Editorial

John MacBeath · Lejf Moos

Received: 31 December 2011 / Accepted: 2 January 2012 /

Published online: 14 January 2012

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2012

Changing teachers' classroom practice remains, in the year 2012, still one of the most challenging of dilemmas. Maurice Galton's research over four decades in the U.K. found hardly any change in the ration of teacher talk to pupil talk, stubbornly remaining at 80:20 over that period. To what extent is this related to how student teachers were taught during their university years where lecturing was the predominant mode of 'instruction' – to use the American term which, in this instance, conveys fairly accurate the nature of the transmission theory of teaching and learning? As Amrein-Beardsley and Osborn Popp write, 'For decades, researchers have expressed visions about how to improve university teaching and learning', arguing that preferred styles are 'selected out of personal preference rather than alignment of a method with an andrological learning theory, collective views about what it means to be an effective teacher of adults, expected learning outcomes, characteristics of adult students, practical considerations such as the number of students in a class'. While teachers, or lecturers, new to the job, might be persuaded to change their approach, to what extent would long experienced professors be willing to confront the habits of a lifetime?

Amrein-Beardsley and Osborn Popp's paper describes the attempt to reform teaching practice through peer observation, engaging which a set of principles which posit that effective learning is active, learner-centered, inquiry-oriented, and prompts students to construct new concepts and conceptual systems by connecting new information to prior learning, what they already know and can do. Using an instrument the Reformed Teacher Observation Protocol (RTOP), based on this learning theory, the university staff who participated in this study explored ways to reform their practice (or 'praxis') through collective and individual reflection. That the

J. MacBeath
Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK
e-mail: jecm2@cam.ac.uk

L. Moos (✉)
Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark
e-mail: moos@dpu.dk

instrument has been designed for use in Science and Mathematics classrooms proved to be major obstacle to change, as teachers ('instructors') found it difficult to transfer the principles or procedures to their own subject domain. Perhaps no surprises there, given the content dominated nature of teaching and peer observation and exchange, which tends very largely to take place within subjects rather than across disciplinary enclaves. How often do Maths teachers observe or learn from P.E. teacher, or English teachers collaborate with Physics staff? The very design of schools and universities discourages that kind of cross-fertilisation yet there is little to rival the power of peer learning, especially when it ventures to cross the most hallowed of bounded empires and challenges 'the way we do things round here'.

There is much common ground with the Chen and colleagues' paper assessing the quality of teaching. It starts with the assertion, whether by reference to P.E. or Maths, that 'no matter what specific subject content is being taught', there are four essential dimensions, described as, designing and presenting the tasks for their students, organizing the students to perform the tasks, and responding to what the students are doing and saying, the fourth of these unhappily couched as 'instructional response'. The observation instrument in this case contained 17 teaching components across the four essential dimensions of Task Design, Task Presentation, Management, and Instructional Response. Having been trained to use the instrument and coding protocols, teachers watched each taped lesson together, independently coding each lesson with the AQTR Assessment Sheet and using the coding protocols to check the inter-rater reliability. As in the previous paper, peer assessment plays a vital part in professional development and in enhancing the quality of formative assessment.

Again with echoes of the Amrein-Beardsley/ Osborn Popp paper the greatest variation in teachers' strategy and the greatest challenge to effective teaching lay in the 'instructional response' category. Teacher-centered aspects of pedagogy such as designing and implementing tasks are less likely to take teachers out of their comfort zone than those which require a rigorous nuanced focus on what young people are doing and learning. To enter the learner's frame of reference can be a risky business, and to discover that teaching does not necessarily produce learning may require a critical revisiting of not only task design and implementation but the very nature of the task, its appropriateness and relevance for the learner and perhaps even the social and environmental context in which the task is set.

'The relationship between teacher professional conversations and improved teaching and learning is difficult to ascertain'. So begins Lenore Adie's contribution to this volume. Conversations about practice again are seen as lying at the heart of improvement in pedagogy, in this Australian case, through teachers meeting on line to examine and attempt to reach agreement on the judgments made on common assessment tasks graded on an A to E scale. It is acknowledged from the outset that the contributions made by teachers in those moderation discussions are underpinned by a range of differing experiences and 'exist in relation to understandings that have developed through other historic, social and cultural contexts (Bakhtin 1981)'. 'Social moderation is proposed as a practice that promotes professional dialogue between teachers and involves sharing their knowledge about assessment', described as particularly apposite for newly appointed teachers, providing support which inducts them into the language of teaching and assessment and, 'when conducted with others beyond the local boundaries of the school can work to extend and promulgate practice'.

Through involvement in these conversations it was hypothesised that participants would come to recognise similarities and differences in practice and, consequently, begin to re-examine and reframe their own pedagogy. While common understanding and motivation for change would hopefully occur through the negotiated meaning that moderation implied, it was also understood that what teachers would take from each meeting would translate to different contexts and life histories. The use of WebEx[®] allowed for audio, video and text to be incorporated in meetings, promoting a sharing of documents, applications and desktops, teachers meeting in real time to view or annotate student work.

The conclusion of Adie's paper is that these moderated meetings are a powerful tool for teachers to become knowledgeable assessors within a standards-based assessment system but also important in shaping their identity as pedagogues, translated and reconstructed within their own local, sociocultural contexts. However, as with many such exemplary initiatives, these one-off experiences may not be sustainable without continuing support from education authorities. If we have learned anything over a half century it is about the nature of attrition and the challenge of sustainability.

The first three papers in this volume are all concerned with learning, with reform of pedagogy and with teachers as key change agents. It is only in the fourth paper (Stoner and colleagues) that we are reminded that most learning takes place out of school and that parental, peer and neighborhood effects combine to exert greater influence on children's attitudes and achievement than their teachers. Teachers can, however, make a vital contribution to children's out-of-school learning when there is a strong and sustained relationship with home and family. Nowhere is this more vital than with children with developmental disabilities and 'special needs'.

In the PiCS project (Parent-Implemented Communication Strategies) parents of young children with developmental disabilities were trained and coached in their homes on naturalistic and visual teaching strategies designed to enhance their children's social-pragmatic communication skills. The fourth paper in this volume by provides an overview of the PiCS project, discusses the MAU (Multiattribute Utility Approach) to evaluation, its potential benefits and some of the attendant concerns.

We are reminded again of environmental factors, contexts for learning, and the powerful impact not only of the physical setting but the nature of relationships within it – the sociocultural setting referred to in previous papers. 'For all children, and especially for young children with DD [developmental disabilities] it is the social context within the home environment and the relationship with their parents/caregivers that sets the stage for early social-communicative competence.'

Naturalistic teaching strategies are, by definition, grounded in the day-to-day routines of the family, meal times play and the communication processes, verbal and non-verbal that arise spontaneously in informal environments.

Integral to the evaluation was the inclusion of all 'stakeholders', including alongside the range of professionals, the children's parents, from the outset communicating their vision for their children, setting individual goals for them prior to each coaching session, and providing feedback on their own performance after each coaching session. Their central and active involvement is described as 'vital' to the evaluation process. The PiCS Project, the authors conclude brought value to the parents 'who increased their use of naturalistic and visual teaching strategies, to the children who benefited from parental use of these teaching strategies, and to the field of special education. As the 'underlying

goal of all parent education programs is universal—for children to thrive, the MAU evaluation process gave us the confidence to state unequivocally that the PiCS project taught our participants strategies that met that universal goal’.

Four projects and four evaluations, all with a promise of success, all with something to teach us about the nature of evaluation, of pedagogy, and androgogy, as well as both the limitations and potential of environments for learning. Among the recurrent themes uniting these four papers is the role of conversation, talking about learning, but within a dialogic framework, which promotes reflection, challenges inert ideas and offers the prospect of enhanced learning for children and young adults, and for enhanced professional development.