

# **Becoming a teacher in the learning and skills sector: the inter-related influences of workplace, course and individual factors**

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## **Introduction**

The learning and skills sector (LSS) in England comprises further education colleges, sixth form colleges, personal and community development learning, work based training and learning in other adult settings. The majority of LSS teachers undertake initial teacher education (ITE) on a part-time in-service basis after they have begun teaching. I have proposed elsewhere (Maxwell 2009) that trainees' conceptual and practice development may be represented as continua, where trainees have different starting and end points, and progress at different speeds. The aim of this paper is to illuminate the factors that promote and inhibit in-service trainees' progression along these continua and consider the implications for supporting trainee development.

(Billett, 2001) concept of co-participation in learning has been adapted to provide a theoretical framework for conceptualising trainee development. Billett identifies dual bases of participation: the ways in which workplaces afford opportunities for learning and how individuals elect to engage. These are supplemented in this paper by a third base, the affordances for learning offered by the trainee's ITE programme. This framework offers a lens for examining the interrelationships between trainees' participation in socio-cultural learning and key contextual aspects of their workplace and course and their own beliefs, experience and dispositions.

In this paper I draw on literature and six longitudinal case studies of in-service trainees to develop a conceptual model of the factors affecting learning and skills sector trainee development. I conclude by discussing the implications for supporting trainee development.

## **Literature Review: Factors affecting trainee development**

The aim of the literature review is to consider the range of workplace, ITE course and individual factors that may impinge on LSS trainees' development. Since LSS trainee development is an under researched area, the discussion also draws more widely on teacher development and early professional learning literature.

### *Workplace factors*

The inter-related factors of the *extent and nature of support, the allocation and structuring of work, and workplace culture* are crucial in determining the affordances workplaces offer for participatory learning and the quality of those learning experiences.

Relationships and feedback are central elements of *support*. Affective relationships, informal on the spot support and unplanned collaborative peer learning are important in early professional learning and teacher identity formation ((McCormack et al., 2006), McNally et al. 2008). Conversely, isolation from peers, which occurs in some LSS contexts, restricts trainees' opportunities to engage in professional knowledge construction with experienced colleagues (Maxwell 2004). Both short term task and long term strategic feedback are necessary for development (Findlay, 2006).

LSS trainees are required to have subject specialist workplace mentors. Mentoring has the potential to provide models of good classroom practice (Eraut, 2004a) and help trainees develop practical theories (Wallace and Gravells, 2005). However, mentoring is often an unsatisfactory experience (Furlong, 2000): mentors from the same subject specialism are not always available and their workloads often leave them with little time to support trainees (Ofsted, 2008). Support from a mentor alone appears insufficient. Workers use informal on the spot support more than formalised mentoring (Hankey, 2004) and some LSS trainees do not feel able to take major issues to their mentor (Eraut, 2004a).

The *allocation and structuring of work* determines trainees' opportunities for meeting, observing and working with more experienced colleagues, engaging in collaborative activity, and developing relationships that provide support and feedback. A recurring theme in inspections of LSS ITE is the narrow breadth of some trainees' experience of teaching (Woodd, 2001). This is problematic as it limits trainees' opportunities for developing competence through skills practice and for constructing knowledge with and about learners. The importance of engagement in participative activity with learners has been highlighted as having particular significance for LSS trainees in generating professional knowledge (Maxwell 2004). The link between development and engagement with learners was also highlighted in (Ofsted, 2008) study of early career school teachers. Flores identified student feedback, motivation and achievement, which underpinned teachers' sense of self-efficacy, as the most important factor that led to changes in practice. While some LSS trainees lack the opportunity to teach different levels and types of learner groups within a department, (Flores, 2003) argue that an expansive learning environment for novice workers should also provide opportunities to experience participation in communities of practice beyond their own department.

Where trainees are allocated difficult classes and given too many responsibilities they are set up for failure (Fuller and Unwin, 2004). Challenge and support need to be balanced:

For novice professionals...a significant proportion of their work needs to be sufficiently new to challenge them without being so daunting as to reduce their confidence; and their workload needs to be at a level that allows them to reflectively respond to new challenges,

rather than develop coping mechanisms that might later prove to be ineffective' (McCormack et al., 2006)270).

Organisational and departmental *cultures* were team working, collaboration, and cross-boundary communication are valued, underpin expansive learning environments (Eraut, 2004a). Both organisational and department cultures affect the degree of agency that individuals can bring to bear on their context.

#### *ITE programme factors*

A small but growing body of evidence indicates that LSS trainees' place a high value on being observed. A small-scale study of LSS trainees' found that feedback from observations was statistically more significant in stimulating changes in trainees' practices than feedback from other types of ITE assessment (Fuller and Unwin, 2004), and a larger scale study of further education lecturers found that:

'One of the most significant findings ... was the importance of observation in the "learning to teach" process, indicating that for many people, the coaching aspect of ITE is important' (Maxwell, 2005b).

The same study found that reflection, which is central in many LSS ITE programmes is also valued by trainees. However, where reflection is solely individual and focuses narrowly on the evaluation of teaching sessions the degree to which it can support trainee development is limited (Harkin et al., 2003). LSS teachers have mixed views on the usefulness of theory taught on their ITE programmes (Parsons et al., 2001).

#### *Individual factors*

Prior knowledge and skills (Harkin, 2005) and attitudes to work, career and learning have been shown to influence engagement in professional learning. Attitudes encompass commitment (Hatch et al., 2005), motivation, persistence and perseverance (Eraut, 2004a), interest in experimenting with new roles and responsibilities, and the meaning teachers attach to their roles and responsibilities (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001).

Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon's (1998) survey of studies of initial training and early career development of school teachers highlights the strength and resilience of novice teachers beliefs, and the significance of beliefs and prior experiences in determining their approaches to practice. This appears to be replicated in the LSS sector:

'Trainees' beliefs, dispositions and prior experiences are both a knowledge resource trainees draw on in their practice and a filter that affects the extent and nature of their engagement with other knowledge resources.' (Maxwell, forthcoming)

Drawing on Bourdieu, (Kwakman, 2003)117-8) use the concept of dispositions to describe such orientations: '[d]ispositions are much more than conceptual schemata, for they

are embodied, involving emotions and practice, as well as thoughts.’ Differences in dispositions lead to different patterns of participation:

‘Different learners perceive the same opportunities differently, and react towards them differently, because of these differing dispositions’ (Hodkinson, H. and Hodkinson, P., 2005) 4-5)

Empirical studies have demonstrated that trainees’ engage with the affordances of ITE programmes in different ways. For example, LSS trainees perceive the purposes and utility of feedback in qualitatively different ways (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003), and school trainees exhibit different orientations of towards theory (Maxwell, 2005b).

### Research Method

Six longitudinal case studies of in-service trainees over their first year of ITE were undertaken. Each case study comprised three interviews with the trainee, two observations of their teaching by the researcher, and documentary analysis of their ITE teaching observation reports and other course work. To aid recall, minimise discrepancies between espoused theory and theory in use, and elicit tacit knowledge interview questions focused around specific situated instances of practice.

The case study participants (Table 1) were volunteers from one university ITE programme. While this was not a representative sample, it provided rich contextualised data from trainees with different prior experiences who were teaching different subjects in varied settings.

Table 1. Case study participants

Case	Age	Workplace	Teaching Area	PT/FT teacher
Kerri	22	FE college	Performing arts	PT
Amy	23	FE college	Photography	PT
Liam	34	Training centre	Fire service training	FT
Karen	45	Community venues	Information technology / Personal development	PT
Safiah	33	Community venues	Community development/ Introduction to teaching	PT
Julie	40	Community venues	Islamic Studies / ‘Help your child’	PT

Holistic individual case summaries were produced and checked with trainees in their final interview to ensure trustworthiness (Hobson, 2003). This was followed by categorical analysis of individual cases, production of individual summaries charting development and factors affecting development. categorical cross-case analysis and the construction of comparison tables. Emerging hypotheses were tested against the data and alternative explanations sought (Bassegy, 1999).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Findings summary*

The main factors that trainees in this study identified as leading to conceptual and practice change fell into the workplace, ITE course and personal factor categories identified in the literature review. A combination of factors generally led to a specific conceptual or practice development. However, trainees who reported the same development often related it to different combinations of factors. There was no evidence that different factors were more influential at different points in trainees' development.

The strongest workplace affordance for conceptual and practice development was the extent and nature of the trainee's teaching experiences and their access to participation in communities of practice with learners. Trial and error and student feedback were particularly important in stimulating learning, however development also occurred through immersion in practice and 'getting to know' learners. Other workplace factors that stimulated development were: support from mentors; access to participation in teacher communities of practice; and access to reified workplace curriculum through workplace resources and training. The isolation of most of the case study trainees, created variously by the physical isolation of community venues, trainees' part-time and/or co-teaching status, and workplace culture, was striking and restricted their opportunities for participatory learning.

Trainees perceived that feedback on teaching observations were the strongest ITE related affordance for learning. In addition to providing them with direct feedback on their practices and guidance on how to develop, trainees mentioned that observations created a pressure to change, introduced new conceptual ideas, built their confidence, and made tacit aspects of practice explicit. Participation in ITE activities that introduced new concepts, strategies and techniques provided trainees with understanding, 'know how', exemplar materials, and awareness of aspects of their practices that they had previously given little attention to. Furthermore, trainees described how participation in these activities had led them to think more deeply about their practices, developed their understanding of the wider context, and boosted their confidence. Course reading was a site for knowledge construction and led to greater appreciation of the importance of specific aspects of practice, but did not provide 'answers' to teaching problems. Trainees' experiences as learners, both positive and negative, led to conceptual and practice development, and interactions with other course members generated knowledge and built trainees' confidence.

Trainees' beliefs and dispositions, prior knowledge, skills and experiences, and confidence and sense of self-efficacy influenced the extent and nature of their engagement in the

affordances for learning offered by their workplace and ITE programme. Previous experiences as a learner, particularly negative experiences which generated strong emotions, either stimulated or restricted trainee' development depending on the individual and the context. Trainees' attitudes towards their development affected their orientation towards participatory activity, with some trainees deliberately seeking opportunities to engage in learning about practices they perceived would be valuable in future teaching roles. Developing relationships with learners and a desire to see learners' progress also stimulated development. Increased confidence in the trainees' abilities as a teacher, or in a particular way of working, supported development, and for two of the trainees confronting and overcoming fears was crucial in developing their practice.

The complex ways in which workplace, ITE and individual factors impinge on trainee development are illustrated in the following vignette.

#### *Case Study Vignette*

Kerri's conception of learning as acquiring and using knowledge and skills and conception of her role as a guide, listener and friend remained unchanged over the year of the study. However, by the end of the year she realised she had been too friendly with students and her conceptions of teaching had expanded to incorporate a broader awareness of teaching and assessment strategies and methods. The main changes in Kerri's practice were: improved planning; more varied teaching approaches; better engagement of, and rapport with learners; increased assertiveness and challenging of learners; and the introduction of formative assessment. I have proposed conceptual and practice development continua that represent trainees progress elsewhere (Maxwell, 2009). Using these continua Kerri started her journey near the beginning of the continua in the phase characterised by developing a broader awareness of awareness of the teachers' toolkit and establishing a repertoire of strategies and skills to meet the most immediate needs of teaching context. Over the year she began to move to the next phase characterised by realising that different learners need different approaches and developing strategies and methods that begin to respond to learners' needs.

Kerri explained how engagement with the affordances for learning with ITE programme related to the development pattern outlined above. Through observations of teaching she developed wider awareness of teaching strategies, such as the need to introduce variety in sessions, practical ideas for planning and assessing learning, and became more confident:

'I was starting to feel ... however hard I try I'm not moving forward with the practical side of things.... Since being given the observation feedback however, I feel a lot more confident and positive that the changes I have been making ...have been worthwhile'.

Engagement with the ITE course content led to increased knowledge and as a consequence boosted Kerri's confidence. However, Kerri was ambivalent about the value of course reading:

'Whatever literature I read and however much I let inform my lesson planning on classroom management it still feels like I have to struggle through the actual lessons.'

Participation in workplace communities of practice with learners was also important in facilitating Kerri's conceptual and practice development. She found that getting to know and developing relationships with learners was a necessary condition for developing effective approaches to classroom management.

'I know them and I know they know me so it's kind of... I suppose it's kind of a mutual respect thing.'

However, workplace conditions in Kerri's college and her position in relation to these limited the workplace affordances for learning available to Kerri. Kerri generally worked with more experienced teachers in a co-teaching role which limited her opportunities to experiment with new ideas and skills. Her part-time co-teacher status combined with departmental micro-politics also restricted her access to teacher communities of practice, although she did receive 'know how' support from her mentor and other colleagues.

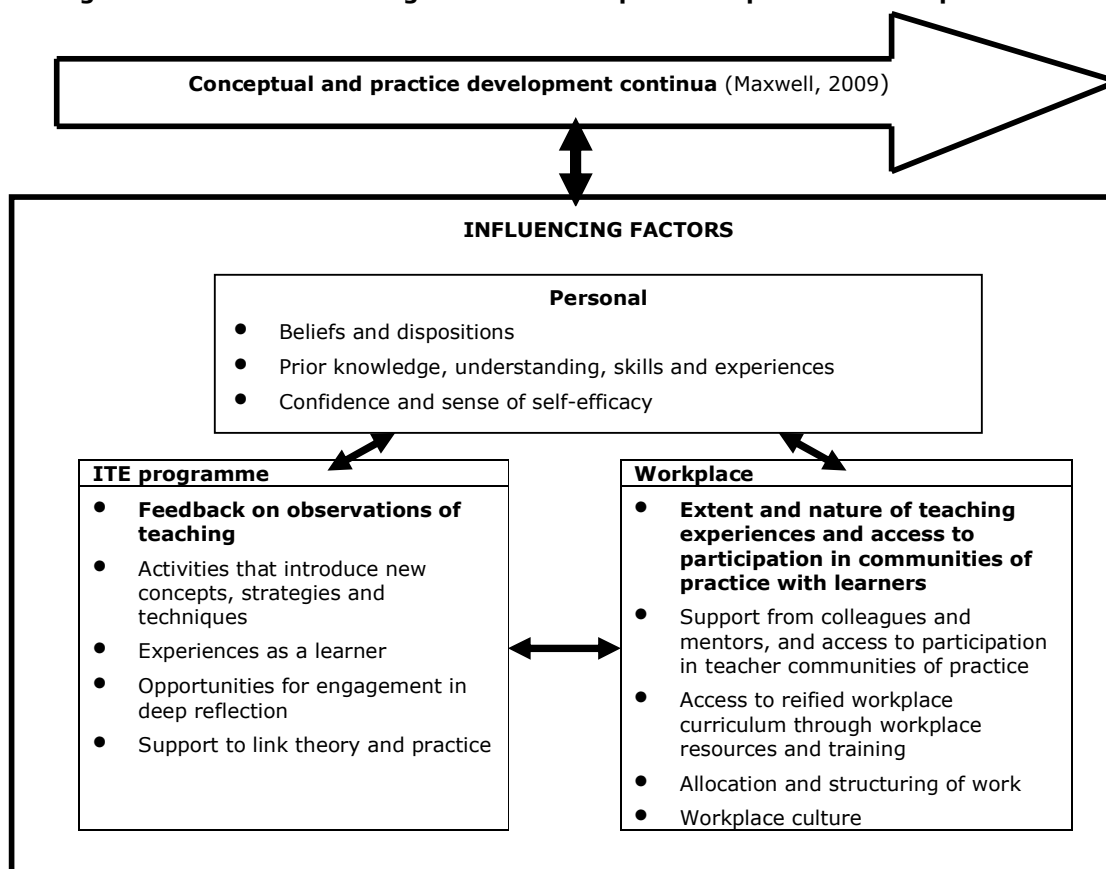
Kerri taught at the same college where she had been a student and had no other experiences of teaching. This limited personal experience meant she was only able to draw on a restricted repertoire of teaching approaches. It was not until she undertook a professional visit to another college as part of her ITE course, that she began to develop awareness of alternative approaches:

'it wasn't until I .. saw how they do things differently, that I started to feel a bit more inspired. I decided to introduce other instructional techniques.'

#### *Towards a model of the factors affecting LSS trainee development*

A conceptual model of the factors affecting trainee development (Figure 1) was synthesised from the findings and the literature. Observations of teaching and the extent and nature of teaching experiences and access to participation in communities of practice with learners are emboldened to signify the strength of these factors found in this study. The arrows denote the complex inter-relationships between workplace related, ITE programme and individual factors. The specific combination of factors that are most influential, and the ways in which factors inter-relate is likely to vary in different teaching contexts and for different trainees. The model requires further testing with a broader sample of trainees over the full two years of their training programme and further research with trainees' colleagues and learners.

**Figure 1. Factors influencing trainees' conceptual and practice development**



*Implications for supporting trainee development*

It is only recently that connections have been explored between workplace learning theory and trainee development and a call made for the development of a 'pedagogy of the LSS workplace' (Yin, 2003). This would need to comprise: the intentional structuring of participation in workplace activities and guided participation; acknowledgement of the consequences of different workplace affordances; and consideration of how trainees elect to engage in workplace learning ((Lucas, 2007). Using (Billett, 2002)an expansive learning environment the findings and literature related to this study have been drawn on to presents a tentative list of the key features of LSS workplaces that support trainee development (Figure 2). This provides a useful starting point for developing a pedagogy of the workplace.

An intentional workplace curriculum for LSS trainees should include planning trainees' *teaching experiences* to ensure they teach a range of learner groups, have opportunities to experiment, take responsibility for groups, undertake sufficient practice to gain competence and experience teaching which is sufficiently challenging but not too daunting. The intentional curriculum should also plan for trainee engagement in *workplace interactions* that provide access to support from knowledgeable and skilled

colleagues and opportunities to participate in teacher communities of practice. Mentors are ideally positioned to play an extended role in guiding trainees' engagement in the intentional workplace curriculum.

**Figure 2. Key features of an expansive workplace learning environment for LSS trainees**

<p><b>Teaching experience</b> which provides opportunities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• teach a range of learner groups</li><li>• experiment in practice</li><li>• take responsibility for groups</li><li>• undertake sufficient practice to gain competence</li><li>• engage in activities that provide sufficient challenge but are not too daunting</li></ul> <p><b>Workplace interactions</b> that provide access to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• participation in communities of practice with learner groups</li><li>• participation in teacher communities of practice</li><li>• support from knowledgeable and skilled colleagues</li><li>• informal peer support</li><li>• affective relationships with colleagues that provide social support</li><li>• mentors that support the development of trainees' subject pedagogy, access to teacher communities of practice and reflective skills</li><li>• reified curriculum embedded in workplace documents, resources and training</li></ul> <p><b>Workplace culture</b> that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• provides opportunities for collaborative learning</li><li>• aligns with theories and practices promoted on the ITE programme</li><li>• enables trainees to exert agency in implementing new practices in the organisation</li></ul>
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Employers can address the affordances and constraints for learning that are embedded within work practices by considering the extent to which *workplace interactions* generated through routine practices provide access to informal support and communities of practice, and the quality of learning that emanates from such participation. Attention also need to be paid to the extent to which *workplace culture* promotes collaborative learning, aligns with theories and practices promoted on ITE programmes and permits trainees to exert agency in implementing new ideas and practices.

Implementing a pedagogy of the workplace highlights the need for greater integration between course and workplace learning. Engaging trainees in practical theorizing, which involves 'looking for attractive ideas for practice and subjecting these ideas to critical examination' ((Fuller and Unwin, 2004)58) offers a way of addressing this. Ideas are drawn from more experienced colleagues in the workplace as well as from educational research, so that both professional craft knowledge generated in the workplace and propositional knowledge generated through participation in the ITE programme are subject to critical review. (Hagger and McIntyre, 2006) argues that traditional views of transfer underestimate the learning involved 'by an order of magnitude', since codified knowledge acquired for assessment purposes has to be converted into personal knowledge, and knowing how to use this knowledge in practice is largely tacit. He goes on to argue that this is further compounded as little time or support is given to

supporting development of this tacit knowledge either in HE courses or the workplace. However, this would seem to imply a one way process of applying learning from the ITE course to practice situations. In contrast, engaging trainees in practical theorizing opens up a more fluid relationship between course and workplace learning.

Viewing trainee development through the lens of three bases of participation, workplace affordances, ITE course affordances and the ways in which trainees engage with these provides a useful frame of reference for the development of LSS ITE. Teacher educators and mentors would have a pivotal role in these developments. They would need to work with employers to develop the intentional curriculum, and with trainees to plan their engagement with the intentional curriculum and affordances for learning embedded in everyday practices. Teacher educators would need to develop frameworks to support trainee's practical theorising that links course and workplace learning. Both teacher educators and mentors also have an important role in challenging the ways in which trainees elect to engage in workplace and course learning. Only ITE programmes that encourage deep reflection, using the multiplying factor of peer support and positive criticism can facilitate the perspective transformation (Eraut, 2004b) required to break from past beliefs and experiences of education (Mezirow, 1983).

## **Conclusion**

Research and literature discussed in this paper indicates that LSS trainees' conceptual and practice development is influenced by complexly interrelated workplace, ITE and individual factors. Trainees perceive that observations of their teaching and the experience of teaching and interacting with learners are particularly important in stimulating conceptual and practice development. However, trainees position in the workplace and workplace conditions may inhibit trainees' development. Trainees' beliefs, dispositions and prior experiences affect their engagement in the affordances for learning offered by their workplace and ITE course.

Supporting trainee development requires the development of an intentional workplace curriculum, employer attention to the affordances and constraints for learning embedded in everyday practices, enabling trainees to recognise the effect of their beliefs and dispositions on workplace and course learning, and greater integration of course and workplace learning by engaging trainees in practical theorising.

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