

(2005) Published in *Interactions* 9/2 (Issue 26). Online:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/ldc/resource/interactions/issues/issue26/smith>

Developing Professional Autonomy: An action research based MA module and its ongoing evaluation

Richard Smith, CELTE, University of Warwick

Background

The Centre for English Language Teacher Education (CELTE) offers various MA programmes for English language teaching professionals from around the world. Most of these programmes are for students with prior teaching experience, but one programme, the MA in English Language Studies and Methods (ELSM), is specifically designed for students with little or no substantial experience. Innovations and evaluations implemented over the last five years within the core Professional Practice module for this particular programme will be focused on in this article.

Aims and rationale

The Term 2 Professional Practice module has a central but, in some ways, problematic role within the overall MA in ELSM programme, in the sense that it is relied upon to help students relate theory to their own practice in the context of an academic course of study. Students themselves are often concerned above all to develop practical teaching skills. However, this module, like all others in the programme, must meet academic criteria, in other words cannot be a purely practical one. Nor is there much opportunity for teaching practice, since the module lasts for only one term, with five contact hours timetabled per week. The solution we have introduced in this setting has been to redesign the module according to an 'action research' learning model (initially, for 2000–01), and to focus less on imparting teaching skills per se than on the development of students' 'professional autonomy', that is, their ability to evaluate and continuously develop their practice for themselves, into the future.

Initial design and planning

Prior to the redesign of the module, the students – typically around twenty to twenty-five in number – would co-teach (with one partner) one thirty-minute lesson to peers during the term (the class was split into two for these sessions). Reflections on this experience constituted one part of the overall assignment, the other parts being: (1) a 3,000-word rationale for a series of lesson plans and (2) a 3,000-word report of small-scale classroom observation research. Input sessions (three hours per week) provided insights into language teaching methodology and classroom research methods. However, there were several problems with this model. One was assignment-writing overload: the different parts of the assignment were largely unrelated to one another, and students themselves complained about having to undertake more work than if they had been asked to write a single, unified report. Secondly, I was concerned that in various respects the module seemed to reflect a top-down, theory into practice, or 'applied science' (Wallace 1991) conception of teacher-learning, with input sessions being expected to be the main driver for students' learning. I hoped instead to encourage a more bottom-up, 'reflective' (ibid.) and 'experiential' (Kolb 1984) learning process, whereby students would develop their own ideas on the

basis of teaching, as well as of classroom research more clearly related to their own concerns. Finally, students themselves highly appreciated the peer-teaching practice component but felt it should be increased in importance (as expressed in 1999–2000 module evaluations).

The solution adopted in this context (initially, for 2000–01) has been to decrease the amount of input we provide and thereby to increase the quantity of teaching practice in the module, while placing a greater onus on students seeking out new insights of relevance to themselves via a structured process of research. All students now plan, teach to peers and evaluate for themselves (on the basis of peer feedback and reflection on a video-recording) two thirty-minute lessons, one at the beginning of the term, and one at the end. Between these two points, we guide students via input and workshop sessions to investigate an area of their teaching which they are particularly concerned about (such areas have included, for example, how to increase interest and participation, how to give clearer explanations and instructions, and how to ask questions more effectively). Students are encouraged to use a variety of research methods, including transcription and analysis of a recording of their teaching, interviewing experienced teachers, observing English classes within CELTE, and reading in their chosen topic area. The lessons they learn in relation to their research questions feed into improvements which they attempt to implement and evaluate the second time they teach, thus making the overall experience akin to one of ‘action research’, that is, ‘a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices’ (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162; see also McNiff 1988). Students write a conventionally assessed 6,000-word assignment, but in stages corresponding to the three phases of the module: report on the initial teaching and self-evaluation experience, with clarification of a topic for further research (Part I, submitted in draft form for feedback about half-way through the module); report on research into the topic (Part II, submitted in draft by the end of Week 8); and report on self-evaluation of improvement, with concluding reflections (Part III).

Evaluation activities and lessons learned

Fuller and more specific details of the initial redesign of the module are reported in Smith, Alagöz, Brown and İçmez (2003), which also evaluates student reactions in the first year of implementation according to a combination of data from open-ended reflective writing (including long pieces submitted by the two student co-authors of the report) and responses to an end-of-term questionnaire. We found, in broad terms, that students appreciated the practical orientation of the module, the guidance and feedback on writing given, and the way the module had developed their ability to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, with 14 out of 16 students who completed the questionnaire agreeing (8 strongly) that they had benefited and learned a lot. On the basis of these positive overall assessments, we retained the basic module design, and have continued to receive very positive end-of-course feedback from students in subsequent years.

At the same time, and these are the points I wish to emphasize in the present report, (1) we have continued to ‘tinker’ within the overall module design, since (2) we are aware that students can find great initial difficulty in the transition to relatively self-focused and self-directed ways of working, even though they tend to end up appreciating the advantages; and (3) ongoing evaluation during the module has been of great value, in our case, in helping us understand and ease this transition.

Even in the first year we were able to note a definite change in student perceptions between the mid-term stage (when we asked students to reflect freely in writing on 'good points' and 'points for improvement' in the module) and their final evaluations. Mid-term there appeared to be some dissatisfaction and confusion associated with a shift from conventionally academic to self-reflective work, from consumption to production of knowledge and from dependence on module tutors to relative autonomy. Students complained they had received no feedback from us on their teaching, were confused about our expectations and were having trouble identifying topics for further investigation. Asking students for their perceptions at this stage enabled us to intervene 'at the point of need', not to totally redesign the module but to explain its rationale and our expectations more clearly, to provide additional support in the form of tutorial time, and to postpone the second practice teaching by one week, allowing students more time to clarify their research questions.

It was our awareness gained at this mid-term point, rather than from end-of-module evaluations, which convinced us that we should seek a deeper understanding of students' developing perceptions, with a view to better targeting our support. Accordingly, in the following year (2001–02) we engaged in a systematic process of ongoing, 'formative' evaluation (as reported in detail in Smith forthcoming). Some important features of this evaluation were: (1) there was a deliberate attempt overall to access students' own perspectives rather than impose preconceived categories; (2) information was gathered about the development of students' perspectives as the module went on, not just their perceptions at the end; and (3) the primary purpose of evaluation was ongoing improvement of the module as well as improvement for the following year. Reflecting these priorities, the evaluation process began in Weeks 2 and 4 with students being asked to write freely at the end of sessions in these weeks in response to the prompt 'What do I think of the course at this stage?'. The themes elicited were the source for the majority of items on a questionnaire completed anonymously by students in Week 5. In this mid-term questionnaire, students were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale in relation to a total of 74 statements about the module, most of them derived directly from students' reflective writing. While students already had many positive perceptions overall, the primary areas of shared concern at this mid-term point were exactly the same as in the previous year:

- Lack of tutor feedback on teaching or support in identifying points for further investigation;
- Confusion regarding tutors' expectations of students.

As in the previous year, then, the tutors 'took time out' at this point to explain again the rationale and structure of the module, and offered extra individual guidance in the formulation of research questions, while determining to improve their support in these particular areas in the first half of the following year's course (with new students). In week 9, there was another anonymous and open-ended reflective writing session. This time, students were asked to reflect freely on 'Any ways you feel you've developed / Any problems you're having'. Many positive points were highlighted by students, and the few problems they mentioned reflected different, 'end-of-module' concerns from those elicited in Weeks 2 and 4, notably:

- problems in organizing and structuring the assignment; and
- the difficulty of being 'balanced' and independent in one's studies.

Many of the items in the week 5 questionnaire were repeated for the final questionnaire, which was given out at the end of the final session, in week 10 of the module. Comparison of responses to these items showed some clear trends during the second half of the module. The most striking positive changes were (in decreasing order of strength of 'swing'):

- Increased perception of the 'reality' of the peer-teaching experience;
- Decreased sense of need for tutor guidance;
- Increased perception of having developed professional autonomy;
- Increased perception of having developed abilities to reflect critically
- Decreased sense of need for tutor feedback on teaching;
- Increased appreciation of the value of the action research project;
- Increased sense of the usefulness of transcribing one's lessons; and
- Increased overall satisfaction with the module.

Some negative trends were also revealed, however (again, in decreasing order of strength of 'swing'):

- Increased worry about getting a good grade;
- Decreased sense of usefulness of observing others' peer-teaching;
- Increased perception that the workload was heavy.

Overall, the evaluation of the module in 2001–02 showed that, as in the previous year, it ended up being viewed very positively by participants, despite problems encountered on the way. Data gathered longitudinally for this evaluation confirmed that students seemed to pass through states of confusion, anxiety and even resentment in relation to different aspects of the module, but also that they increasingly appreciated its benefits as time went on, including its usefulness in developing their autonomy as learners of teaching.

As tutors we realized that, through experience, students showed an increasing tendency to think beyond the problems of the module and to appreciate the opportunities it gave them to engage in self-directed development. Increasing anxiety about assignment-writing and a decreasing interest in participation in peers' lessons as 'students' – perhaps itself related to mounting anxiety about lack of time for completing the assignment as the module neared its end – emerged as factors which tutors had previously underrated but which, we realized, should be taken into account in the future.

In ensuing years, on the basis of the evaluations reported above and subsequent evaluations, we have been concerned above all to improve the quality of the support and guidance we give to students in the relatively 'difficult' first half of the module. We have done this partly by introducing a tutorial group system (each of the three module tutors now has responsibility for tracking a particular group of 7–8 students throughout the module), and by timetabling individual and group tutorial time during the first half of the module. In response to the student requests for tutor feedback on their first teaching

experience which were highlighted in the first and second year evaluations, we did start to offer students this opportunity from 2002–3 onwards, but with a delay of a week to encourage them to first reflect on their lessons for themselves. These support systems are now one of the most highly appreciated aspects of the module, as revealed in end-of-module questionnaires.

Continuation strategy

The tutorial group system and the now-frequent discussions about individual students' progress among the three module tutors are based on the heightened awareness we have derived over the years regarding the need for individualized support in the 'difficult transition to autonomy'. In our evaluations, one direction we now feel we need to move in, then, is away from 'aggregate' data and towards refining the means we use to access individual students' perceptions, in order to support these or future, similar students even better in the future (see Smith and Erdogan, forthcoming, for a report of one attempt at evaluation which has adopted this more individual kind of perspective). In terms both of evaluation and of module design we would also like to adopt a more longitudinal perspective, following students up after the programme has ended, asking them for their feedback on our module once they have become teachers, improving the module on this basis and – potentially – developing a parallel Postgraduate Award in action research by distance learning as a means for re-involving our former students around the world and further enhancing the quality of the on-site programme.

Conclusion

This case study has offered insights of potential wider value in relation to two main areas: (1) enhancement of students' autonomy as learners, in this case via incorporation of action research experience into a module; and (2) evaluation strategies for ongoing development of a module.

With regard to the first area, we have found that basing a module on action research has been beneficial in increasing relevance to students' own practical concerns, enhancing their motivation, and developing their capacity to engage in 'continuing professional development', without compromising academic standards. Providing students with an experience of action research (where research leads to improvements in practice) is perhaps most relevant within professional development programmes, but the goal of developing students' ability to learn for themselves is of relevance in all subject areas. The contribution this case study might make to the development of research-based learning in other departments (see <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/cap/curriculum/rbl/>) lies perhaps in the insights it provides into problems students face in the early stages of a transition to self-directed work, and the support systems which might be needed to ease this transition. Our experience shows that students benefit from a clear overall structure, and – just as importantly – from targeted individual support 'at the point of need' (which we have increasingly come to assure by means of a tutorial group system).

The awareness we have gained and are continuing to gain in relation to the 'difficult transition to autonomy' has come about largely as a result of the evaluation strategies we have adopted. We believe that these, too, are of wider relevance, in particular when – as here – students are engaged in new kinds of learning experience with which they may initially be uncomfortable. More specifically, there seems to be great value in gathering participant perspectives (for example, via reflective writing and repeated questionnaires) during a module and not only when the module comes to an end each year, since insights

into development can be gained; these insights can feed into immediate, not only delayed improvements, with student support becoming well-targeted on an ongoing basis.

As a result of our own action research in developing this particular module over the last five years, we have developed a knowledge base out of practice, without being 'driven' to do so in a top-down fashion by university-wide initiatives, even though we now find that our practice fits in well with the institutionally valued strategies of research-based learning (see above) and – in ways not considered in depth in this article – Personal Development Planning (see <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/PDP.htm>). An action research approach has, then, proved to be of value in our own development, as much as in the development of our students, enabling us to produce knowledge which, we hope, may now have value for others across the university.

Acknowledgements

While I have had overall responsibility for the development of the module, the contributions of my colleagues Peter Brown and (since 2002–03) Ema Ushioda have been very significant and deserve more than this brief mention. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the first draft of this article for their supportive, detailed and informative feedback.

Richard Smith

Lecturer

Centre for English Language Teacher Education (CELTE)

University of Warwick

Tel: 024 7652 4987

Email: r.c.smith@warwick.ac.uk

References

Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. 1986. *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. London: Falmer Press.

Kolb, D. 1984. *Experiential Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Little, D. 1991. *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues, and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.

McNiff, J. 1988. *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. London: Macmillan.

Smith, R.C., Alagöz, S., Brown, P. and İçmez, S. 2003. 'Faute de mieux? Simulated action research, from participant perspectives'. In Hancioglu, D. (ed.) TDTR 5: [Proceedings of] *Teachers Develop Teachers Research* (CD-ROM). Ankara, Turkey: Middle Eastern Technical University. Also available online: http://www.warwick.ac.uk/~elsdr/Simulated_action_research.pdf

Smith, R.C. Forthcoming. 'Developing teacher-learner autonomy: constraints and opportunities in pre-service training', in Bobb-Wolff, L. and Vera Batista, J.L. (eds), *Proceedings of The Canarian Conference on Developing Autonomy in the FL Classroom 2003*. La Laguna, Spain: University of La Laguna.

Smith, R.C. and Erdogan, S. Forthcoming. 'Teacher-learner autonomy: Programme goals and student-teacher constructs'. In Lamb, T. and Reinders, H. *Learner and Teacher Autonomy: Concepts, Realities and Responses*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Wallace, M. 1991. *Training Foreign Language Teachers: A Reflective Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.