

Tackling the issue of the teacher's response to linguistic diversity in initial teacher education

Contributing Author

John Landon

Formerly Head of Department of Educational Studies

Moray House School of Education

During professional development programmes for teachers working with bilingual learners, I often hear the cry : What preparation are student teachers receiving? The answer has been : Not much. Many courses contain the obligatory single lecture, usually delivered by a teacher from the local EAL service. This connects with nothing else in the programme; its marginality is evident to all, with the attendant messages that gives. Some courses also offer a final year elective on EAL, in the face of fierce competition from ICT, SEN, health education, and so on. It is frequently cancelled because of poor uptake. The first contact which many student teachers have with the challenge of supporting bilingual learners is on placement. Students may receive support from their teaching colleagues, but they feel ill-prepared by their coursework to plan and teach with the needs of bilingual learners in mind. However, students placed in 'mainly white' schools may be denied this experience altogether.

Rationale for Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

At Moray House School of Education in the University of Edinburgh, those involved in ITE for primary teachers have been concerned about the lack of connection generally between the theoretical part of the programme delivered through lectures and seminars during the taught part of the course and the need for student teachers to be able to grapple with the complexities of classroom practice during placement. The theory has tended to be presented in an idealised form, one aspect of the idealisation being the assumption of linguistically and ethnically homogeneous classrooms in which learners are willing and compliant collaborators in the psychological and social processes of learning. When students embark on placement, they find that this is far from reality and that they are ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of diverse classrooms and wide ranges of pupil motivation, learning styles and behaviour.

Staff in the department of Educational Studies decided that one approach to tackling this concern was to problematise the pre-placement sections of the programme, so that theory was not presented as fixed and static but as open to questioning and challenge by teachers, as they negotiate school and classroom contexts. Margetson (1997) sees this as an alternative form of expertise to the mastery of content:

Expertise is an ability to make sound judgements as to what is problematic about a situation, to identify the most important problems, and to know how to go about solving or at least ameliorating them....It does not, therefore, deny the importance of 'content' – but it does deny that content is best acquired in the abstract, in vast quantities, and memorised in a purely propositional form, to be brought out and 'applied' (much) later to problems. Problem-based learning requires a much greater integration of knowing that with knowing how (p.38)

We drew on work taking place in the Philosophy Faculty at the University of Maastricht, Netherlands and on new approaches to the curriculum being introduced into the School of Medicine at Edinburgh. In both cases, students were initially presented with a 'problem' (in the Maastricht version the 'problem' had to be extracted from a short text; in medicine, it was seen in terms of a specific micro-phenomenon in need of diagnosis). The students then worked on finding an answer to the problem or a possible way forward in the problematic situation, using theoretical insights presented during lectures, their own reading and on placement, to provide a number of models for addressing the issue (examples of activities can be found in Bolzan and Heycox, 1999).

At Edinburgh, we felt that '*many educational situations were problematic in a more holistic and plural sense, and were often non-susceptible to a straightforward 'diagnosis and prescription' methodology*' (Morgan and Wrigley, 2008), and therefore we decided to provide a number of broader, multi-faceted issues which students could work on for around six days spread over three weeks of the course, and sometimes much longer. The issues often contain elements of social, linguistic and ethnic diversity and require the student teacher to respond to a range of additional learning needs, at individual pupil, and whole-class/ school, levels inclusively, proactively and effectively on a day-to-day basis.

PBL within the University of Edinburgh B.Ed. programme

In the Moray House version of Problem-Based Learning, the student, with the support of tutor guidance and intervention, tackles the problem through the following stages:

Plenary

1. Clarifying the task : the problem scenario is presented, and the nature of the process of problematisation is clarified.
2. Storming ideas : at this stage, anything goes, as students contribute ideas, without lengthy discussion, and note everything down.
3. Making connections : this stage involves discovering connections between the ideas previously identified by students and beginning to map out the field for later research.
4. Confirming the way ahead : the different aspects of the problem are here identified and the task is allocated to different students or pairs of students on the basis of their prior knowledge or interests.
5. Identifying learning needs: students decide what they need to know and how to go about finding it out.

Independent research

6. Acquiring knowledge: students work together independently using a range of resources made available through the library, lectures, meetings with key staff involved in research in the area concerned, book and website lists. One floor of the library has been designated as a resource centre to enable students to work together, without a silence rule. As well as books and journals, they have access to computers, printers and a photocopier, offprints, video-recordings and 'soft resources' which they can use for their later presentations. There is a tutorial midway through this stage at which the tutor probes the theoretical bases for the students' thinking, clarifies further questions which may have emerged and steers them back from following irrelevant leads.

Plenary

7. Working on and illuminating the issue: each learning team presents its thinking to date to the whole group and receives further feedback from the tutor and fellow students. This feedback is used to clarify the issue further before the next and final stage:

8. Presenting a response : these presentations are summaries of how the problem might be addressed, on the basis of theory and using case studies of good practice. The presentations do not seek to give 'correct answers' but to hypothesise a way forward, which would then need to be tried out within the practice context. Students are encouraged to use a wide variety of means of presentation, including powerpoint, posters, role play and video, for example. Following each response there is a time for questions and comment.

Problem-based learning, as it operates in the second year of the BEd programme, encourages students preparing to become primary, PE and technical studies teachers, to address school- and classroom-based issues, in an integrated way, around the themes of:

- Teaching and learning
- Curriculum and assessment
- Education and social justice.

In the first semester, 'problems' are presented in various forms:

1) as a question (Does play or activity have a role in learning?);

2) as a narrative in the form of a letter, poem or case study (each of these contained issues of discrimination in school structures, ethos or practice which could be damaging to pupils, around language, ethnicity and social class);

3) as a fact file, with incomplete sections, on approaches to curriculum design (the fact file included sections on multicultural education, citizenship and language awareness).

At this stage, the way in which the 'problem' is addressed is fairly well prescribed. In 1), students are asked to analyse the role of play in their attempts to learn a new skill (a game, a language (Urdu in this case), or some technical expertise). In 2) students are asked to produce two alternative outcomes to the scenario they have considered (students chose to address positive/negative outcomes, or individual/institutional responses), using any media. This is followed by a written rationale theorising the situation and the issues at stake. For 3), they are expected to produce a written version of the incomplete sections and to design a cross-curricular study unit incorporating appropriate assessment.

In semester two, the approach to the 'problem' is more open-ended and draws on experience gained on placement which takes place between the semesters. During the placement, students gather information on two or three learners around the same 3 themes. They are encouraged, after a briefing period which tackles the dangers of negative discourses in the description of individuals, to analyse critically the response of the school to individual differences, and to suggest alternative approaches. The critical framework to which students are introduced is based on the 'environmental model', and helps them to raise questions about institutional discrimination, inclusion and differentiation. The final 'problem', the Future Schools Challenge, requires students to think of changes

occurring in the world (technological, demographic, cultural, environmental. etc) and the way our understandings of education and the nature of schools will need to adapt to these changes. We asked students specifically to address three issues in their research and final presentations:

- the learning challenge
- the citizenship challenge
- the equity challenge.

A number of students who had participated in international study visits during the preceding vacation (to Iceland, the Maldives, Norway and South Africa) were able to draw on their experiences by introducing a comparative element. Many students chose to make their final presentation in role as if speaking to the Scottish Assembly or a group of parents or newly qualified teachers.

Evaluation

Morgan and Wrigley (2008) have undertaken an evaluation of the first year of the PBL course. They conclude that:

'the course in its structure seemed to facilitate practical engagement with a great variety of educational issues.... The long-term process involved in presentation..., together with a thoroughness and range in the design of the Future Schools, strongly suggests that the PBL course does foster a significant sense of agency and personal commitment in participants'

The quality of the research and presentations, to my mind, testify to the potential of the approach to equip students with the questioning and problematising skills required to deal with the diverse nature of contemporary schools and to challenge the inequities which they often foster. The PBL approach is an excellent way of embedding issues such as linguistic and cultural diversity and the teacher's response to it within the core of the undergraduate curriculum rather than leaving it to a final year optional course or a post-qualifying specialist programme. There are plans to develop this approach further in the third and fourth years of the undergraduate programme building in opportunities for greater student independence. There is also discussion of adapting the approach in a review of the School of Education's highly successful Masters programme in Additional Support for Learning (Bilingual Learners).

References and Further Reading

Bolzan, N and Heycox, K (1999) Use of an issue-based approach in social work. In Boud, D and Feletti, G (eds) *The challenge of problem-based learning*. London : Kogan Page.

Margetson, JP (1997) Why is Problem-based Learning a Challenge? In Boud, D and Feletti, G, *Problem-based learning* (2nd edn), London: Kogan Page

Morgan, P and Wrigley, T (2008) Transforming teacher education : professionalism for a changing world *Educational Futures Vol.1(1) August 2008*