Please do not defer…. A personal reflection of participation on the PGCLT (HE)

The article ‘To defer or not to defer.....that is the (perennial) question’ (Jo Peat published in Educational Development 11.3, September 2010), and the subsequent article by Helen Gale (Educational Development 12.1, March 2011) inspired me to reflect my own experience of the Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching (HE) (PgCert) which was very close to completion at that time. In particular it made me think about the value of the programme in terms of enabling new academic staff to meet The UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (HE) <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/rewardandrecog/ProfessionalStandardsFramework.pdf>.

At a time when the current standards are under review, is it time to consider the value of the PgCert as a means of ensuring all new members of staff are able to: *‘Demonstrate an understanding of the student learning experience through engagement with all areas of activity’* (Standard Descriptor 2.) or is it still possible to say that these programmes are merely a reflection of the increased and unwarranted interference by the previous Labour Government as set out in the White Paper "The Future of Higher Education" (2003, chapter 4).

Presented here is my personal perspective. At the time of my enrolment, I was in my first year of a permanent contract having been employed by my institution on a sessional basis for one year before. I was experiencing all the tensions of being a new academic, most notably the transition from expert to novice in terms of pedagogy, but novice assumed to be expert in terms of research activity (Murray and Male, 2005).

At my institution it is a condition of appointment for all academic staff new to teaching in Higher Education (HE) to complete the Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching (HE) if they have less than one year’s UK higher education teaching experience. Exceptions do apply however, and the discretion of the Head of Department is an important consideration. In my case because of my previous experience and qualifications, this discretion applied.

Gosling (2010) claims that there is still an element of resistance to the growing regulatory environment of learning and teaching in Higher Education. Indeed, this was the response from some of my faculty colleagues, largely those who had not participated in the programme when I stated that I was going to participate in the PgCert. Those who had participated were generally more positive about the experience overall, and were keen to acknowledge the impact on their practice.

I attended the Introduction to the PGCLT (HE) session as part of my induction programme. I found the content of the session and the overview of the course both stimulating and challenging. So, undeterred I registered for the programme. There were a number of reasons for my decision to engage despite there being no requirement of my contract as I held a PGCE (Primary) and a Masters in Education; I was looking for a stimulus for my own research activity; I wanted to develop my skills knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning in HE so that my teaching would be less stressful and more rewarding; and I wanted to find a community of practitioners with whom I felt able to share my ‘novice’ opinions.

**The Programme**

The PGCLT (HE) at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) is a programme of learning to help new staff identify and meet their immediate personal and professional development needs set in a broader context of induction and staff development activities.

*‘The aim of the programme is to encourage participants to become knowledgeable, and critical reflective professionals, able to work as effective educators in an increasingly diverse HE sector’* (Programme Handbook, p.7)

The PgCert is structured to be tutor-led but is centred around discussion and collaboration; the handbook states

*‘that the fundamental feature of the programme is the desire to create a ‘safe environment’ in which colleagues can engage in free and frank exchange of ideas.......... In this light the programme is not designed to engender a’ culture of compliance’ amongst academic workers, but contribute to the maintenance of a lively and supportive ‘academic learning community’.’* (p6).

**The structure of the programme**

There were five taught modules and a pedagogic study through which participants are encouraged to investigate an issue that is of direct importance to their teaching or support of students. The programme has recently been revalidated with a slightly different structure, but the content is largely still the same. There is an option to APL out of the Introduction to Teaching and Learning for those who already have substantial experience or a recognised teaching qualification (outside of HE). There are four other taught courses; Teaching for Learning in HE; Supporting Students as Learners; Curriculum, Assessment and Quality Assurance; and Understanding HE.

The programme can be taken over one or two years. I attended all the taught sessions in one year but decided not to submit the pedagogic study until year 2. This gave me time to adapt to the pressures of teaching combined with scholarly activity, but enabled me to continue to reflect and develop my practice for an extended period. I did not consider this opportunity as a ‘lesser priority to my other academic activities’ (Peat, 2010).

**Did it have an impact on my practice?**

The programme has definitely had a significant impact on my professional identity as a tutor in initial teacher education (ITE). I no longer see myself just as a teacher; I am now beginning to develop professional identity as a researcher too. And indeed the Programme enabled me to integrate my own research activity with my teaching.

There has been much research about the transition from practitioner to researcher in initial teacher education (Murray, 1998; Harrison and McKeon, 2010; Griffiths et al, 2010). When I joined the institution, although there was a clear expectation to engage in both teaching, research and scholarly activity, like many new primary initial teacher educators I saw my primary role as teaching and supporting students (Murray, 1998 p.143). The PgCert not only encouraged me to consider the value of research informed teaching, but it also helped me to understand my role as a researcher. It enabled me to talk with other new colleagues in the university at an academic level – something that can be intimidating for those new to academia. The assignments made it possible for me to engage in small pieces of academic writing, upon which I received feedback, that helped me reflect and improve my practice and ability to conduct research.

I do not intend to describe the merits of each course but would like to draw attention to a few of the activities that enabled me to reflect on my role as a new ITE tutor and develop and enhance my practice.

The ongoing learning log encouraged me to reflect on the sessions directly after, thinking about the issues and how I could use the ideas to develop my practice. This also served to increase my confidence in making contributions at meetings, particularly about the development of programmes, widening participation, personal tutoring and assessment. I have since been involved in working groups in all of these areas.

In the Curriculum Design, Assessment and Quality Assurance course, with the support of visiting tutors from the QA department, something that Helen Gale advocates in her article, we considered the various influences on how the curriculum is designed and assessed in HE. As a consequence of these sessions, I now have a deeper understanding of the purpose of assessment for learning in HE and have used this to contribute to discussion about assessment tasks on some of the programmes on which I work. I used the pedagogic study to examine ITE students’ attitudes to the feedback they had received on an assignment. Based on the results of the data collected I now write fewer, but more constructive, comments that enable students to understand not only where they have gone wrong but also what they need to do to improve.

The Teaching for Learning in HE course enabled me to reflect on the content and delivery of sessions on the ITE mathematics course. My critical narrative for this course compared a traditional teacher-led teaching strategy with a more problem based learning approach. Through engagement with the reading I developed my taught sessions by introducing more activities based on an enquiry-based learning (EBL) and peer supported approach that encourages students to learn in a more independent way.

The Understanding Higher Education course probably had the most enduring impact on my practice and professional identity. Initially it was just interesting to chart the development of Higher Education since 1335 and how the position of the university has shifted from a place whereby education was available to the intellectual elite to the much more instrumental model with increased participation promoted by the previous Labour Government. Although I found it difficult to come to terms with the arguments which created internal dilemmas, it enabled me to begin to reflect on my own ideology; should the University focus on traditional academia where learning takes place for learning’s sake or should it focus on serving the public good? If that is the case, in my position as a tutor in initial teacher education am I merely an agent working for the benefit of society? Was I an agent of academic competency at all? Subsequent sessions raised many questions in my mind about my professional identity as a teacher in ITE, for example what is my role as an academic? Is it a teacher or a researcher? Which is most important? Which does the University value? These questions have stimulated many a lengthy discussion in the Senior Common Room!

The recommendations of The Browne Report (2010) are also extremely pertinent, which is appearing to indicate an even greater regulation of quality of provision in HE, as students make a even greater contributions to their education.

*‘It will be a condition of receipt of income from the Student Finance Plan for the costs of learning that institutions require all new academics with teaching responsibilities to undertake a teaching training qualification accredited by the HE Academy, and that the option to gain such a qualification is made available to all staff – including researchers and postgraduate students – with teaching responsibilities’.* (p48).

More specifically

 *‘Anonymised information about the proportion of teaching-active staff with such a qualification should be made available at subject level by each institution’* (p.48)

Thus it seems the question will not arise anymore about how mandatory the PgCert is (Gosling, 2010), but more a case of how the programme can be designed so that staff value the qualification and those who teach it. Helen Gale (Educational Development 12.1 March 2011) offers some interesting solutions to address some of the excuses that tutors use so as not to participate fully in the PgCert.

**Some final comments**

With an increasing emphasis on the value of high quality teaching, the Higher Education Academy has recently launched a review of the UKPSF. The UKPSF review identifies ten areas for future development:  academic practice focus, external examiner training and development, disciplinary expertise, new and emerging technologies, sustainability, qualified to teach, public information, alignment of professional standards, progression and career enhancement, and recognition, reward and promotion, all issues that were encompassed in the PgCert Programme.

Whether mandatory or not,  I hold a strong assertion that the PgCert did enable me to demonstrate all aspects of my role as a tutor in Higher Education in line with the UKPSF (2006) and the values of my own institution. I felt as a direct result from engaging with the course content, well informed and inspiring tutors, and my peers, my pedagogy became more effective and appropriate for adult learners. I improved my ability to provide effective feedback and was able to express my philosophy about learning and teaching with growing confidence and conviction. Most importantly it made me reflect on the issues that I would not have found time to do otherwise. And as anticipated the PgCert did indeed act as a springboard for my own doctorate about educators’ motivation to engage in research degrees and the impact this has on professional identity. One final benefit of participating in the programme is that have received continued support from my tutor who has supported me as I develop as a practitioner, researcher and indeed a writer.

Of course, I did not agree with everything that was presented on the PgCert, and I would hope that people would not be expected to, but it was by being presented with perspectives and issues that it provoked deeper critical engagement. For example, one of our guest tutors felt very strongly that E-assessment in HE will have a significant impact on the way we assess students. I feel very strongly that this may not the case so presented a critical narrative entitled ‘Computer Assisted Assessment: Is this the only way forward? A comparison of two innovative assessment strategies in Higher Education’ arguing just that.

Was I alone in thinking that the PgCert had enhanced my practice? When I asked my peers, who have attended the programme over recent years, I found mixed reactions. However most, like me, who had participated, had found that their teaching had become more effective, and more rewarding.

How do I feel about those people who have joined the institution and not taken the PgCert? I would say they have missed out on an opportunity that would enable them to reflect and develop their practice whilst being supported by peers and colleagues And as I am sure many of us would say to our students ‘it is not the arrival at the destination that is important but it is about the journey along the way’. And for me the PgCert was more about engaging with the issues through discussion and research that the award itself.

Part of my role now is as a member of the Staff Development Team for the Faculty of Education and I am pleased to say that I can present a very strong case for participation in the PgCert. Would I say that PgCert should be mandatory? – without a doubt! And to all those cynics who see the PgCert as a regulatory tool that reflects increased Government intervention I would argue that it is the right of every student to be taught by knowledgeable and reflective professionals and the PgCert will support them in doing just that.

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