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Does the cap fit? The case for contextualised Initial Teacher Training for vocational teachers

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Key words – vocational teacher training

Abstract: This case study of UK teacher-training for vocational trainers highlights the tensions between the professionalization of the teaching workforce and the skills and expectations of vocational trainers.

Introduction

In 2007, UK legislation affecting Further Education (FE) providers changed (DIUS, 2007). Teachers in the post-compulsory sector were required to gain professional Initial Teacher Training (ITT) qualifications. Whilst this was not compulsory for all parts of the sector (voluntary sector and work-based learning (WBL) providers were initially exempt) it quickly became apparent that providers who did not follow the legislation may be disadvantaged in terms of inspection grades and being awarded publically funded contracts if their staff are not as qualified as other FE providers. As well as being treated differently in the legislation, WBL providers were also starting from a different point in terms of the qualifications and skills of their staff. Their focus had been on the industry skills needed to be credible with employers and learners rather than the academic skills more often associated with a college learning environment. Many WBL staff had been recruited with a particular skills set which is now inadequate. In short, good vocational tutors often lacked literacy, language, numeracy, ICT and study skills needed to become qualified teachers.

Rationale for the research

The new ITT requirements have challenged providers in terms of investment in staff training and the level of skills required of staff. This is further exacerbated by the fact that ITT courses have been run predominantly by Further and Higher Education institutions with little reference to the specific needs of WBL staff. It is this particular dimension that this paper will address. As members of WBL teams, we as practitioners and researchers became aware that the needs of vocational teachers were not being addressed. WBL providers were not part of the ITT discourse yet they were being judged against the same inspection and contract standards as other providers. The target of qualified staff became the focus and, as Seddon (2003) argues, a target driven public sector has not necessarily improved services. A lovely new cap had been designed to award to qualified teachers but no one had checked whether it would fit all parts of the sector.

The work-based learning providers

This study has taken place in two WBL settings. The providers employ predominantly older men who have had careers in engineering or construction. Their curriculum is designed to be employer responsive with learning delivered either at the workplace or in workshops which

simulate the working environment. Traditionally, the teaching has focused on ‘instruction’ where the trainer didactically demonstrates techniques and imparts knowledge and skills to meet industry standards. Trainers were not expected to include literacy, numeracy or e-learning into their courses. Also, most trainers were recruited before the legislative changes in 2007 and so did not expect to undertake ITT qualifications.

Methodology

This research had a dual purpose; to examine the impact of PTLLS provision and to provide a framework for mentoring. It is the former that we will discuss in this paper. One member of our team is an experienced researcher and teacher-trainer and the other is new to research and teaching but is a subject specialist in engineering. To support our dual aim, we agreed to use a case study approach using a thematic analysis of data and working within the principles of grounded theory. This was to allow for in-depth analysis of a small data set looking for multiple layers of meaning (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999) in a way which responded flexibly to the emerging data within a reflective and reflexive interpretive framework (Mason, 2005) to support our mentoring relationship. The use of the case study here ‘aims to understand the case in depth, and in its natural setting, recognising its complexity and its context’ (Punch, 2005:150). We do not seek to offer large data sets for comparison or generalisation, rather, we aim to illuminate any tensions in the data and to offer recommendations for future policy.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews based on the views of staff who had completed the PTLLS course. The focus was to find out how relevant and useful the PTLLS course had been to the participants. It also offered an opportunity for interviewees to give suggestions for how the course could be developed to better meet their needs.

Presentation of data

Data was collected through seven face-to-face interviews with teachers who had recently achieved a PTLLS qualification. The interviews were conducted in the workplace with restricted time for discussion as interviewees were being released from teaching roles to take part. The teachers worked across two organisations delivering apprenticeships. Six of the interviewees were White British and one was Black British. All of the interviewees were male and from traditional industry backgrounds in engineering and construction. Their ages ranged from mid 40s up to mid 60s.

The thematic review of the data showed several recurrent themes which can be grouped as follows –

- perception of teaching role
- relevancy to the specific needs of work-based learning providers
- repetition of material
- mentoring
- specific culture of the industry

Each one of these will be examined in turn.

Perception of teaching role

Every interviewee was asked to describe their role. Five of the interviewees commented that they did not see themselves as teachers, one said that he did not have a teaching background and one said that he was a manager. Job titles were based in an instructional pedagogy as six of the interviewees said they were an 'instructor'. For instance, Derek says that:

I'm not a teacher, I never pretend to be a teacher. I am an instructor. There is a big difference.

Terry reiterates this;

I'm not really a teacher I am an instructor. I don't claim to be a teacher. I don't teach classrooms of students.

Throughout the interview he seems to have a fixed idea that a teacher teaches classrooms of students and this is not what he does. His view is firmly fixed within an instructional pedagogy rather than andragogy based around the needs and interests of adult learners who are maturing and growing through the learning process (Knowles, 1980).

The choice of language and the way in which the interviewees perceived their roles is important as to become a teacher requires them to move outside familiar territory, to teach in a way that they were not taught (Britzman, 1991). It also moves them into a different profession, that of teaching, rather than the one that they are comfortable in, engineering or construction. Len is resistant, almost angry when he says;

I'm not a teacher I am an instructor, the day I get labelled a teacher will probably be the day that I leave...why is it so important to write a sentence in the correct wording? Why? Does that make you a better mechanical engineer?

This shows that he does not accept the academic requirements of the PTTLS qualification or the literacy skills needed of a teacher. This may be a reflection of his own lack of skills or may be based on a firm belief that teaching and learning is about the topic and nothing else.

These examples show a resistance to professionalization of the teaching workforce which is encapsulated by Derek's belief that teaching is a club which he does not want to join. As Bourdieu notes, this may be because of the 'sympathies and antipathies inspired by a shared habitus' (1988:3). If trainers do not feel they have the skills or attributes to join the teaching club they are much more likely to stay within their existing club (engineering and construction) or habitus. Sandy is less forthright than the other interviewees but says;

...at the end of the day we are talking about instructing. Yes, you can teach theory but at the end of the day because you have got to produce something to actually work, evaluate it and make it suitable

He does not see the link between teaching and a vocational qualification. He seems to be perpetuating the instructional model whereby apprentices just absorb information and do not engage in any sort of questioning (Knowles, 1980) or double loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974).

Only Addy describes himself from an education-based perspective when he says that his role is ‘Teaching and Learning Manager’. Addy is the most positive of all the interviewees and has progressed to a Certificate of Education (Cert. Ed.). He seems to have moved away from his trade background, something he does not mention, and into his role as a teacher-manager.

The strength of feeling about roles masks information about the actual quality of the PTTLS training received. It could be that the course did meet ITT standards ITT but that there was insufficient contextualisation and differentiation to meet the specific needs of vocational trainers.

Relevancy to the specific needs of work-based learning providers

A second theme is that interviewees did not feel the PTTLS course, content and delivery, was relevant to WBL. For instance, Terry described how colleges did not have;

...the ability to differentiate the course for everyone on board

This shows that even though the PTTLS course will have covered material on differentiation the delivery teams did not respond to the differentiated needs of their learners. Scott captures this problem when he points out the session plans do not work for his setting because of the roll-on roll-off structure. Len is particularly direct in his criticism when he says;

I found this PTTLS totally irrelevant to anything that I need to pass on to young apprentices.

It is Terry who identifies the possible mismatch between the purpose of the PTTLS course and the needs of the vocational sector when he says;

For current staff, going from industrial staff to teachers, it doesn’t necessarily work, the cap doesn’t fit.

The interviewees are aware that the PTTLS course is generic and their experience has been one where there has been little differentiation to meet their specific needs. The PTTLS course does not appear to have been contextualised or differentiated which makes it difficult for the interviewees to appreciate how they could learn from their peers, either in vocational or other settings, or apply theory to practice.

Repetition of material

As well as the content being seen as irrelevant, several of the interviewees felt that things were being repeated or that they had not learned anything new. Terry says that it was “Going over old ground”, Phil says he “picked up nothing new” and Derek says;

...the learning cycle. In that time we spent, lesson after lesson after lesson on it and I do it on a daily basis. Show them something, question them see if they can handle it, if not reinforce it, assess it. I do that all the time...I don’t need telling that and I don’t need a piece of paper.

The perception is that the content did not introduce them to anything new. There is almost an arrogance in their belief that they already knew everything. This can be seen when Phil states;

I think the guy running the course learnt more off me

However, he does not go on to explain what the teacher-trainer learned nor does he recognise that the teacher-trainer may have been role modelling reflective practice, thus learning from his students.

Mentoring

Legislation and awarding body guidance states that new teachers should have a mentor. However, there was little evidence of this in the interviews. Two interviewees said they had received mentoring and that it had been helpful. Sandy, in particular, felt that;

...mentor was very helpful, could contact him and would come back the same day or the next day and he was just very, very helpful really

Sandy is generally positive about the PTLLS and teaching generally and is the one who seems to have used his mentor most. This indicates that mentor support supplements the PTLLS delivery and that those who are not offered a mentor or choose not to use one may find the material more challenging.

The specific culture of the industry

Although none of the interviewees talk about the culture of the industries they come from, it is clear from their comments and language that this has a significant influence on their current thinking. For example, Len says;

I found this PTLLS totally irrelevant to anything that I need to pass on to young apprentices.

Here Len describes teaching as the need to ‘pass on’ something which puts him in the position of expert imparting knowledge to ‘young apprentices’. This is paternal, both in the language and the approach. He does not acknowledge that the PTLLS course focuses on learner centred approaches. Rather, the culture of his original trade seems to be over-riding the culture of his current trade. As such, the PTLLS course will never be able to meet his needs or expectations as his perspective is firmly steeped in an instructional pedagogy.

This cultural mismatch appears again in Derek’s comment that;

...they were totally inadequate, the instructor was...a very clever guy, a lot of respect for him. But he was frightened to death about signing off, but that’s the academic way. I was bored shitless, excuse my French. If I sign off one of my kids I will defend what I have done.

There is an interesting disjuncture here between Derek saying that the “instructor” was very clever and he had a lot of respect for him but that he was “totally inadequate”. The inadequacy seems to be based on Derek’s perception that the teacher did not meet his needs. Derek’s

language is also very paternalistic when he talks about “my kids” and defending his assessment decisions if he thinks they are good enough. There is an undertone of power and a machismo about controlling the outcome (whether the learner has passed or failed) then fighting for this assessment decision. Derek contrasts his strength of decision-making with an implicit weakness in the academic approach of the PTLLS tutor who he believes is frightened to pass their work. He fails to acknowledge that they are both working to national standards and that if work does not reach that standard it cannot pass.

Phil is the interviewee who makes the most obvious link to contextualising the PTLLS course and bringing the organisational culture into play when he makes suggestions for changes to the PTLLS;

... if the course was delivered in here as opposed to a college, using our materials, using [our] equipment and scenarios, as it is. I think that would be of benefit...possibly, you can actually relate the way that we do things, as well as paperwork side, as well as the teaching side, and on the shop floor you can relate the two together.

This type of delivery would certainly ensure the context of vocational learning is addressed but it would perpetuate the culture of organisations rather than exposing them to outside influences and potential change.

Analysis of findings

The data highlights a tension between the suitability of the PTLLS course for the whole post-compulsory education sector and the readiness of engineering and construction trainers for a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning. This is for several inter-linked reasons. The PTLLS is designed on a FE model of delivery which means learners attend for regular patterns of teaching over an extended period. For WBL this is not the case. Learners often attend in roll-on, roll-off patterns so that there is always a mixed ability group, learning may take place in the workplace which impacts on planning and delivery of teaching and learning activities maybe tailored to meet the specific needs of an employer. Also, courses maybe for a few weeks or up to 5 years. The assumed homogeneous nature of all post-compulsory education means that both the design of the PTLLS course and the way in which, predominantly, FE teacher-trainers deliver the programme does not offer a context or style suitable to the needs of WBL tutors. Vocational trainers were paternalistic in their view of teaching which is at odds with the learner-centred andragogy of a PTLLS course. Similarly, vocational trainers were unsure of the relevance of some of the concepts to their setting and were not prepared to engage with theories that challenged their preconceived notions of teaching. Thus, it is unlikely that the PTLLS course would ever meet their expectations or needs.

Some responses implicitly criticise academia and the study skills necessary to complete the PTLLS. Sometimes this manifested itself as a criticism of education generally and at others it was focused on the literacy and theoretical knowledge required of trainee teachers. As all interviewees are from backgrounds where these skills are not highly valued it is likely that they will either not have these skills or not have great respect for them.

The PTLLS design presumes that all tutors have an appropriate academic background for undergraduate level. For many vocational tutors this is alien as they have been recruited to their role for their trade skills not their academic ability. Even though the legislation was amended to allow WBL more time to complete ITT, the Ofsted inspectorate applies the same inspection

criteria to all providers and the public funding bodies expect all providers to have fully qualified staff. Therefore, the difficulties raised by a FE based teacher-training model are further compounded by the way in which the legislation is being interpreted.

The interviewees did not seem to feel part of the teaching profession. It seems that they, and the wider WBL sector, have been excluded from the discourses about professionalising teacher and this is having a detrimental effect on their ability to reach the standards being imposed across the sector. This is particularly important in a difficult economic climate where public funding is limited and employer investment is dwindling.

Summary and Recommendations

This paper raises concerns about the suitability of the PTLLS qualification and the current delivery model for WBL providers. The research aimed to expose some of the inherent contradictions in the PTLLS model as a generic qualification for all parts of the sector. During the research it became apparent that there is an unspoken conflict between the expectations of vocational trainers and the expectations of the teaching profession associated with the PTLLS qualification.

There are two key recommendations arising from the research; PTLLS delivery teams need to contextualise their materials and PTLLS courses need to be reviewed to meet the needs of vocational settings (LLUK).

Associated with this, considerable work needs to be done with vocational trainers to change their perceptions of their role and profession. Greater awareness of the skills needed to be a successful teacher will enable vocational trainers to better appreciate the content of the PTLLS course and to become aware of the purpose of the academic content. In turn, the vocational trainers may need support to gain appropriate academic skills to complete the course which will then better enable them to support the skills of their learners. This is seen in the generalised lack of understanding of the role of 'academic' skills in a vocational context (Wolf, 2011). To support vocational tutors to better understand this, the PTLLS should focus on the embedded language, literacy, numeracy and ICT needs of professions when completing Schemes of Work, Lesson Plans and choosing primary source resources.

A weakness of the research is that it does not provide comparative data in terms of the perceptions of the PTLLS delivery team. Further research is needed to compare the views of both the teacher-trainers and the teacher-trainees. This needs to be linked to an examination of the role of mentors for vocational tutors as the data on this is inconclusive.

In summary, there is a need for contextualised PTLLS delivery for vocational trainers but there is also a need for the WBL sector to undertake work with their staff to better prepare them for the requirements of the teaching profession.

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