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Continuing development as a teacher - a China-UK example

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Abstract

In September 2016 14 award winning university teachers from Shanghai arrived in the UK to take part in a four month programme at the University of Hertfordshire designed to enhance their educational practice. In this article, two of the programme designers and six of the participants reflect on how the experience was structured, the reasons for including particular elements, and the impact of the programme on all concerned. Questions about how experienced teachers can continue to develop professionally are posed and the impact of observing and participating in learning contexts in a different culture as part of this development are considered. Issues around the cultural underpinning of learning approaches and limitations on transferring practice from one context to another are identified. Lessons about learning for all concerned are also identified and implications for the teaching of Chinese students in UK universities are raised.

Professional learning

How does one continue to develop as a teacher? This was a question embedded in an initiative to bring university teachers from Shanghai to spend four months at the University of Hertfordshire (UH). The aim was to bring university teachers from a range of disciplines to learn together with UH members of staff. Fourteen teachers from higher education settings in Shanghai had been identified through a competition involving observed teaching and scrutiny of their course design, development and implementation, as reaching an excellent standard in teaching. How could they develop their practice further? In this article, two leaders of the programme and six participants identify the ideas behind the programme design, and evaluate the experience and its impact on practice.

A key factor influencing development as a teacher has been identified as engaging in some form of inquiry (Rowland, 2000). This generally involves reflection on, and subsequent evaluation and changing of, practice (Ashwin, 2015). Brookfield (2017) has argued that this reflection needs to involve paying attention to one's own responses to a teaching event and also to those of the students. In addition one needs the perspectives of colleagues and insights from research and scholarship in the field. Underpinning the ability to reflect and inquire is the ability to notice (Mason, 2002). Noticing involves paying attention to an event, returning to it and examining it with fresh eyes and through the eyes of others by discussion and reading. However we may well fail to notice what is important as it can be hidden in our assumptions and traditions of practice. As experienced teachers how can we become more able to notice and question our practice?

One way of looking differently at practice is to look at different practice. This can involve seeing how another teacher in an institution is teaching and this is one of the values of peer observation. Seeing practice outside a cultural frame, in a different institution or a different country, leads to resonances and dissonances enabling us to question why something is done in a particular way and enabling us to reflect on our own practice. This was the idea underpinning the design of the UH programme for the staff colleagues from Shanghai. The aim was that they would return home with new insights into what they did and why they did it and also with ideas for new approaches that they could adapt if appropriate for their own

context. Space for thinking about practice has been eroded in increasingly busy and fragmented roles (Savin-Baden, 2008) so, as one of our participant authors wrote: *'Four months of respite from loads of professional burdens could give a teacher time and space to settle his/her mind well.'*

The University of Hertfordshire Programme

Colleagues from Shanghai engaged in a short cultural tour of the UK and also had four months living on the campus at UH, which gave them some insight into the context of learning and teaching at a UK university. They undertook a course in academic English with colleagues from the UH Centre for Academic English which not only helped to develop their academic English and gave them insights into teaching approaches, but gave them experience of being a student. Being a student when one is an experienced teacher enables one to experience learning from a different perspective and to gain insights into student experience which can enable reflection on one's own practice. It is a form of inquiry through experience. The other form of student experience undertaken by the colleagues from Shanghai was completing the 'Exploring Educational Practice in Higher Education' short course designed by two of the authors of this article.

The short course was designed to enable the group to work together discussing aspects of higher education practice such as lecturing, group work, curriculum, assessment and feedback. It used constructivist principles, an approach widely taken in higher education (Harland, 2012) enabling colleagues to bring their own knowledge and experience to the learning context and engage in dialogue with others to extend learning. The course leaders and participants met at the beginning and end of each week to focus on a particular topic. On the other weekdays participants spent time with UH colleagues from their own discipline, observing teaching and discussing practice. Four of the participants worked with the School of Creative Arts, three in the School of Engineering, three with the Hertfordshire Business School, two with the School of Humanities, and two in the School of Health and Social Work. This enabled participants to observe teaching in their own discipline and to bring examples of what they had observed to whole group discussion sessions with peers and the two UH short course leaders.

The whole group discussions were designed to identify resonances and dissonances and to explore the contexts in which these occur. Sessions were designed around activities, such as exploring examples of practice, experiencing different ways of learning including a wide range of group learning approaches, and using practical and creative experiences to disrupt normal ways of thinking (James and Brookfield, 2014). For example one session involved participants working in disciplinary teams using bricks and other 'toys' to create an 'ideal classroom' for learning in their discipline. This activity opened up a number of different ideas including how students needed to learn, the spaces that could enable this, what inhibits our creating these spaces and also how creative approaches to learning can extend our ways of thinking. For the course leaders a key insight was that spending a significant amount of time engaging in and sharing ideas around an activity can enable deep learning. They identified that often, when working with home students, they might use a number of short activities, perhaps with limited attention and engagement time, and that spending longer on an activity and having higher expectations of the participants' ability to engage and learn in this way can enable greater thought and development of ideas and knowledge.

Allowing enough time for participants to engage in activities was part of the course design brought about in part because of what the course leaders perceived might be the nature of the participants' learning needs. Clearly engaging in learning in a language that was not their first language was an important consideration. Time needed to be allowed for talking together in their first language, for comprehending and using English and for identifying word meanings and collecting and sharing these together. A learning context in which participants would be comfortable to share their ideas was also important, particularly as we were aware that traditionally Chinese learners may be seen as less willing to engage in raising questions in discussion. Watkins (2000:169-170) suggests that 'Whereas Western teachers expect questions to be asked by students *during* the process of learning to fill gaps in their knowledge or to aid understanding of the reasoning involved, Chinese students ask questions *after* they have learnt independently of the teacher. They consider that questions should be based on knowledge.' Participants on this course quoted the Chinese proverb 'The empty vessel makes most noise' to indicate that students who talk a lot in sessions are often displaying their ignorance and that a quiet, thoughtful and diligent approach to learning will lead to success. The course was designed, therefore, to build from participants' knowledge and this was enabled both by the participants' own extensive teaching experience and also the opportunity to observe teaching at UH, thus providing a 'shared text' for discussion. Food in the form of fruit, cakes and biscuits was provided for the sessions, partly because the timetabled slots often spanned lunch time or were in the evening, and partly because this can enable a more relaxed environment. This is discussed further in the thought-piece written by a course participant Shao Jaiyu in this issue of LINK.

Impact and Learning

Participants reflected on their learning throughout the course and at the end of their time at UH they identified the key ideas they would take back with them. For the purposes of this paper they were asked to write anything they thought was important in terms of their learning that they would like to share in a paper. Participants identified issues shared by UK and Chinese university teachers, such as teaching large groups and a high level of student need in terms of support for learning and engagement. They also identified differences, including the amount of time spent on small group work rather than whole class teaching in the sessions they observed, and the significant amount of staff time and effort given to assessment and feedback in the UK. They also noticed that staff members were passionate about their work with students and gave a great deal of time and effort to engaging students in sessions and developing innovative and creative teaching approaches. One participant noted:

“ ‘What did we learn here most? Personally, I believe it is the passion that all teachers give to their careers. Teachers here at UH use their passions in the lectures and assessments with imagination and creativity... Where do all these passions come from? By observing the lecturers in the Art & Design School and being a student of the School of Education HE course, I have found the answer perhaps lies in the continual process of inquiry in their own speciality...’ ”

Participants were influenced by the active teaching approaches that were emphasised in the sessions they observed: *'teaching in an active way is a testament for teachers and provides a joyful and challenging experience.'* We discussed how active learning approaches could be adapted to work with large groups and in less than ideal physical settings. Another issue discussed was how to scaffold students' skills and develop their understanding of active learning and its value. As we identified, the aim was not to transfer uncritically something that was used in one context into another, but rather to use a different experience to reflect on one's own setting and on what might be appropriate to change. It is also important not to reify one approach over another without understanding how students are learning. For example active learning approaches are often seen as a contrast to 'rote-learning' approaches that may be important in some cultures including in China. Watkins (2000:165) argues that this approach can be misunderstood by western lecturers: 'Chinese students were observed correctly by their Western teachers as making great use of memorisation. Indeed, if they felt it appropriate they were often able to reproduce model answers many pages long in the exam situations. But many of them were in fact not rote learning at all as their Western teachers supposed but developing their understanding through the process of memorisation.' He argues that using repetition was used by Chinese students '...to deepen or develop understanding by discovering new meaning. The Western students tended to use repetition to check that they had remembered something.' (Watkins, 2000:166)

Participants identified that small group work was an approach they were less used to using, particularly in relation to groups of students working on a task together during a session:

“...what impressed me deeply was the teamwork spirit which is emphasised. In the classroom, after the teacher explained the theoretical knowledge, students were required to have a group discussion. Each member of the group was required to express their views, and finally they reached an agreement and sent one representative to speak. This kind of teaching method values unity and cooperation, seeking common ground while preserving differences, and in the end, they finished the same task together.’

“[I noticed that] small group teaching nurtures participation and an authentic sense of engagement within the group...Finding innovative ways to sustain this engagement not only improves learning but also makes teaching more enjoyable, rewarding & challenging...it is an intimate, relational experience to teaching in small groups which challenges academic teachers to critically engage with teaching practice. Although small group teaching may raise a number of questions (such as capacity concerns and staff/student ratios), one of the major benefits of teaching small groups is making the learning experience dynamic, versatile, and more flexible;- based on the situated interactions between students and teachers.’

Participants identified how they would take back these ideas to change their practice in their own context:

“While looking back on my teaching in the past years, I think we should combine group discussion with the standard teaching procedure. This will mean arranging group discussion as well as suitably assigning some tasks after the class and giving timely feedback and evaluation. What is more, we can base part of the final grade on the student's taking part in group discussion to facilitate active learning and achieve the purpose of student development in a more holistic way.’

Again it is important to consider the students' perspective on any changes introduced and how they might relate to their beliefs about learning. For example the importance of speaking to enable learning, very much part of a particular western way of engaging in group work, may contrast with students' understanding of how learning happens. Jin Li (2005:192) argues: 'The Asian belief that speaking interferes with learning may well reflect the essential learning virtue of concentration. It is also likely related to Asians' distrust in speaking on moral grounds: Speaking is viewed by Confucians as an act of committing oneself to one's claim; if one is unable to back one's claim with action, one should remain silent.'

Assessment and feedback was a key learning area for participants:

“During the past four months studying in the University of Hertfordshire, I learnt the importance of giving students feedback, which includes written and spoken approaches. Contents of a one-on-one written form is specifically designed to be based on the needs of each student... Spoken language is one of the most direct and efficient ways of giving feedback, as we can praise our students so as to arouse their study motivation. When returning back to my country, I will combine the feedback system with my teaching procedures, in order to progress learning in a timely, repeatedly, and intelligible way... when each project is completed, each student will be given timely feedback to help them consolidate and strengthen all knowledge. Along with the increasing difficulty of the project, we can increase the frequency of feedback and, at the same time, adjust the difficulty of task according to students' performance.’

Changing practice is challenging as learning and teaching exist in a culture of expectations and assumed ways of working. Students, for example, may see new approaches as a risk to their attainment. As Dobozy (2011:211) argues in relation to introducing demanding inquiry approaches into an Australian course, 'For students to actively resist such a challenge is an understandable reaction to novel teaching models'. Student satisfaction ratings are important to universities in both countries and can inhibit change. In hierarchical organisations, such as universities in both countries, practice is determined by senior leaders (Buller 2015), so participants on our programme may have difficulty making more than minor changes to their own practice, unless strategies are being developed by those in Shanghai who initiated this programme.

In relation to their professional development participants identified that the whole experience of being in a new culture, being a student again, observing and experiencing teaching in different ways and having opportunities and space to think about teaching had a significant impact on their personal and professional learning.

“ ‘All that I have experienced here, like travelling, life on campus and the study of two short courses, contributes to my formation of new ideas which I plan to carry out in my future teaching practice. First of all, turn a conventional classroom into a self-designed dream classroom; secondly, draw attention from textbook-based linguistic knowledge teaching to the practice of cross-cultural communication; thirdly, set up clear appropriate criteria for oral English assessment and provide feedback to support students' English speaking practice.’ ”

Another participant suggested that this experience, much like sabbatical leave that used to be part of university life, had *'led us to a great mental 'thaw' to something we almost forgot - the happiness of being a teacher.'* Course leaders started to think about how they could provide similar experiences for colleagues in UH. Engaging more staff in working with our Chinese participants and also working overseas itself can offer new perspectives, as can connecting with colleagues in different disciplines and other UK universities. Of key importance is an opportunity to reflect on learning from experiences, otherwise assumptions about ways of working can go unchallenged.

The UH course leaders also reflected on how much they had learnt about teaching, for example: the importance of language and developing shared understanding of concepts; the importance of taking time over activities to enable learning; and the value of engaging in practical activities that leads to dialogue. A greater understanding and appreciation were gained of how Chinese students may understand listening, speaking and learning and how these may contrast with western approaches. It is important that we talk with all students about learning processes. We need to share and identify a range of approaches to learning and appreciate that there are many successful ways of being an effective learner. As teachers in a UK university we need to identify our own cultural biases as well as the cultural influences on our students so that we can provide effective learning opportunities for all.

The leaders and participants on this course found that they had much in common in terms of professional interests, motivations and experiences and hope to keep in touch with each other. Already one of the participants has arranged for a colleague from the School of Creative Arts to teach in Shanghai later in this (2016-2017) academic year. As one of the participants noted about their experience:

“ ‘Both study and life gave me a lot of new and deep impressions. Patient and warm-hearted personalities let me love the UK. Once a member of staff guided me to my classroom when I asked him directions- he did not depart and walked with me until he found it. His office was a long distance away from the destination... I think that culture has no barrier between our two different countries, because humanity is our common language.’ ”

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