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‘The assessor and the assessed’:

Learning from students’ reflections on peer-evaluation

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a peer assessment pilot project with a small number of final year BEd primary education students undertaking school experience placements in local authorities distant to the university. The focus of the project was on identifying student perspectives in an attempt to inform future practice in programme design and delivery. Key issues arising from the study include a shift in students’ own identity as teachers and in their understanding of the role and purpose of assessment. The article concludes with a number of considerations for teacher educators in incorporating such approaches to student placements.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional model of teacher education in Scotland, as elsewhere in the world, has tended to adopt an individualistic approach: individual students undertaking individual placements within individual classes. However, more recently this model has been subject to criticism and debate: ‘the belief that to teach is to work in isolation, to plan lessons alone, solve problems alone, and to stand alone in front of a classroom and to talk at children, is a recognized and major impediment to educational renewal’ (Bullough et al., 2002a, p. 67). This warning is particularly timely as the challenges of teaching increase and as the profession begins to consider more seriously the value of collaborative work. Growing emphasis on teaching as a collaborative endeavour means that teacher educators must ensure that students are adequately prepared for this; providing opportunities for collaboration in teaching practice is one way of doing this.

With this in mind, a small-scale pilot project was started within the BEd (Honours) course at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. The course is a four-year honours degree course which leads to a primary school teaching qualification.

The study is seen as a first step in developing more extensive and wide-ranging approaches to the development of students' skills in collaboration in general, and peer assessment of teaching in particular. A key focus is to understand students' perspectives on peer assessment in order that tutors might better support the process.

Before outlining the study in more detail, the article provides some background detail on the context in which the BEd course operates, taking into account recent research into relevant aspects of peer assessment and collaborative learning. Following an outline of the pilot project, key themes arising from the study are presented before concluding with a discussion of the implications for teacher educators.

WIDER CONTEXT

The Scottish policy context

Recent policy initiatives relating to teacher education in Scotland at all levels have shown increasing attention to the concept of collaborative professional working, for example, the introduction of a nominated 'supporter' for probationer teachers in their induction year (GTCS, 2002) and the agreement that one of one of the four central values underpinning the Chartered Teacher programme should be 'collaboration and influence' (SEED, 2002, p. 1). Among other notable policy initiatives, the Scottish Teachers for a New Era project (www.abdn.ac.uk/stne), led by the University of Aberdeen, places a central focus on communities of learning and is committed to developing mentoring skills in student teachers. Such policy statements indicate a growing recognition of the value of collaborative professional practice.

While the above examples refer to teachers working together, much of the emphasis on collaborative working seems to focus more readily on inter-professional working than on teachers collaborating with each other. For example, the Ministerial Response to the Second Stage Review of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (SEED, 2005) challenges education faculties to build relationships with other faculties and to teach student teachers alongside students of other disciplines where appropriate (SEED, 2005, p. 9).

However, while there is evidence of collaborative practice, in many forms, being advocated in policy documents, there is another strand evident which adopts a more individualistic and standardised position. In the above-mentioned Ministerial Response to the second stage review of ITE, one of the four main sub-sections focuses on ‘competence and values required by new teachers’. Under this heading recommendations focus on individual performance against published standards, with specific competence in classroom management and awareness of additional support needs being the only two competences specified. Similar patterns are evident elsewhere in the continuing professional development (CPD) framework where the emphasis is on individual teachers providing evidence of their competence against pre-defined standards. This might be seen to be in contradiction with some of the policy direction evident elsewhere which promotes collaborative practice.

In addition to this seemingly dichotomous position regarding the conceptual desirability of collaborative practice are some very real pragmatic concerns facing teacher education in Scotland. As a result of Scottish Ministers’ commitment to reducing class sizes in key stages/subjects and to fulfilling agreements made in ‘A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century’ (‘The McCrone Agreement’, SEED, 2001) regarding teachers’ class contact time, Scottish faculties of education are providing places for unprecedented numbers of teaching students. This increase in numbers has been implemented primarily through the one-year postgraduate route, therefore also seeing an immediate knock-on impact in the numbers of probationer teachers needing induction placements on qualifying. This has caused real pressure on the system, resulting in difficulties in some subjects/stages/areas in finding appropriate placements. One potential solution to this has been to suggest that students undertake so-called ‘paired placements’. While for some this has been seen merely as a convenient and practical way of tackling shortages in placements, for others it has been seen as an opportunity to promote collaborative learning strategies to the benefit of students, pupils and placement schools.

The above discussion suggests that the policy context in Scotland is a complex one: on the one hand much of the policy rhetoric promotes collaborative working yet the organisational and procedural side of recent teacher education policies seems to promote standardisation, harmonisation and individual accountability. Added to this

are the pragmatic difficulties associated with placing increasing numbers of students, and therefore also of probationer teachers, in school placements. In this context it would be easy to lose sight of the professional and personal benefits of promoting skills in collaborative working, but there is undoubtedly a growing recognition of the value of collaborative practice, evidenced by the growing popularity of research papers and articles which detail learning benefits accrued by such approaches. There is a vast, and increasing, body of literature available on this subject, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to do full justice to it. However, a number of themes central to the pilot project will be discussed below, including: models for collaboration; preparing student teachers for peer learning/assessment; and the link between teacher collaboration and educational transformation.

Models for collaboration

A review of literature reveals a number of different models which might fall under the heading of collaborative learning in teaching placements. Broadly speaking, however, there appear to be two dominant models: 1. peer learning through paired placements; and 2. peer assessment or evaluation. The first of these, paired placements, involves two students being placed in the same class(es) for the duration of a school experience placement. There is growing interest in this model (see for example, Bullough et al., 2002a; Bullough et al., 2002b; Sorensen et al, 2002; Evans & Jordan-Daus, 2004; Parry, 2004; Smith, 2004) , partly for pragmatic reasons as outlined above, but also as a result of increasing recognition of the value of peer learning. Smith (2004) highlights this dual-purpose in his report of a paired teaching placement programme in Sheffield Hallam University, arguing that peer support might provide scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development in a ‘more supportive learning environment’ (p. 99). The equality of the relationship between peers is seen as crucial to the learning process, situating peer learning within the social domain. For example, Boud (2001) conceptualises peer learning as a ‘two-way reciprocal learning activity’ (p. 3), in which the relationship is equal as opposed to the traditionally hierarchical relationship of the teacher/student. Peer learning in paired placements is generally conceived of as an opportunity for two student teachers to plan, prepare, teach and evaluate collaboratively.

So, while an element of peer assessment or evaluation will probably form part of a paired placement, it is not the only focus of collaborative activity. There are other models, however, where the focus of the peer relationship is primarily on the assessment element, and indeed, there is increasing emphasis on peer assessment in higher education in general. Meldrum (2002) expresses some concern about the emphasis on student assessment in general, claiming that we are too concerned with the 'effectiveness' of assessment techniques, and not concerned enough with the purposes and effects of assessment. He cites Ramsden's (1992) claim that 'the assessment of students is a serious and often tragic enterprise' (p. 181). Meldrum's thesis is that assessment should be conceived of as a social relation, and that issues of power are therefore central. He makes connections between bodies of literature on assessment and bodies of literature on relations of power and critical pedagogy (for example, Freire & Shor, 1987), claiming that the literature on assessment and on relations of power could, but do not tend to, make explicit connections.

Assessment of teaching practice is usually carried out by a tutor through observation of a specific lesson or lessons, and tends not to focus as readily on the underlying rationale which informs the observable practice. Gilpin (2000) therefore proposes that an effective model of peer observation 'has to capture this philosophical level of our practice, and not simply focus on instances of procedure.' She goes on to suggest that such a model might take the form of a 'scholarly dialogue', drawing on the work of Brockbank and McGill (1998) in presenting a model of reflective dialogue which moves from individual reflection through to paired reflection and finally involves a third party who acts as a facilitator/critical friend. Returning to issues of power raised earlier, Gilpin suggests that this model is best adopted between 'equal peers, neatly removing the expert-novice [relationship] and other dualisms'. Keppell et al. (2006) also underline the importance of the equality of the relationship, arguing that 'the reciprocal nature of the activity (peer assessment) is key as students do not hold power over each other by virtue of their position or responsibilities (p. 454).

Preparation for peer learning/assessment

The extent to which students and teacher mentors should be prepared or trained for collaborative working is an area of some debate. Sorenson et al. (2002) argue, in the context of paired placements, that both students and teachers need to be prepared.

However, Evans & Jordan-Daus (2004) raise the possibility that not giving prior guidance or training provides ‘a means to give professional space for the pairs [of students] and their mentors to develop their own understandings of how best to utilise the collaborative teaching opportunities of paired placement.’ (p. 19).

Interestingly, being able to engage in peer assessment is detailed as a specific skill in the Dutch ‘vocational training profile of primary school teachers’ (Sluijmans et al., 2002), yet there are no guidelines on how these skills might be taught to student teachers (ibid.). Sluijmans et al. go on to propose that there are three key skills involved in peer assessment: defining assessment criteria; judging the performance of a peer; and providing feedback for future learning. In a study comparing a group of students who had been trained in peer-assessment with a control group (total n = 93), Sluijmans et al. (ibid.) found that not only were the trained students more effective in their assessment of peers, but that they also made significant learning gains in the substantive content of the course being assessed (designing creative lessons) in comparison with peers in the control group. While this study took place in the context of a campus-based course, the principles are arguably transferable to the assessment of teaching practice, and might have an impact not only on students’ ability to assess peers, but also have a positive effect on their own learning about teaching, and in particular, their ability to self-evaluate..

Teacher collaboration and educational transformation

Encouraging peer learning and peer assessment clearly acknowledges the centrality of relationships to the learning process; attending to personal and social factors as well as to occupational ones (Bell & Gilbert, 1996). However, this may well be at odds with traditional conceptions of teaching as an isolated and individual activity. Gale & Densmore (2003) argue that the isolation of teachers’ work ‘has contributed to the closing down of debate’ (p. 91), and therefore presumably mitigating against possibilities for teachers to contribute to educational transformation. They go on to talk about the need for ‘spaces in which it is safe to think differently’ (ibid.). Genuine peer assessment can provide such a space.

Bullough et al. (2002a) report on their efforts to find ‘means of enhancing beginning teachers’ understanding of learning to teach as a collegial and shared enterprise’ (p.

69), commenting that students in paired placements not only provided ‘emotional support to one another, they became interested in and invested in one another’s successes’ (p. 74). Significantly, Bullough et al. (ibid.) also report on the positive impact on the mentor teacher and the class when students were placed in pairs compared to their counterparts who were placed in single student placements. They contrast this with the considerable power and influence of the ‘co-operating’ or mentor teacher on the student teacher in the individual placement model, concluding that the partnership between three people (pair of student teachers and the teacher mentor) is a much more likely place for educational transformation to take place.

Similarly, the act of peer assessment, a specific form of collaboration, can also be viewed as a worthwhile and potentially transformative skill. Sluijsmans et al. (2002) argue that such a skill can be useful beyond the specific task in which it is employed, but go on to warn that entrenched cultural views about the role of the ‘teacher’ in assessment can act as a barrier to introducing such models within teacher education. However, it is also acknowledged that collaborative practice has the capacity to change the norms of organisational cultures, a key feature of what Sachs (2003) terms ‘democratic professionalism’. This perspective seeks to demystify professional work, to foster collaboration and, ultimately, to challenge existing inequities. Collaborative practice therefore has the capacity not only to transform individual teachers’ mindsets and identities, but also to contribute to change in organisational and professional cultures.

There is clearly considerable evidence of real benefits accruing from teachers engaging in collaborative evaluation of their practice. This article therefore seeks to explore the views of a small group of students on factors that might help to make peer assessment a positive experience in initial teacher education.

THE PROJECT

The BEd (Hons) Primary degree at the University of Strathclyde was reaccredited in 2004. The course team, in revising the degree, was eager to ensure that elements of peer assessment would permeate the student experience. This was implemented in the Teaching and Learning programme by requiring first and second year students to engage in peer assessment while on placement.

The 1998 version of the degree was, however, more limited in the opportunities to provide such experiences for students. In session 2005-06 the third and fourth year cohorts were completing their studies on this version of the degree and it was therefore decided to seek such opportunities for students, particularly in the placement element.

A second initiative on the placement front during the 2005-06 session was the partnership developed with a Northern local authority (Council A) to provide distant placements for some third and fourth year students. Distant placements are defined as placements in locations which require the student to stay away from their usual place of residence. Students had been asked to volunteer for placements in Council A and eight from Year 3 and nine from Year 4 had done so. It was felt that these relatively small groups of eight or nine students in each year group would provide a suitable sample with which to pilot peer assessment with the intention of rolling it out to the entire fourth year cohort in session 2006-07. The benefits of piloting with these particular groups were identified in the provision of a more formal support network for students placed at some remove from campus. For the final year students it also provided some preliminary preparation for the role of mentor which increasingly is seen as appropriate for all teachers to assume as part of their professional responsibilities, and for university tutors it would provide insight into how best to support the process of peer assessment.

Briefing the students for engagement

The students undertaking distant placements had a series of briefing meetings in addition to the planned programme of tutorials designed to prepare all students for placement. The agenda for these meetings covered a range of largely administrative topics such as accommodation, arrangements for visits from local authority teaching associates and university tutors, the type of preparation given to the schools, financial and IT support. They were also introduced to the rationale and suggested procedures for the peer assessment pilot, that is, that engagement would be voluntary and that the procedures adopted should be developed and agreed by the groups of students themselves, according to their own needs and contexts. Bostock's (2000) range of

purposes of peer assessment was used to illustrate the tutor team's intentions in introducing the pilot:

- giving a sense of ownership of the assessment process, improving motivation;
- encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning, developing them as autonomous learners;
- treating assessment as part of learning, so that mistakes are opportunities rather than failures;
- practising the transferable skills needed for life-long learning, especially evaluation skills;
- using external evaluation to provide a model for internal self-assessment of a student's own learning (metacognition), and encouraging deep rather than surface learning.

The students' initial responses to the proposal that they engage more formally in some measure of peer assessment were as varied as their reasons for taking up distant placements. Some were apprehensive about both the mentee and mentor perspectives and all had to be reassured that there was no intention that they should contribute to the overall grade. They were reassured that the emphasis was to be on formative feedback which would provide commentary and advice on strengths and development needs.

Ultimately seven of the nine Year 4 undertaking distant placements engaged in peer assessment. In the Year 3 cohort all students engaged in the process. It is the experience of one triad of Year 4 students that provides the focus for this paper. Their written reflections on the process provides a rich seam of data yielding lessons for us as teacher educators. Getting in-depth, qualitative data to illuminate students' views of the process was key to this stage of the project. There already exists a wealth of evidence about the positive effects of peer assessment, so what we wanted to focus on was not whether or not it is a 'good' thing, but what factors might inhibit or support a positive experience for students. This, we felt we would be able to investigate by allowing the students' voices to be heard.

The focus group and their approach to the project

Three students had asked to be placed in rural communities with multi-composite classes; they were each placed in rural two-teacher schools within a 20-mile radius of a town in the south of Council A. These three students were already good friends. They were aware that the probationary arrangements could result in their being placed in such contexts for an Induction Placement but also spoke of the transferable benefits to be gained such as increased expertise in providing appropriate differentiated curricula in all contexts. It should be acknowledged that all three students had been regarded as highly competent in previous placements and had very sound academic records in other areas of their progress on course.

That these students were familiar with the conditions which promote collaborative practice is clear from their decision, taken before going on placement, that they meet to '*establish basic ground rules*' (Student B), the key features of which included:

- each student would receive two visits from peers;
- two whole days of the placement would be given over to peer assessment activities with all three students being observed on each of the days;
- the observations would be carried out with pairs observing the third member of the trio;
- the existing diagnostic codes in addition to the benchmark framework used by university tutors would provide the basis for analysing teaching and providing feedback;
- discussions would be held at the end of the day and written reports sent to each other within a week;
- the focus for the observation would not be determined by the student to be observed; rather the observers could observe holistically and decide on the focus areas;
- the focus for the second visit would begin with the action points given in the first feedback;
- documentation of the process would include a rationale for the process negotiated, written feedback to peers authored in pairs, and a reflective personal/ professional response.

ANALYSING THE DATA

Given the very open brief provided to the students, it was agreed at the outset that the analysis of the project would take a grounded approach, that is to ‘build theory rather than to test theory’ (Patton, 2002, p. 127). Students had been given free reign in both the design of their peer evaluation model and the means of recording it. They had, however, been advised that any documentation might be considered from a research point of view, but would of course be anonymised.

One of the main reasons for focusing on the trio reported on in this paper was the access to full and varied documentation of the process, including; rationales for their model; written feedback for each observation; and personal and professional reflections on the process. In addition, each student had fulfilled the course-wide requirements relating to placement evaluation. Importantly, while the three students had discussed and agreed a rationale for their model, they recorded this individually, providing an element of triangulation in the analysis of the data. The decision to document the process so fully was entirely the students’, and gives us a unique opportunity to hear the students’ views in their own, unprompted, words. Tutors had expected to see evidence of engagement mainly coming through the ongoing self-evaluation routinely documented in students’ School Experience Files. The fuller documentation agreed upon by the students should be seen as a commitment to engage thoroughly and systematically and provided the data not only for their own reflection but also for that of their tutors.

Focusing on this trio gives this paper a case study approach, an approach in which it is acknowledged that the researcher should ‘not start out with *a priori* theoretical notions... because until you get in there and get hold of your data, get to understand the context, you won’t know what theories work best or make the most sense’ (Gillham, 2000, p. 2). The context is crucial – not only the physical, geographical context, but the social context in which the students have constructed their perceptions of reality. Shadish (1995) categorises this as social constructionism, which ‘refers to constructing *knowledge about* reality, not constructing reality itself’ (p. 97).

The written data is therefore analysed bearing in mind the setting in which the students were placed, and their previous successes in teaching practice. It is organised and discussed below by type of documentation, that is: 1. Student rationales; 2. Student feedback on observed sessions; and 3. Students' personal and professional reflections. Within these organisational categories each of the pieces of documentation were subjected to a grounded thematic analysis, in which themes were generated from the data as opposed to being identified beforehand. As the themes emerged it became apparent that much of what was significant could be grouped under the purposes of peer assessment identified by Bostock (2000), and this was seen as a useful organising tool for the reporting of the students' commentary in their personal and professional reflections.

While the article seeks to portray the students' voices and the use of a grounded analytical approach supports this, it is acknowledged that the analysis was nonetheless undertaken from the researchers' perspectives. By way of authentication the students were given a draft to comment on and have also been involved in a related conference presentation, providing a platform for them to add their own voices directly.

THEMES ARISING FROM THE DATA

1. Student rationales for model adopted

The rationales set out the students' thoughts on the purposes of the project and provided evidence of their thinking about issues of ownership, their responsibilities as autonomous learners, their commitment to collaborative practice and their awareness of the benefits to themselves both as mentors and mentees, and as '*assessor and assessed*' (Student A).

They showed too a consciousness of the shortcomings of previous placements which '*...ignored other students as a resource for learning, despite the array of differing experiences and recent classroom experiences they have accumulated*' (Student A). This view echoes the earlier assertion by Smith (2004) that peer support can provide necessary scaffolding in a much more supportive environment than the traditional student/teacher/tutor relationship.

The students' decision to observe in pairs was justified in terms of '*...using a trio has the benefits of widening the range of expertise drawn upon and means that more of the lesson is likely to be observed*' (Student A).

Their comments on what should and should not be their provenance in supporting their peers reveals what could be interpreted as an awareness of their status as novice teachers but also reflects less favourably on a hierarchical view of the value and status of advice from different personnel engaged in the processes of teacher education. Student B considered that the written aspects of her peers' work were '*more suited to the more professional eye of the tutor*' and that tutors '*will pick up on different areas for development from a more professional perspective*'. Student C also defined boundaries for her own comment in recording that she was '*not at liberty to judge a peer's Specific Learning Outcomes*', opining that this was more within the provenance of the tutor. These perceptions would seem to support Meldrum's (2002) view that issues of power are central to assessment,

This recognition of the hierarchical nature of the traditional assessment procedures was summed up by Student A who expressed surprise at being '*considered as qualified to observe two final year teaching students and contribute to their development*'. This comment has interesting implications for the extent to which students feel ownership over the evaluation of their progress on placement, and therefore also for the existing patterns of power distribution in tutor/student relationships.

2. Student feedback on observed sessions

The agreed format for feedback was structured on the type of written feedback provided by tutors and facilitated the inclusion of elements that help to set advice into the context of the observed session and what is known of the placement. Interestingly, the students' use of voice in writing the reports highlighted the dual nature of written reports to students: firstly to address the student and engage in discussion of progress; and secondly to provide a record for third parties of the session observed and advice given. The first would suggest the use of the second person in writing; the second would suggest the use of the third person. One student chose to write in the third person which gives the feedback a slightly more distanced feel.

All reports, however, had the following elements to help the reader make sense of the teaching session and the students' chosen approaches:

- a context setting introduction giving brief background to the lesson;
- a description and commentary on effectiveness of specific teaching behaviours;
- a commentary on pupil response and engagement;
- identification of particularly novel, creative or innovative approaches;
- an explicit linking of practice to theory (e.g. "...this role of the teacher as learner, as a co-constructor of knowledge, is an appropriate one and was effective in this context where the children could have so easily begun to defer to you for answers rather than consulting the research books.");
- a clear statement of succinct action points framed in terms of diagnostic behaviours.

In addition to the example cited above of teacher as co-constructor of knowledge and its epistemological and pedagogical implications, there were references to recent and current initiatives such as 'Assessment is for Learning' and learning styles. These discourses were therefore conducted in appropriate professional language and were underpinned by informed and sophisticated understandings of teaching and learning processes.

While there were clear advantages for students in adopting the pattern of written feedback already familiar to them, questions must be raised about the extent to which discourse had been restricted by the wholesale adoption of tutor-style of feedback.

3. Students' personal and professional reflections

The students reflected not only on their practice but also on the learning accruing from engagement in the peer assessment project. Drawing on Bostock's (2000) purposes of peer assessment as a framework for reporting the students' insights is helpful here and has been used to discuss the students' observations.

Ownership of the assessment process and improving motivation

The first observation from a tutor's perspective has to be these students welcomed the opportunity to design the process and engaged most earnestly in doing so with due consideration for evidence based practice, confidentiality and the interface between personal and professional relationships.

Secondly, one significant departure from the conventional wisdom, that the student should identify areas of focus for the observation, would appear to have yielded benefits. Student B commented: *'I was completely unaware of my non-verbal communication and it was useful to have something very practical picked up by my peers.'* The student clearly felt that there were tangible benefits for her in not having had the focus of the observation determined beforehand, yet traditionally, determining a focus would be deemed to be good practice in observation. This example lends some weight to Evans & Jordan-Daus' (2004) argument that not giving prior training gives space for students to develop their own understandings of how best to use the opportunities afforded by peer assessment.

Taking a professional pride in practice, a key element in teacher motivation, was given a context by peer observation. All three students provided commentary on how acting upon advice from the first peer visit in preparation for the second made them determined to improve in the areas identified by their peers. There is for some students a thin line between improved motivation resulting from professional challenge and the creation of angst to *'keep up with the others'* (Student A). Later entries in this student's account would suggest that this diminished as confidence grew and the student realised that *'...this isn't about whether we are good teachers or not ... (but) about making good teachers better.'* ...clearly a very significant piece of learning indeed, and one that endorses Meldrum's (2002) argument that we should be focusing on the purpose and effect of assessment, rather than the effectiveness of specific assessment techniques.

Developing autonomous learners

Autonomous learners need to understand that assessment is an integral part of the learning process. The learner's perception of the validity and authenticity of feedback will impact on the extent to which she or he will act upon advice. One very insightful comment from Student A sheds light on one way in which peer assessment may assist the learner because of the peer status of the assessor. In discussing the feedback from her peers she noted that *'There is no scope for the excuse that you sometimes kid yourself with – that if you'd been teaching as long as Mrs X had, then you'd have thought of that as well.'* This is not to suggest that University tutors and supervising teachers are not skilled in scaffolding learning for novices. The point relates rather to the uneven power relationships in the process.

Seeing mistakes as opportunities rather than failures

This is one of the perennial dilemmas in assessing practice in the context of grading, particularly where a judgement ultimately has to be made about fitness to teach. Students are often reluctant to admit to failures or even to development needs if they believe this to be a sign of weakness which assessors will reflect in the grades they award and the judgements they make. Peer assessment is the one context which these students see as having *'no ultimate cost for identifying areas of development'* (Student A). Since their peers had been relieved of making any summative judgement there was no penalty to admitting to difficulties and subsequently having the opportunities to explore their causes openly and to seek solutions collaboratively.

Transferable skills needed for life-long learning, especially evaluation

There was existing evidence that all three students in this focus group had developed a commitment to, and facility in, self evaluation before embarking on this project. The additional benefits that were to be found may be due to the collaborative nature of the experience. Student C commented on the importance of empathy in working with colleagues in this way whilst Student A regarded *'the final conversation (to be) one of the most interesting aspects of peer assessment (because it provides) the only opportunity where we can ask potentially awkward questions and address the justification behind practice.'*

Given the high value attached to collaborative working practices and peer observation in initiatives such as ‘A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century’ (SEED, 2001) and ‘Scottish Teachers for a New Era’ (www.abdn.ac.uk/stne), such positive dispositions and understandings will surely be welcomed by school managers.

Meta-cognitive benefits

Much of the students’ writing in the Professional Response section of their documentation reflected on the nature of their learning, and is of a meta-cognitive nature: the shared understandings from post-observation discussions; the clarification of terminology through hearing alternative interpretations; and the commentary on their motivations and their emotional response to the process.

Student C had initial concerns about ‘*how the endeavour would affect our friendship*’, but felt that this threat had been minimised through careful planning. This initial concern, and her perception of the resolution, seems to suggest that this student had an awareness of the potential for feedback to be construed as a personal attack. The subtle difference between professional discourse and personal disagreement are further exemplified by Student A, who reported a shift in understanding after the first round of observations and discussions:

I was able to respond more confidently to issues raised about my teaching because during the first peer assessment I did not want to be seen to be countering every issue for fear of looking as though I was unable to accept constructive criticism.

Encouraging deep rather than surface learning

One of the conditions for deep learning is that the student is motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors, and that there is an understanding of the purpose of the activity rather than engagement for the sake of reward. The students’ realisation that the purpose of peer assessment was to improve everyone’s practice rather than to separate out good teachers from poor teachers is relevant here. Moreover this

disposition in itself will promote the students' commitment to deep learning in the longer term.

The cumulative nature of knowledge in a deep approach to learning was also reflected in the iterative process in which the students were prepared to engage, and upon which they commented so favourably.

CONCLUSIONS

In drawing conclusions from this pilot study it is important to remember that this particular group of students were all already making good progress on the BEd course and were viewed as competent students. They were already friends, and had each made a commitment to trying out something new for their own benefit. It is therefore acknowledged that the conclusions drawn here might not be replicated in the same way across a wider, more diverse group of students. Nonetheless, the overarching themes are clearly relevant and will help to inform those involved in planning and delivering both the BEd course at Strathclyde, and hopefully, a wider audience involved in planning and delivering ITE courses.

Impact on the students

The overall tone across the data indicates that for these three students the experience of peer evaluation was a positive one. However, two key aspects seemed to be central to this positive experience. These two aspects both involved shifts in perception: first, a shift in the construction of their identity as student teachers, and second, a shift in understanding of the role and purpose of assessment. These issues, perhaps more than issues of procedures, seem central to the success of such processes.

In terms of identity, the students' initial construction of their own identity was of student teacher as the learner; and university tutor, or experienced class teacher, as the assessor. They drew distinctions between '*the assessor and the assessed*' (Student A), seeing the two roles as separated by hierarchy, a point illustrated by Student A's surprise at being '*considered as qualified to observe two final year students and contribute to their development*'. Indeed, Student C's initial concern about how the endeavour might affect their friendship might also be seen as being symptomatic of this dichotomous role delineation, where friends do not act as 'assessors'. However,

as the programme of peer visits progressed, a shift in this perception was evident. The students began to see explicitly that the role of learner should not necessarily preclude them from also facilitating their peers' learning, and from drawing on their peers as resources for learning.

This shift in the construction of their own identities as student teachers was linked to a shift in understanding about the nature and purpose of assessment, as already discussed.

A third important, and linked, issue raised through the data was the students' recognition of the power dimension in assessment. There was explicit recognition of the impact that peer assessment could have. This was positive in terms of feeling comfortable enough to ask '*potentially awkward questions*' (Student A) but also challenging in that students recognised they could not use the uneven power in the traditional student/tutor assessment relationship as an excuse not to confront difficult issues.

Implications for teacher educators

Perhaps the biggest implication arising from the data is that we as teacher educators must acknowledge the positive impact of collaborative working for these students, and based on this experience, must endeavour to find ways to allow all students such opportunities. It is suggested that creating a more sustained focus on peer assessment across the BEd course would be a welcome addition. It is not, however, suggested that this would replace more traditional forms of assessment designed for quality assurance purpose; rather that it would allow students to engage in a range of assessment activities designed for different purposes.

One of the dilemmas faced at the planning stage of this pilot programme, and discussed earlier in this paper, was the extent to which students should be prepared or trained for the peer assessor role. This project has not enabled us to make any firm conclusions on this, and indeed, if anything, while most of the literature appears to argue for some form of training, our students made explicit reference to the benefit of having had free reign to carry out the task as they saw fit. However, in many places in the data the students talked about the importance of relationships, engendering trust

and developing skills in giving honest feedback. There is, therefore, perhaps an argument for ensuring that such skills and dispositions are developed in a planned and progressive manner throughout the course. Providing skill development, but still enabling students the scope to plan the detail of the peer observation programme, would arguably equip them with a range of skills, knowledge and understanding from which to draw.

Finally, it is abundantly clear from this case study that these students, and presumably, therefore, many other students, are more than able to grasp opportunities to enhance their learning through peer assessment. However, their reticence to take on what they perceive to be the tutor's role, and to believe themselves capable of providing good feedback to peers, is a concern. There is a message here for university tutors to place more trust in students to respond to the challenge of participating in the design of aspects of placement requirements, and to recognise their key role in developing student confidence in the validity of their evaluations. These are vital and sustainable skills that will surely be welcomed in future teachers. However, in order to support the development of such teachers, issues of trust, power and purpose will need to be considered explicitly in relation to both peer assessment and tutor/student assessment relationships.

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