



## **Innovative pedagogies series: 'It's all about the shoes'**

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**Exploring the perspectives of others and  
ourselves in Teacher Education**

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# Introduction

## The approach

Our pedagogical work in this area, which we have called 'It's all about the shoes', is a three part approach designed to enable teachers to develop a curiosity about their own and others' perspectives and to develop a process to enquire into the assumptions and ways of seeing the world that underpin our teaching. The three parts are: 'Exploring shoes', in which different ways of identifying perspectives are explored; 'Exploring other people's shoes', in which we look at how we can try to decentre from our own views and try to stand in the shoes of others; and 'Looking at our own shoes', where we work to explore and articulate our own ways of looking at the world and develop the courage to questions and shift these.

## Context

The context of this work lies within the broad spectrum of teacher education including students in initial teacher education and more experienced teachers undertaking higher degrees or other professional development opportunities. Teachers involved in participating in this work include those working with learners of all ages from early years to higher education contexts. The local context of this work is a School of Education within a post-1992 university and a range of courses taught in university, school and early years settings. The authors have taught in early years provisions, schools, adult education, and higher education.

## Purpose

The purpose of this pedagogical approach is for teachers to enhance their understanding of themselves and others in order to develop professional relationships to enable learning. It takes courage to loosen established ways of thinking and be prepared to see things differently. However it can release us from limiting beliefs and enable us to engage in pedagogical relationships with learners. Teachers need to be aware of their own motivations, values and assumptions and question these. They need to be able to begin to understand the perspectives of others, particularly those with very different experiences and life contexts from their own. Empathy is an important professional attribute. Here we use Krznaric's (2014, p. x) definition of empathy as "the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions."

Through their courses and their practice, teachers develop curricula knowledge and teaching skills and also undertake an ongoing cultivation of 'professional wisdom' (Schulman 2004) that enables them to respond to the many different situations they need to respond to each day. Max van Manen (1991) argues that teachers need to develop 'pedagogical thoughtfulness' which involves attunement with pupils and students. Trevarthan (1979) used 'attunement' to describe the way in which a carer and a baby interact. It is about mutual responsiveness, engagement and joint responsibility for learning. Knowledge is socially constructed and teaching is a relational activity which involves relationships of trust. This is necessary if learners and teachers are to be open to the challenge of learning, which involves personal change. Part of building relationships involves a curiosity and motivation to understand oneself and others. The approaches in this text share some of the ways in which we have worked to do this ourselves and in the courses we lead.

## Structure

The explanation of the approach is sequenced under three headings: 'Exploring shoes', 'Exploring other people's shoes' and 'Looking at our own shoes'. In our experience the sequence involves an increase in difficulty, although each area could be explored alone. Under each heading we first explore the metaphor, and the question: *Why do we need to do this?* We then summarise the general processes used under the

heading: *How can we do this?* We then give examples of our work, which are entitled: *What have we done?* Specific examples of activities are given in boxes. We then ask: *What is the impact?*

Later in the text we talk about how the practice evolved through our work separately and together and articulate the wider theoretical base underpinning what we do. During our explanation of our approach we identify specific practical issues and then, at the end of this piece, we draw together ideas about developing practice in this field.

## Exploring shoes



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### *Why do we need to do this?*

For this part of our approach we are using a visual metaphor of people wearing many different types of footwear. The picture reminds us that in our personal and professional lives we will meet a range of people with different experiences and perspectives. We can see the very different shoes they are walking in. Before we start to explore particular shoes it is useful to explore the idea of different shoes and where perspectives come from.

### *How can we do this?*

We can explore this in groups using activities that show that people look at objects and events in different ways. The activities enable people to identify how they look and what frames their looking; to identify the range of different perspectives that can be taken on one topic; and how professional education leads to a particular way of seeing.

### *What have we done?*

Below are a number of activities we have used to work with groups of students and teachers to explore these ideas.

#### **A. Looking and framing**

The purpose of this set of activities is for participants to experience a context where other people's perceptions of something are different from their own.

Generally, our first activity in this section is to use pictures. We have collected packs of cards, such as pictures of paintings, photographs of people or cards with patterns, which can be used in a variety of ways. These include:

1. Choose a card you like. Take a few minutes to look at it. Then get into pairs. Show your colleague your picture and ask them to say what they see. Then tell them what you see. Do the same for their picture. Discuss why you might see similar or different things (e.g. background, job experiences, knowledge, interests)
2. Choose a card that you think relates to something about an identified a topic (e.g. leadership, care, courage). Walking round the room meet up to have paired conversations with people and gather responses to your picture in relation to the topic. Make notes on how their perspectives and yours are similar and different. How do their views influence your thinking?
3. In a group of three, one person takes the role of the observer. A range of pictures is spread over the table. Two people take turns to choose two pictures and say how they see them as connected. Do the same with other pictures. This can increase to three or more pictures as appropriate. The observer notes the reasons given for choices. At the end, the three people explore if there are patterns in the way different people have made choices.

These and similar activities highlight that we see differently. We then use the idea of 'framing' to explore this further. As Bruner (1990, p. 56) argues "Framing provides a means of 'constructing' a world." We have a number of different-sized cardboard frames that enable you to see only parts of a picture, which can be used in a number of ways. This three-part activity can be useful to explore why we have different perspectives:

1. Place frames of different sizes on a picture and note the ways in which this alters your understanding of it. Discuss what is both gained and lost by having a narrower or a wider field of vision.
2. Make or choose a frame. This time think about the frame itself as a metaphor for the way in which you are focusing your looking. Note on the frame what might be influencing this (e.g. culture, experiences) and discuss the implications in a group.
3. Explore the value of having a range of people who look differently for expanding our own way of seeing. Explore the danger of stereotyping and assuming that people with particular experiences or cultures look at things in the same way.

Building on this introduction to framing, we have explored wider issues such as the framing of education and how this leads to assumptions about what is important. We discuss why we need to understand the way our own work is framed so that we can make informed choices. One way in which we have done this is working with university teachers to identify the impact of a performativity agenda on the way in which teaching, and staff learning about teaching, are positioned. This is an important topic for all students and teachers to understand so that they can identify the external influences on their work and can make choices about how to act within particular contexts.

### **B. Perspective taking**

The purpose of this set of activities is to experience taking different perspectives on a topic. For this we use practical resources including large magnifying glasses with different coloured lenses. We have collected examples of classroom scenarios and also use video clips from TeachersMedia.

A short paragraph describing an event, for example an aspect of classroom practice, is placed in the centre of a large piece of paper. A number of these are created and put in the centre of tables. Participants write on the sheets a sentence or two about what they notice in this scenario. Once everyone has responded to each paragraph they walk round and look at what people have noticed and discuss how they are similar or different

One of the above scenarios is then reproduced and placed on a number of sheets of paper. A different

coloured magnifying glass is placed beside each one labelled with a different perspective on the topic (e.g. independent learning, peer learning, use of technology in learning). Participants then respond in writing to the scenario from the perspective of the lens. Discussion is raised about how your viewpoint alters what is seen.

We have used these approaches in a number of different contexts. For example, a group of new teachers in secondary schools on a short course asked for a workshop around behaviour issues. They started by looking at examples of behaviour from different lenses including their own, the involved pupil, their peers, the head of year etc. While they could only imagine perspectives other than their own, they found decentring from their own way of looking very powerful and it enabled them to get a wider view of the issues.

A step beyond looking at scenarios from others is to look at our own examples. This involves both heightening noticing abilities and also building trust within the group to share examples and to give feedback. Both of these take time. One group of teachers met monthly over an academic year. Initially they had wanted to undertake an enquiry or action research project together but were unclear about the focus. We decided to start by noticing practice more, and sharing what we noticed. What was intended to be the prelude to the enquiry became the enquiry itself as the impact of noticing and sharing our practice became evident.

We started by looking at parts of John Mason's (2001) book, *Researching your own practice: the discipline of noticing*. In this he describes ways in which we can become more conscious in our noticing. All participants in the group reported how they became more active in noticing in their classrooms and by the end of the year some noted that they "couldn't stop noticing." The discipline of noticing and documenting had helped to make this approach part of how we acted in professional contexts. Small scenarios or incidents were recorded in writing and brought to meetings for feedback, which was done initially in pairs with the scenario writer leading by saying what they saw in their example. People started to see patterns in their scenarios and to ask questions about why they were doing or noticing particular aspects of their work repeatedly. Some of the examples were then used in both the activities described above. Examples were placed on tables along with general feedback on what individuals noticed, and then feedback from a particular perspective was given by the group participants. An example of a scenario is given below:

**Seminar group of approx. 30 seated at five tables of six Level 4 History of Education students. This is the first time I have met the group.**

**I have given them a range of 'primary sources' – pictures, original texts including interview quotations, and printed pamphlets, and asked them in groups to identify a number of features.**

**I move around the groups listening, asking questions, and focusing attention on aspects of particular materials.**

**One female student raises her hand and I move towards her. When I am at her table she points to a text and asks me what the word 'apathetic' means.**

**I say that it is great she is asking, that it is important to ask, it is good to model this for others to see that all questions are fine. I explain what the word mean.**

**I move onto the next table.**

This was one of Joy's examples. We feel that while we are tutors in these activities we should also be participants and learners too and that is why we include our own examples. In this way we are attempting to build a learning community together and are also modelling ways of learning. We have been influenced by John Loughran's book *Developing a pedagogy of teacher education* (2007) in which he talks about modelling as a

key part of teacher educators' pedagogy. He emphasises both doing and talking about what one is doing so that it is seen by students. We make decisions about the extent to which we articulate our own processes according to the context.

The giving of feedback on examples has to be carefully managed as the starting point is where the scenario writer is and their perspective. We drew on coaching approaches to giving feedback (Kline 1999) as we were not making judgements but challenging people to think more deeply or differently. To make this explicit we developed an approach called 'It's not the Bake Off!' in which we compared judgements about quality from the perspective of the expert cake maker with the facilitative approach of a coach who is aiming to help the coachee identify their own thinking and their own solutions to issues. We have role played this contrast using pictures of cakes and also real cakes which is highly motivating!

In the project described some of the scenarios were then used to facilitate thinking in other contexts. For example, Joy's scenario was used as one of the examples in another school in the university where she works. One person responded to the scenario by noting that clearly the student was "winding the tutor up" as all university students would understand the identified word identified in the example. This and other examples were used to explore how our own assumptions lead us to take particular perspectives on events. We are drawn to Brookfield's (1995) work on teachers' critical reflection and use this quotation from one of his texts with many groups of students: "In many ways we are our assumptions. Assumptions give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do." (p. 2). This shows how embedded our assumptions are, and how difficult it is to work to shift them.

At this stage we engage participants in discussing approaches to teachers enquiring into their own practice and building an enquiry way of thinking into their practice. We give examples from texts such as *Enacting a pedagogy of teacher education: values, relationships and practices* edited by Russell and Loughran (2007) in which they bring together examples of different teachers' practice and their reflections on this practice. We discuss the importance of finding opportunities to discuss practice with others to gain different views. We also discuss the unsettling nature of challenging our assumptions – how it is easier not to – and that we need to support each other in accepting the idea of living with uncertainty.

### **C. Professional perspectives**

We recognise that as professionals develop so that their way of seeing becomes more like other professionals; they develop "teachers' ways of seeing." They see through professional eyes and walk in professional shoes. Teaching requires liaising with a range of other professionals and multi-professional working is fraught with potential difficulties, not least that of understanding the perspectives of other professionals when working together (White and Featherstone 2005). We have worked with multi-professional groups in a range of ways to help this understanding of different perspectives, and one approach involves using the idea of professional shoes. For these activities we use either real pairs of shoes or pictures of shoes. Ideally, one would work in groups with different professionals together but this is not always possible.

**Create groups of about four with different professions represented. In the centre of each group place a short case-study scenario representing a professional case they might be involved with. Each person chooses a picture of a pair of shoes from a selection plus a large speech bubble. Each person writes in their speech bubble what they would see as a good outcome for the case and the first thing they would want to do. Everyone places their speech bubble with shoes on the paper and all discuss the issues.**

We used this approach recently in a group of different health professionals and it was immediately clear to them why there were issues around working together on a case and they talked about ways they could unpack assumptions in general, and also how this could be dealt with by individuals in case conferences and similar settings.

If there are no other professions apart from teachers present, then small groups are formed each of which is asked to research a different professional role and to summarise this and place it in a shoe box with a suitable pair of shoes to represent this profession. The problem of professional stereotyping can be discussed in a fun way relating to shoes, images and reality! A case-study scenario is then given and the group representing each professional tries to identify the perspective they might take on it. This always highlights differences in priorities and differences in 'best outcome' beliefs.

In this activity we are not suggesting that other professionals' views can be identified accurately, but that we can begin to understand that there are other professional ways of looking that may be different from our way. Our professional learning will frame the way we see and become a teacher, partly by standing in contrast to a social worker or speech therapist, who will see the child differently. Through these activities, and writing about them (Jarvis and Trodd 2008; Graham and Jarvis 2011), we aim to raise awareness of the value of other ways of seeing and how we can work together more effectively if we acknowledge that we walk in different shoes.

### *What is the impact?*

Informal and interview feedback on some of this work indicates that those involved often talk about what they will do differently as a result of engaging in these activities. For example, after a 40-minute session at a university conference involving the activities in Section B, participants reported: "I have had a shift in my thinking"; "I am going to remember that it is wrong to assume things about students"; and "I am going to dare to notice things that I have been determined not to notice for some time!"

Reflection after a year's programme involving activities from Sections A and B included:

Noticing is helping to release me from patterns of engagement which prove ineffective. It can open up new possibilities. I talk to the 'truculent' girl; she is hugely insecure about speaking having moved here from France in her GCSE year, this is dread not defiance ... Greater awareness about what is happening means I am getting better at responding in the moment. It's impossible to take my expectations out of the equation completely, but noticing peels back a layer. It makes me alive to more possibilities.

In multi-professional sessions, greater awareness can be raised about what can cause tension:

I didn't realise that we sometimes mean different things when we use the same words.

I now realise that what I think is best for the client may not be what someone else thinks.

From understanding that there are different perspectives, we next move onto exploring the perspectives of others. Our work in this area has mainly involved thinking about young people, but it could involve any group we perceive as different from ourselves. The idea of a 'group' is, of course, problematic in itself but the work below explores ways of thinking about individuals with a range of different and also some similar experiences.

## Exploring the shoes of others



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### *Why do we need to do this?*

For this second area of our pedagogical approach we are using the metaphor of a shoe shop to represent trying on different shoes. In this shop people are swapping shoes with each other!

Martha Nussbaum in her book *The new religious intolerance: overcoming the politics of fear in an anxious age* (2012) argues for the necessity of understanding “the other” if we are to be able to live together peaceably. This involves being curious and interested and having information. But more than this, Nussbaum argues, we need “a willingness to move out of the self and to enter another world” (p.140). Initially we need to “learn that other worlds of thought and feeling exist” (p. 144), so that we can begin to understand ways of thinking that are very different from our own. John Hull in *Teaching as a trans-world activity* (2004) argues the same point in relation to teachers working with young people with special educational needs or disabilities. If teachers and other professionals only understand their own way of learning and making sense of the world, then they will not be in a position to create appropriate learning opportunities for those whose perspectives and skills are very different from their own.

### *How can we do this?*

The role of imagination is key to the way we have undertaken our work in enabling students to begin to stand in the shoes of others. Imagination is a capacity developed by most people in the early years of life (Harris 2000). It enables us to have vicarious experience and appreciate that there are different ways of thinking and acting. Children develop their imaginations through role-play and fantasy. Kelly (1970), developing the field of ‘personal construct psychology’, argued that the experience of role-play allows someone to see that another perspective is possible. This may loosen their constructs, or ways of seeing the world, making them more amenable to change.

The other concept that is central to this work is narrative. Stories are a particular form of narrative by which cultures and people share much of their social knowledge. Nair (2003) suggests that stories are ways in which cultures encode theories about the world and in which individuals express their own perspective on events. Autobiographical and fictional stories are one way of seeing the world through different eyes, or, one could argue, of seeing different worlds. It is the idea of there being only one version of normality that needs to be challenged if we are to begin to understand others’ perspectives, and stories enable us to participate vicariously in other realities. Reading fictional stories can involve readers empathising with people very different from themselves. Gerrig (1993) identifies evidence of changed perceptions gained from fiction leading to readers deciding to take different actions in the real world, which is why narrative has been included on courses for professionals working with people, such as in Medicine, Social Work, and Teaching.

Writing stories from different perspectives has been used in teaching as part of enquiry into practice and action research (Winter 1989). Waterland (2002,), a head teacher undertaking action research, wrote as if in the voice of a five year old starting at her school and argued: “it is only by constructing the world the child

experiences within our own imaginations that we can make that world better” (p. 138). The work we undertook involved both reading and writing narratives from different perspectives.

### *What have we done?*

This work was first situated in an optional module on special educational needs taken by about 40 students in their fourth year of a BEd programme. Today we generally do not have the luxury of four-year courses, or indeed optional modules. Also, we may find it less easy to change teaching approaches and assessment types when these have to be prescribed and authorised well in advance. Joy had taught modules on this topic before and was aware of students’ anxiety to have strategies for dealing with “every single special need” before they started teaching. She was dissatisfied with the approach she had used previously, which involved reading on different disabilities each week and identifying the challenges these could lead to in relation to school learning, and then identifying strategies that could be used. She felt that this led to a negative view of children with different needs and abilities and did not encourage the students to be curious about and notice individual children’s learning behaviour and to be responsive and creative in their approaches to teaching all pupils. She decided to use students’ imaginative and narrative abilities as learning tools.

**Before the session, Joy moved the furniture so students’ chairs were in semi-circles facing the only desk. After welcoming the students Joy sat on the desk and started to read to them. She read from texts that were autobiographies or fictional texts as if in the voices of children, young people and adults with special educational needs or disabilities. Texts included a novel written from the perspective of a teenager with Asperger’s Syndrome (Haddon 2003), short stories written by children’s authors in collaboration with children and young people with identified conditions such as cerebral palsy (Laird 1996), and a story written as if in the voice of a pupil by a teacher in a special school (Winter 1989).**

As Joy noted in the first paper she wrote on the work in this module:

The initial reaction to the session, both from the students and the lecturer, was not in relation to what was said but to the quality of the silence in the room while the stories were being read. (Jarvis et al. 2004, p.4).

Most students felt very relaxed about the experience yet could give the story a high level of attention. They felt that they could absorb the information more easily than factual information given in a lecture. Bruner (1986) has argued that we learn about the social world through narrative, and through story structure we can interpret and remember events. For one student, however, the session brought back memories of a school context when a teacher would choose pupils to answer questions after a story had been told, leading to her experiencing story reading in an educational context being associated with anxiety. This highlighted Joy’s assumptions about story-telling contexts and was one of the topics discussed with students after the reading. Discussion focused on story as a means of learning and also on their responses to the stories told. Some students were surprised that the stories written by established authors with young people often talked little about disability but were about friends, shopping, music and hobbies. Through discussion we realised that we may tend to see others’ differences rather than similarities and define children with special educational needs by their condition. Some students reported that they could now start to understand why some children behaved in particular ways, behaviour that had previously been seen only as annoying and disruptive.

The rest of the module was built on this foundation and involved students taking an enquiry approach to their learning. The value of undertaking enquiry is that students develop understanding and skills in relation to the process and so can use this approach again in their work context. It encourages engagement in the project in which the student co-creates knowledge in a context which includes peers and the course tutor.

Each student chose one special need or disability to research and this was done using a range of sources including academic texts, autobiographies, online contact with interest groups, and observations and interviews with children or adults with consent and ethical safeguards. In this process, the weekly module sessions were used to share approaches to enquiry and findings to date with the tutor and peers.

Students were then asked to combine their new knowledge with their existing knowledge about schools and families and about children's literature, to create a book telling a story as if in the voice of an imaginary child or young person with their focus special need or disability. It was emphasised that this was a fictional work and that it was not a case of presenting another individual's views. Sessions on story development from an English tutor, and on the use of colour and illustration from an artist in residence, were part of the module content. This book, plus a written assignment on the identified special need or disability, comprised the assessment for this module.

The quality of the books and insights shown in the texts were so good that we organised an exhibition of work which over 100 students and local teachers attended. Visitors were asked to give written feedback on the work and many reported that they had much better understanding of particular educational issues as a result of reading the texts. One teaching assistant wrote in exhibition feedback: "I'm going to go back to the school I support in and look at the classroom from his (child with special needs) eyes." This relates to Gerrig's (1993, p. 198) point that "real world judgements can be affected by fictions." Academic staff at the university noted the quality of the students' work. A principal lecturer wrote in her exhibition feedback, "This is some of the most interesting and insightful students' work that I have ever read."

Due to the response to the exhibition, the assignment was changed in following years to include a requirement that students take the book they have made into an educational context, use it with staff or pupils and get some feedback. This enabled sharing of their work more widely. Also, Joy identified that the supporting essay she had asked students to write was not necessarily useful. Students' learning was shown in their text, and to articulate this more clearly a learning log was kept including sources, processes, and explanations of the development of ideas. She thought this would support the students' ability to reflect on their learning.

### *What is the impact?*

A Teacher Training Agency Research and Development Award and a University of Hertfordshire Learning and a Teaching Fund Grant enabled student learning from this module to be researched through interviews, focus groups, and analysis of learning logs and texts. Key learning for many students was identified in relation to shifting perspective: "I know it's a really silly thing to say, but I've never looked at the classroom from a child's perspective before" (interview data). In their texts students identified that we can gain insights into another's life through our own experience, and can therefore empathise to a certain extent with others. In one book written for young children about a boy with Asperger's Syndrome the student wrote:

Quite often at school we play pretend games, but my friend Joey doesn't join in. He is not being rude. He does like to play on his own quite a lot, but I love it when he chases me or lets me collect things like stones and leaves with him.

Do you sometimes like playing on your own? Do you sometimes not understand the game others are playing?

She shows the importance of connecting the experience of 'the other' to our own experience. Are we really so very different?

In their texts, students showed good understanding of classroom issues – such as the effect of background noise on hearing, and not understanding language used by teachers – and they identified strategies that they

could use that were tailored to the specific child and context. They saw the importance of listening to the children themselves and of close observation, so that individual strengths and needs could be identified. In this way they would be in a strong position to enquire into issues in their new classrooms and to create their own appropriate teaching approaches.

We undertook a detailed case study of one student who had written a story about a deaf teenager called 'Deaf people don't dance'. In this story she charts the developing awareness of a teenage boy that his deaf girlfriend can indeed dance, although she may access music in a different way. The students' interview data shows the importance of learning from multiple sources, and thereby seeing the individual within a named category; that some deaf people like music and some do not; some deaf people use sign language and some do not. She acknowledges the importance of not making stereotypical assumptions:

The only thing I do say about the story is that it is quite simplistic and I wouldn't like to think that this is where the learning ends. Because there is a danger in reading that story and me thinking that I actually understand deafness and that is just one aspect of a deaf child and it's far more complicated than that being deaf and maybe I've over simplified it and that worries me slightly. (Jarvis and Iantaffi 2006, p. 83)

After three years of teaching in this new way, the module was discontinued as the four-year BEd course was reduced to three years. Joy and colleagues now had one or two sessions in which to use this approach with larger groups of students, often in lecture theatre contexts.

**We called these sessions 'Becoming a trans-world teacher' and aimed to lead students into different worlds through narrative extracts. Then we challenged them to research and create their own narrative to share with others on their programme at a session a few weeks later. This was not part of an assessment, and notes and cartoon pictures were encouraged as there was not time to produce quality resources. The approach was presented as a way of undertaking teacher enquiry and of sharing knowledge with peers.**

Final year BEd and postgraduate student teachers were able to use this small input and task to develop ways of listening to children's voices and combining this with other sources of information to gain understanding of how they could be more inclusive in their classrooms. A student used this approach on a teaching placement when she asked a child to draw how he experienced the classroom, and then talked with him about his picture so that she could gain insight into his experience. She noted: "I will never again make the naïve assumption that the way in which I see the world is the only way in which the world can be seen" (teaching placement notes).

We have evidence of the effect that this type of work had on student perceptions and what they said we would do in practice, but do not know the wider impact of this work. We close this section, however, with an excerpt from our article about our case study student:

Listening and valuing children's voices can make a difference in student teachers' knowledge and approach as it can be noted in our case study of Gill. She had undertaken a teaching placement where two deaf children were included in her class, yet she notes in her logbook how she didn't actually have conversations with them. She states in her follow-up interview, commenting on this issue:

"If I was with children again, and I will be, with special needs, that would be my reflection. This getting to grips with how it is for them, what is life like and how can we actually help you."

Once student teachers start to widen their understanding to include the children's perspective, we move from a discourse of abilities, or SEN in the classroom towards one of equity and social justice. (Jarvis and Iantaffi 2006, p. 84)

## Exploring our own shoes



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### *Why do we need to do this?*

In our third and final picture we see people looking carefully at their own feet. For us this represents helping students and teachers explore their own shoes and go even deeper to look at what is in their shoes. What are the values underpinning our practice? What is the essence of who we are as a teacher? In our experience, this is the most difficult area in which to work. It is much easier to recognise the strange views of others than our own strange views! Indeed our work aims to make the familiar strange – by taking our assumptions and critiquing them. It is important to do this, because our decision-making will be based on what we view as significant and ethical. If we have not explored our own perspectives and tested them within a professional community, then our judgement may be unsound. Teachers have to make many decisions throughout the day and usually they have to make them very quickly. Many may be intuitive and there is a need to explore and develop the underpinning of our intuition so that our practical wisdom and discernment can be well grounded (Vokey and Kerr 2011).

### *How can we do this?*

For the past fifteen years we have used arts-informed approaches as enquiry tools to deepen understanding of personal perspectives. Arts-informed approaches to research are becoming increasingly used in qualitative research in order to get more in-depth insights into people's experiences and perspectives (Butler-Kisber 2010). They allow imaginative, playful activities with a range of visual and physical materials and open up possibilities of insights emerging that may have been previously unarticulated by the participant. This type of approach is based on constructivist principles of developing thinking through practical activity, on the role of play in allowing exploration without constraints, and on the importance of metaphor in helping us to understand the world (Gauntlett 2007). It connects to ideas of deep immersion and flow in creativity developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1997) including the 'Aha!' moment when new insights emerge. This has been explored more recently in relation to brain function by Corballis (2015), where he looks at the value of "mind wandering" in making connections and new ideas. Play with physical materials can give space for mind wandering. In addition, arts-informed approaches are not based on language so it allows us to move beyond

stereotypical ways of articulating thinking. As Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) note, non-verbal enquiry can be a way of exploring and potentially surfacing tacit knowledge. This is linked well with the purpose of our work in trying to identify assumptions.

### *What have we done?*

Our own values and beliefs are often difficult to articulate. For example, Joy was running a workshop at a conference with experienced teachers and asked them to identify their underpinning values in teaching prior to an activity that would be based on these. Identifying values proved difficult, and people were unable to articulate these without preparation. This helped Joy to identify that she had an assumption that people could do this immediately, whereas she had thought about hers for a long time while planning the session! She therefore used the activity below, which has been found useful on a number of occasions:

- 1. Take an A5 piece of paper and draw the ideal classroom moment – learning and teaching at its absolute best.**
- 2. Place this in the middle of an A4-sized piece of paper, and using two different coloured pens identify (a) what the pupils/students are doing and (b) what the teacher is doing.**
- 3. Place this in the middle of an A3 piece of paper and reflect upon what you see as ‘good teaching’. What do you see as most important? What values underpin what you see as ‘good’?**
- 4. Share this with colleagues and identify similarities and differences.**
- 5. Also discuss if the ideal is ever realised in practice and if not what are the barriers preventing this?**
- 6. Discussion considering whether we really act in the way we think or if we only think we do (e.g. related to Agyris and Schön’s (1974) espoused theory and theory in action) can also be undertaken here**

This form of starting with visual representation and pulling out what maybe previously unsurfaced or unarticulated is a feature of our work. We use drawing sometimes, but an issue with this is that participants often say that they cannot draw and this inhibits them from engaging. Our most established way of exploring our own perspectives is through using collage. The way we have usually undertaken the activity is as follows:

- 1. Identify the question/topic that the participant will respond to individually. The question needs to be important to the participant.**
- 2. Have available large sheets of different coloured paper and a wide range of materials such as blocks, sticks, pipe-cleaners, shells, buttons, pieces of material, etc. Ask participants to respond to the question/topic by placing objects on a piece of paper. The items are not stuck down so that they can be moved at any stage.**
- 3. When all the collages are completed, people work in pairs taking turns to explain their collage to each other. The listener listens and can ask questions probing for more information (e.g. Why are all the buttons in this line blue except this one? Is the distance between these two blocks significant?). These questions are designed to help the collage maker think and articulate further. It is essential to be clear that the meaning of the collage is held by its maker and cannot be ‘interpreted’ by the questioner.**
- 4. As appropriate, the collages can be explained to a bigger group by people talking about their collages, or photographs of their collages, which can be projected on a screen.**
- 5. The collage maker can take photographs of their collage to use for further reflection as appropriate.**

The question or topic identified is important and needs to be carefully thought through. If the purpose is to explore personal perspectives, as in this work, then questions/topics could include: ‘My best professional work’; ‘My leadership’; ‘The current area of focus in my work’; or ‘How I would like to work’. Individuals can do

with the topic whatever they choose and then discuss as little or as much of their subsequent collage as they wish to.

The discussion around the collage needs to be carefully undertaken with the person listening to the collage maker's explanations, without interrupting, and then asking questions that focus on the collage such as: 'Why did you choose this object?' or 'Please tell me more about this part of your collage.' It is important that the listener/questioner does not bring their own perspectives and interpretations to the collage; their role is to help the collage maker to reflect and articulate their thinking.

On occasions we have used a "clean language approach" (Sullivan and Rees 2008), in which the questions designed to support thinking are restricted to a given list. These include: "You mention x. What kind of x is x?" These can help people avoid putting their own ideas into their questions, but in our experience people need practice to use them effectively.

The process can be built up gradually if people are unused to working with physical materials and if they find the idea of play challenging. Scaffolding the process can be done by structuring the making so that everyone is asked to make a small collage, using a few objects, about a topic such as 'a learner' or 'achievement' – so that the idea of using materials metaphorically can be explored. In our experience, when people engage in the making they either think through what they would like to do and then make a representation of it (such as finding materials to make a bridge to represent 'transition'), or they rummage for materials, play with them on the paper and see what emerges. In our experience, both approaches can be helpful but the second leads to greater insights. People who start by using a 'representing thinking' approach may later move to more playful approach and achieve flow and deep engagement during the creating of the collage.

Sometimes individuals refuse to participate. This may be for a range of reasons and we do not assume that we know why in individual cases, or indeed that they know why themselves. It is important that people are not pressurised into taking part. The process can be personally challenging and the ethical context has to be a prime focus for the facilitators. In relation to ethics, we join in and make our own collages as we feel that if we are expecting people to unpack issues then we should do that too. We also clarify at the start that people do not have to talk about their collage and that if they do choose to talk then confidentiality needs to be assured by those in the room. Enabling people to feel secure and relaxed, and able to take risks helps them to engage with an open mind, and in this way to gain most from the activity. We find when making collages ourselves that we are sometimes in a better place mentally to do this than at other times. We talk to workshop participants about this and some will subsequently try the activity on other occasions or in a different context.

The collage approach can be undertaken with other materials such as playdough or LEGO® Bricks. LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® was developed by the LEGO® Company to help businesses and other organisations explore issues creatively, and we have used LEGO® bricks either by themselves or with other materials. The topics to be explored can be extensive. Recently, for example, we used collage for the 'dream' aspect of an 'appreciative inquiry' (see Lewis *et al.* 2011) when we asked, "What would an ideal learning community look like?" We have also looked at student-staff working relationships in a collaborative research project, and at colleagues' conceptions of our University. All doctoral students in our School have opportunities for using materials to explore their research topics at different stages, and we ourselves use this approach personally: Sally in exploring her role as a coach, and Joy when she is 'stuck' with a particular issue.

### *What is the impact?*

It is rare for participants in these activities not to report some form of realisation or shift in thinking. We recently used this approach on a leadership course when participants were asked to use collage materials to explore the topic of themselves as leaders. Many people reported that they initially thought "the idea was a bit odd" and "I went along with it but was sceptical". Subsequently they reported, "it was the best activity in the whole of the four days as it revealed so much to me", and "I can't believe how much I learnt through that –

talking with my colleague who was really listening and asking great questions enabled me to say things that surprised me.”

On other courses we have had people report:

[I] now understand why I set up my classroom in a particular way. I hadn't realised that it is about nobody feeling left out. I used to feel isolated at school and I never want a child in my class to feel that. I hadn't realised that this is what drives what I do but it is obvious really.

Our experiences and their emotional impact may be held as tacit knowledge, and making this clear to ourselves enables us to recognise patterns in our behaviour and to make choices about what we do. Participants identified impact in the session and later in assignments if they use their collages and the outcomes of the process to explain what they are doing differently as a result. We have not, as yet, undertaken any formal research activities into wider or long-term impact of the approach.

## How this practice evolved

This approach developed gradually and draws from our separate interests that we brought together when working on some courses and projects. Sally's professional interests stem in part from her first career as a graphic designer and her interest in creativity in education; also her experience in early years practice and more recent work in university teaching and in coaching and leadership. Joy's work comes from her earlier history as a teacher of children who were deaf or who had communication difficulties and needed visual support for learning, and practical materials for understanding concepts. Her recent interest in narrative as a research approach led, due to Sally's influence, to her using Arts-informed research methods. These threads of using practical materials and creative approaches can be seen in our histories.

The other focus that can be identified is our belief that education is about personal change. In our work as teacher educators we aim to engage people fully in learning, see knowledge as socially constructed and acknowledge the importance of emotion in both teaching and learning. We see teaching as a relational activity and have worked to enable people to work together in communities of practice to learn from each other.

The work explained in this text developed in a different sequence to the way it is presented here. The collage approach to exploring self, ideas, concepts and systems – introduced into our School by Sally 15 years ago – has become, through use by colleagues across a range of courses and research projects, part of the culture of our School. The work in Part 2 was developed by Joy and has influenced the way in which courses in special educational needs and disability are taught in the School. The work in Part 1 has been developed most recently as Joy and Sally work with colleagues across the University who are fairly new to exploring their teaching. The practical materials we have developed to support this work are now used by colleagues in a range of internal and external contexts. For those introducing this type of work to their own context, the logical sequence would be that we have described here.

## How this practice is situated theoretically

Throughout our text we have shown the theories that have influenced the different stands of our work. Underpinning this are theories of learning and teaching. We believe, like Mezirow (2000), that learning is about transformation. We talk with students about a model of learning which involves enquiry, reflection, and critique, and which requires engagement with ideas and concepts and professional practice. Forde and O'Brien (2011) eloquently explain a model like this. The work in this text is based upon learning in groups and on the importance of working with others to build communities of practice (Wenger *et al.* 2002). We also believe, with Leach and Moon (2008), in the “Power of pedagogy” and the importance of the role of the

teacher in enabling deep learning to take place. In this work, the teacher carefully structures the activities but leaves them open to change, disruption, and individual leadership of learning.

## How others might adapt or adopt this practice

Ideas for using this work, and issues that might arise, are indicated in the text. In our experience, the most important enabler of this type of work is to create a learning environment conducive to personal engagement, experimentation and risk-taking. Paying attention to the quality of the physical learning space and to building relationships within the group are essential if the ways of working suggested here are to be successful. If people are to be enabled to explore personal assumptions deeply, and to be more open to change, then power issues inherent in classroom learning need to be highlighted and not ignored. Brookfield (2013) has ideas for ways of beginning to do this in practice.

Working in ways that might be considered innovative is helped by finding colleagues you can work with who will provide support, challenge, and ideas. Finding space for learning conversations is essential and we are drawn to the idea of "Transformative Conversations (Felton *et al.* 2013) for teachers as well as students. These conversations are enriched by engaging with a wide range of literature, not only texts focused on your immediate interests. Above all, teaching a wide range of courses, and working with and learning from students and colleagues, enables continuous practice development.

## Conclusion

This work is ongoing and it is perhaps important to note the unfinished nature of teaching and how we are all continually developing and learning in ever changing contexts. The work presented here has been 'messier' in reality than is indicated in this text. Our pedagogical process could be understood more easily, perhaps, in an interactive exhibition or experiential workshops. Ultimately, teaching requires curiosity, attunement and courage in order to work in a context of uncertainty, and to take an ongoing enquiry approach to practice. We hope that the processes explained here can help teachers walk in this direction through exploring why it's 'all about the shoes.'

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