather than developing their own theory (Op cit.: 98). I am inclined to view this exchange as not so much an exploration of aims, but as a jointly constructed narrative, which affirms the mentor's curriculum.

## **ANALYSIS (2)**

So far we have considered the feedback in terms of the mentor teaching the trainee. Taking a social constructivist view, we can see the feedback more as a way in which both parties construct knowledge together. In this view, knowledge is not simply located in the mentor, and passed on to the trainee. Neither is it found by a process of self-discovery. Rather, it is constructed in the conversations between mentor and trainee.

This view of learning owes something to the Russian psychologist, Vygotsky, who saw that children developed their thinking through their interactions with adults, and particularly by talking – not only by 'thinking aloud' but also by social talk. He concluded that, 'Any higher mental function . . . had been social before it became internal'. He suggested that a child had a 'zone of proximal development', defined as,

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978)

Building on Vygotsky's work, Bruner postulated some ways in which the adult might assist the child's learning within the zone of proximal development. He called this assistance, 'scaffolding', a term which, 'refers to the wide range of activities through which the adult, or the more expert peer, assists the learner to achieve goals which would otherwise be beyond them, for example by modelling an action, by suggesting a strategy for solving a problem or by structuring the learning into manageable parts'. (Smith et al., 1988)

Bruner saw learning not as a matter of acquiring new, static, information, but rather as actively constructing new ideas and concepts, based on those previously learned. He also saw that learning in childhood was related to learning in later life for, 'Central to Bruner's thinking is the conviction that the process of learning is the same whether we are talking about the pioneer at the frontier of knowledge or the child engaged in making a construction of wooden blocks'. (Smith et al., op cit.)

Very often in this study, the knowledge was constructed only by one person, while the other listened (or at least remained fairly quiet). Sometimes, knowledge was constructed by the trainee, as in this exchange between Mentor E and his trainee:

T: also I'm interested in that new Pure and Simple thing for the year sevens.

M: yeah.

T: That led to them doing a lesson based on it which could have been extended for several lessons.

M: sure.

T: And I'm trying to, you know, find songs which are up to date and all the rest of it which the children will take to, which we can do as keyboard exercises and then sing.

M: yeah.

T: And that's one of the things I'm going to be doing in my scheme of work I'm going to hand in.

M: right, yes.

In this instance, the mentor acknowledged that he had heard his trainee and, by so doing, he gave her permission to continue to develop her theme. On the other hand, he didn't actually contribute anything of his own to this theme. There are many conversations within this study, which I have called 'solos' when there has been no comment from the other party and 'accompanied solos' when, as in the above example, the main speaker has elicited conversational tokens.

Leaving such instances aside, we can now explore those transactions in which knowledge was actively constructed by both parties. When this happened, we can usually find a trigger – something said by one person that enabled the second person to contribute to building knowledge. Triggers were usually provided by the mentors in the form of questions. In fact, most of the occasions when the two parties constructed knowledge together began with a question. Sometimes this was fairly straightforward, as in this example, where Mentor C and her trainee discussed some of the pupils' work:

M: The group at the back, by the telephone, they didn't just start with the waltz, did they? They started with [inaudible – chords?] but they did a lovely melody over the top of them. Was that the bit you said you liked?

T: ding ding ding ding [singing the music] Yeah.

M: I can't remember what it was, but it was really nice.

T: Yeah. It was in fifths.

At other times, the questioning was more probing. In this example, Mentor E challenged his trainee:

M: what are you going to do that's going to be different? . . .

T: Well if I can, I'll line them up.

M: But do you think that it will work . . . on that afternoon that the other two teachers on this corridor have both got tutor groups across the other side of school

T: Yes

M: So they're going to be late. I can predict now that they will be late.

T: Yes

M: So their classes will be kicking off in the corridor because the kids will be here before the teachers. But you'll be here in time . . . Is it wise to think about lining yours up at that stage? Or is there something else you can do?

T: Well another thing I'd do . . . is actually stand in the doorway as they come in so that they're forced to come in single file . . . So, if I can't get them into a line I could at least get them coming in single file.

M: That would be good.

In general, the mentors and trainees found it difficult to construct knowledge of this sort (relating to the trainee's practice) together. What was much more common was for the mentor to give advice which might, or might not, be acknowledged, as in this example:

Mentor C: You can afford to use the overhead projector, the blackboard, the piano much more

Trainee: Yeah.

On the other hand, the topic of music gave them a forum in which they were much more likely to construct knowledge together. Here is Mentor B, discussing his curriculum:

M: One of the things I'm guilty of here; we don't do a tremendous amount of composition. We do do it, but I must be honest, I pay lip-service to it, because it is so difficult to teach, here, composition.

T: I'm not being funny, but some of the kids haven't got enough musical skills to do it anyway, have they?

M: No.

T: Well, looking at some of the Year 9 classes, if they can't play the blues, how are they going to write something themselves?

M: Well there is an argument that says you don't really need those skills because you're creating 'sounds' on the keyboard.

T: You need to have some sort of musical [skill], though, don't you, really, to know about rhythm and things like that.

M: I think so.

In terms of training, this conversation has a weakness; teachers (and trainees) are required to teach composition by the National Curriculum (DFEE, QCA, 1999). This conversation appears to show the mentor and trainee colluding with each other, constructing a story in which composition might not be taught in some schools. There is evidence here that, across the cases, mentors and trainees were working to establish strong relationships and that the establishment of such relationships was sometimes seen as more important than criticising aspects of the trainees' practice.

## TOWARDS A THEORY

Analysis of my data shows that, in the five cases under study, mentor teachers were engaging in conversations in which both the content of lessons and the teaching strategies needed to impart that content were discussed. Further analysis showed that there were two main areas in which the mentoring could have been more effective. First, very much of the talk concerned actions. Reasons for actions were also discussed: both practical reasons and theoretical reasons, but Handal's third level of reflection was reached on only one occasion. This suggests that mentoring conversations are effective in promoting discussion about actions and sometimes the reasons underpinning them, but are not effective in promoting thinking about the ethical considerations which can lead to generalised theory being developed.

Second, many of the conversations can be construed as 'solos' or 'accompanied solos'. In such conversations it is not clear that the knowledge is understood by the person (mentor and trainee, but most often trainee) who supplies the audience for the performance.

I would like to suggest that mentoring conversations are most useful when,

- REASONS & JUSTIFICATIONS arising from specific actions
- About the PRACTICE of teaching
- Are constructed in a DUET

But my data show that this situation is difficult to achieve, and did not, in fact, occur in any of the observations I made.

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