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How can reflective practice be used to support the effective transition of primary teachers to teacher educators in Higher Education (HE)?

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Abstract:

This article documents my reflective journey transitioning from a primary school teacher to an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) lecturer in higher education (HE). It explores the research behind how to support effective transition and the value of reflective journaling. Throughout my transition to HE, I used the steps outlined by Bassot (2020) to reflect upon the various opportunities and challenges I faced in transferring my knowledge and skills to my new context. Having reached this stage of my journey, I propose that reflective journaling is a valuable tool to support transition and I make recommendations for how those embarking upon this career change may utilise this approach.

Keywords: Reflective journaling, Transition, Higher Education (HE), Teacher Educator (this term is used synonymously with 'lecturer' during this paper, as the focus is on teachers becoming educators within Initial Teacher Training)

Introduction:

Many lecturers come from a research background in their own discipline but may not have received any formal training to support them in transferring this knowledge to others through teaching (Harland, 2012). By contrast, those from a teaching background may have practical skills and knowledge but will not fit the mould described by Harland (2012). This was certainly true in my case when I made the move from teaching in a primary school to working as a teacher educator. My personal experience of this journey motivated me to

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research the factors that can support primary teachers transitioning to the role of HE lecturer.

Existing literature on transferring knowledge and skills from primary education to HE confirms the themes identified by Dinkelman, Margolis and Sikkenga (2006): a shift of professional role identity; understanding the new institutional and cultural context; developing new frames of knowledge and understanding; and access to support and developmental opportunities. These opportunities may include induction programmes, mentoring or academic qualifications and action research that support reflection on teaching and learning within the HE context.

McIntosh (2010) believed reflection to be the most valuable aspect of action research, and it is my reflection that informed the small-scale project I conducted as part of my Post Graduate Certificate of Academic Practice (PGCAP). My aims were twofold: first to identify the strategies that support effective transition, and second, to use reflective practice to evaluate my first year as a lecturer. This process has supported my continuing professional development and enabled me to offer support and recommendations to others making the same career move.

Literature Review

Ziechner (2005) proposed that primary teachers should make a smooth transition to work in HE, however, McKeon and Harrison (2010) point out that this transition involves different identities trying to establish dominance, making it far from straightforward. The main aspects for successful transition can be categorised around the themes identified by Dinkelman, Margolis and Sikkenga (2006): shifting role identification, understanding the institutional and cultural context of HE, developing new frames of knowledge and understanding and identifying support and development opportunities.

Shifting Role Identification

Arnott (2017) suggested that, during career transitions, the identity of new teacher educators is constantly shifting as they explore different identities for different purposes in their new context. During this time, they can be said to be in a state of 'becoming'. Ashwin (2015) maintained that the values that new teacher educators hold have a clear link with establishing purpose and these are integrated in ITE. Keeping core values present is vital as they are transferrable from primary education to HE. Sharing common goals with colleagues can lead to collaborative practice and collegiality. Wenger (1999) concluded that identity can be developed through a community of practice where commonality of interests or passions can support learning and improvement: the shift in identity may not come necessarily straight away, but continuing to learn and work within a community of likeminded individuals will support this.

Understanding the Institutional and Cultural Context

The concept of lecturers as researchers is significant in establishing HE identity. Murray (2010) notes that a focus on developing the skills around research will be a predominant aspect in the development of a new HE lecturer. This is consistent with Ashwin (2015) who outlined the need for research to improve pedagogy. However, Carillo and Baguley (2011) raised concerns that there can be pressures around undertaking research in some universities, which can be a potential barrier to new educators. Similarly, Labaree (2003) contended that one of the main challenges faced by schoolteachers moving into the university sector is the difficulty of conducting research, due to the multifaceted nature of the role.

Minogue's (2019) Layers of Reflection (see Figure 1) gives a frame for understanding the multidimensional nature of working in HE. While developing subject knowledge and

teaching skills, new lecturers are also learning about the institutional and cultural context within their own university and within the field of HE more widely.

Layers of reflection

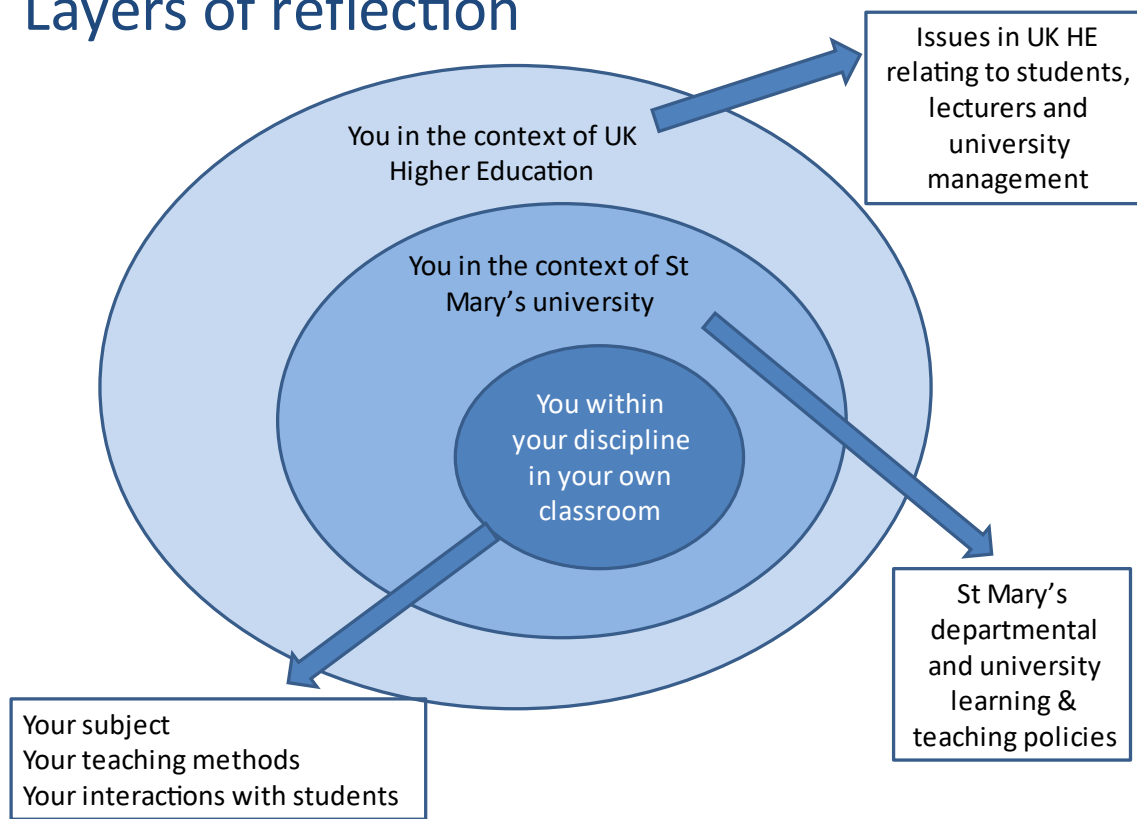


Figure 1: Minogue's (2019) Layers of Reflection

These layers overlap and interconnect, so although they can be considered simultaneously. Prior experience and transferrable skills can be employed here to reflect on each layer discreetly as new lecturers develop frames for understanding their new role.

Developing Frames of Understanding & Knowledge

Using past experiences and being able to reflect on time within school practice is beneficial for new lecturers as this knowledge and skills within teaching pedagogy can be used for aiding student understanding (Allen, Butler-Mader and Smith, 2010). Unlike in a primary school setting where teachers tend to work predominantly with one class, HE lecturers work across different year groups and may also work on different pathways. Understanding the needs of students on different programmes and at different stages of their academic journey is vital as this allows you to develop an emotional connection (Mortiboys, 2011).

As a new lecturer, it is important to understand the value of constructive alignment through linking curriculum learning outcomes, assessments and learning tasks (Biggs, 2003). Preparing for this could involve such tasks as utilising and collaborating with expert colleagues, organising your time for background reading or reviewing previous assignments to gain an understanding of university assessment levels.

Support and Development

Reflection is a critical part of the learning process. Ghaye (2011) highlights the psychological need for practitioners to focus on positive experiences, in order to not have a deficit-based approach. Conversely, Osterman (2004) believes that reflection on problematic experiences allows for identification of problems and clear actionable steps to

create solutions. With support and guidance from line managers or expert colleagues, new lecturers can reflect on both positive and problematic experiences during their induction period.

Amott (2017) acknowledged that appropriate induction for new staff is needed, which assumes that a shift in identity will automatically follow. Izadinia (2014) identifies four features of successful induction: having opportunities to be a part of learning communities, supportive relationships, reflective activities and research. It is essential for new members of staff to have time, space and access to each of these aspects, in order to successfully transition from primary teachers into HE lecturers. However, it is important to consider aspects from different viewpoints. Brookfield's (2017) Four Lenses of Critical Reflection helps practitioners to step back and consider experiences from the viewpoint of not just ourselves, but also that of students, peers and in relation to theory.

Methodology

In keeping with the reflective theme of this research, qualitative data was the appropriate choice for collection as the question required evaluation of experiences, thoughts and emotions; journaling can provide flexibility of depth and inclusivity (Holme, Robb & Berry, 2016). However, Holme, Robb and Berry (2016) caution that qualitative data is highly subjective as it consists of opinions and emotions. This can be a potential limitation in some cases but the reflective nature of this particular study mitigated this concern.

A reflective diary was used as the research tool, where ideas could be linked and meaning determined from them (Bassot, 2020). Bassot (2020) identified a three-step process to effective reflective journaling: to reflect, analyse why different actions/feelings have taken place, and action based on what has been learned. These steps were adopted for an 8-week period of weekly journaling, documenting my lived experience as a new lecturer. Clarke and Braun's (2017) framework for thematic analysis was then used, in accordance with the key themes discussed in the literature review, ensuring accessibility and organisation of prominent themes.

Findings

The reflective diary was analysed using the themes identified by Dinkelman, Margolis and Sikkenga (2006): a shift of professional role identity; understanding the new institutional and cultural context; developing new frames of knowledge and understanding; and access to support and developmental opportunities.

Shifting Role Identification

As my role shifted, it was important to reflect on transferrable skills and knowledge that my previous experience could provide. Multiple links were found throughout the experiences journalled in the diary, which built confidence. Being able to utilise and refer to previous examples in teaching developed authenticity and purpose with students. Taking full advantage of collaborative opportunities helped consolidate my place in the learning community and this, as Wenger (1999) stated, helped me develop confidence in my new identity. Whilst one may want to shy away from challenging areas, it was important to invest time in activities to develop these.

Following a reflective session on school placements for final year students, where they were able to discuss progress made so far and share best practice, I reflected:

'Leading a session on Best Practice Day built my confidence in this area of mentoring, as I was able to refer to my own experience in teaching Year 6, my experience of school placements from my teacher mentor and link tutor roles, in order to support trainees' reflections during placements.'

Sharing reflections of my own experiences in schools was a powerful and relatable way to help students to develop an understanding of pedagogy (Allen, Butler-Mader & Smith, 2010). During this session, I was able to use my previous experience as a teacher to support students developing their teacher identity through sharing my own reflective practice. The goal of developing trainee teachers so they can become effective future teachers is the vision we hold strong for all activities we do with students and this established purpose supports the shift in identity that takes place when primary school teachers move into HE (Ashwin, 2015). In this case, my authenticity gave me authority and enabled me to shift from my teacher identity to that of HE lecturer.

Understanding Institutional and Cultural Contexts

In line with Labaree's (2003) observation, the steepest learning curve I faced during my first year in HE was around understanding my role as a research tutor. Developing my own understanding at the same time as supporting the students led to feelings of inadequacy at first but continuing with the process ensured that there was a clear understanding of the Level 6 dissertation module and expected outcomes. I reflected:

'The process of working with a group of students on their Level 6 research project ensured that my understanding developed for this area, as it was limited to start. Marking alongside more experienced colleagues allowed me to comfortably develop my feedback skills, share grades and discuss strengths and development points. I found this very helpful.'

Working with colleagues in this way helped me to understand the institutional and cultural context around research. This understanding was developed further through the PGCAP which allowed me to develop my own research skills in a safe, supportive space within a community of practice which built upon a shared purpose.

Understanding Frames of Understanding and Knowledge

An area of expertise for teachers is developing relationships with students; this was utilised in creating positive relational environments with students and tutees (Mortiboys, 2011). Understanding student characteristics is key so that modules are pitched at an appropriate level and pastoral support, as well as academic support, can be provided for students. In my journal I reflected:

'In a final session with a Level 3 group, we summarised student learning from throughout the module in a peer quiz format – low stakes assessment task to ensure engagement, develop their confidence and determine understanding. Student feedback summarised that this was a supportive process.'

Working across programmes meant developing an understanding of different pathways and related characteristics, which then led to more impactful teaching sessions and better connections with students. Using the expertise of colleagues to support planning, teaching and assessment for Level 3-6 groups developed an understanding of expectations across HE through an awareness of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003). When lecturers create an environment with accurate triangulation of module outcomes, assessments and learning tasks, students then have maximum opportunities to learn and make good progress.

Support and Development

During the course of my first year, I worked collaboratively with an experienced colleague on a taster session for potential new students. This supportive process developed an understanding of the recruitment aspect of my role in relation to the wider university context. Wenger's (1999) Communities of Practice can be seen here in my reflection:

'Planning a RE taster session for potential new students involved collaborative work with a colleague, planning activities around what RE provision is offered here. My previous experience of subject leadership has helped with planning and running

training sessions. My colleague was supportive, and we developed practice activities for potential new students.'

As noted by Izadinia (2014), having opportunities to develop aspects of the HE lecturer role through appropriate activities such as shadowing and peer teaching are vital in the first year of a new role. Using the expertise of colleagues within your community allows for observation and modelling to take place, which can then lead to confidently developing aspects of your role outside of your classroom discipline.

Looking back at the reflective diary, there was an emphasis on focusing on the viewpoint of self, (with some examples of students' perspectives), so it is important for me to widen this outlook for future development (Brookfield, 2017). There is a balance of problematic and positive experiences reflected on, which Ghaye (2011) and Osterman (2004) believe helps with professional identity and growth. These reflective practices should continue to be utilised in the future.

Conclusion

It is important to note that this was a small-scale project, and as such, limited conclusions can be drawn. Transitions are experienced subjectively, and my experience will be different to that of others. However, the process of reflective journaling supported me on this journey and enabled me to draw a number of conclusions about how to support others.

First, understanding the context of a lecturer within UK HE (Minogue, 2019) can be achieved by taking part in professional development opportunities, such as attending research seminars or conferences for your subject discipline or other areas of interest. Utilising texts that are specifically targeted for new lecturers, such as Mortiboys (2011) and Bale and Seabrook (2021) provide practical strategies and advice for new starters.

It is also important to recognise and adapt to your place within the institutional context (Minogue, 2019). This can be achieved in a variety of ways, such as: engaging in collaborative practice with others. This can involve planning, teaching observations (of peers and yourself) or paired/team moderation. It is essential to develop your Community of Practice (Wenger, 1999). Taking advantage of opportunities to buddy up with new staff across the university can lead to forming a professional network. There are many opportunities to engage with the wider university community once established in your role and these enable you to build upon areas of interest or further passions.

The process of reflective journaling has shown me that my own classroom discipline can be the starting point for reflection. This is central to transition from Primary to Higher Education and should start with understanding what transferrable skills I possess. Sharing my past experiences and expertise with students can lead to authenticity within my discipline. Taking the time to develop relational learning environments with different groups by getting to know the needs of different programmes will create a purposeful and safe learning environment for all. Biggs' (2003) work on constructive alignment is a valuable model to use in order to support this.

Through this small-scale project, I learned that there is strong value in reflective journaling and analysis as a means of supporting career transitions from primary education to HE, and that the process of reflective journaling can lead to forward-thinking action. This, alongside the continuation of professional development and collaborative practice, can positively impact effective career changes and ensure high quality provision for students. Reflecting on my next steps as a HE lecturer and how I can share what I have learned with others, I can see that the greatest transition that takes place when moving from primary to higher education is not in how we are seen by others but in how we see ourselves.

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