Intelligent Inquiry: the possibilities and dangers of inquiry based professional development

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Background

In 2013 the Welsh Government commissioned four universities – Cardiff, Aberystwyth, Bangor and UCL-IOE – to design and deliver a Masters programme which was to be bilingual and open to all Newly Qualified Teachers in Welsh Schools.

The Masters in Educational Practice (MEP/MYA) was designed to address areas of concern in Welsh schools, and to develop the skills and culture of professional inquiry. A direction of travel confirmed in the work of 'pioneer schools'[1].

In addition to a formal 60 credit inquiry project, the forensic analysis of classroom practice, data collection and analysis, and structured dialogues with experienced colleagues permeated the programme. As well as developing insight into key aspects of classroom practice – literacy, numeracy, ALN, etc. – learners critically explored these issues in their schools and the broader literature, identifying how their practice might be improved. The aim was not only that learners would become knowledgeable in teacher-inquiry, but the programme was an extended inquiry to support their developing classroom practice.

In order to facilitate this, as well as developing learners' understanding of school data, and critical reading of literature, they were also introduced to a pragmatist approach to inquiry[2].

As well as being taught by a team of academic tutors, each learner was part of a geographically local group of peers and supported by an external mentor. The external mentors were experienced teachers who, as part of their involvement in the programme, developed both their mentoring skills and their professional skills in conducting teacher inquiry.

The structure of the programme reflected evidence showing that CPD for teachers is more likely to be of benefit if it is:

- collaborative – involves teachers working together, identifying starting points, sharing evidence about practice and trying out new approaches;
- supported by specialist expertise - usually drawn from beyond the learning setting;
- focused on aspirations for pupils – which provides the moral imperative and shared focus;
- sustained over time – professional development sustained over weeks or months had substantially more impact on practice;
- exploring evidence from trying new things to connect practice to theory.[3]

MEP students and external mentors in conversation

Teaching and human agency

Teaching can be seen as a form of intelligent action in which it is desirable that the novice progresses to expert[4,5,6]. What remains unclear is the model, heuristic or otherwise, that might underpin a more detailed analysis of the ways in which teacher-inquiry can support professional development. At best we have a 'what seems to work' set of conditions for developing teachers.

This is not simply a matter of *academic interest*, there are indications from the MEP, and elsewhere, that teacher-inquiry does not necessarily lead to good outcomes. Let us take the example of *Louisa* who was a young teacher with a real flair and ability for teaching English in key stage 2. Her external mentor and the senior leadership in the school saw her as a potential regional and national leader in the field. As a result she chose to undertake a systematic inquiry into an aspect of literacy.

Having explored her classroom practice and the literature, she became less and less certain of the quality of her practice, but even more problematically became uncertain as to whether there were any *true beliefs* about developing pupils' literacy. This lack of confidence not only in her judgement, but her beliefs about literacy resulted in a negative impact on her ability to teach.

As Weick[7] has pointed out, in practical situations in order to make sense and act well, one need not act only on *true beliefs*. There are occasions, where there is a deficit of true beliefs, that non-true beliefs provide sufficient confidence for the agent to act well.

The case of Louisa (and others) reflects two distinctive aspects of teacher-inquiry over other forms of educational research:

1. The inquiry is conducted by a practising teacher, who is both teacher and inquirer.
2. The focus of the inquiry is often a matter of practical significance for the teacher.

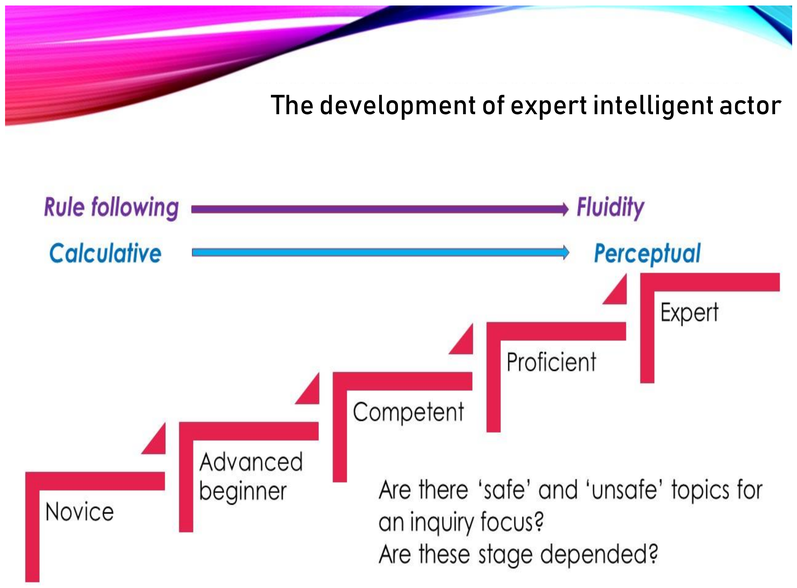
Further, in the case of the MEP:

3. The teacher-inquirer is relatively new to their role as teacher.
4. The approach to rigour in the inquiry reflects the requirements of Level 7 research.

It is these four distinctive features of teacher-inquiry within Masters level CPDL activity which is the focus of these papers[6,8].

MEP inquiry projects

Graduates from the MEP were asked for permission to place some of the outputs from their inquiry projects in a permanent, searchabl archive. This is hosted by the Education Workforce Council



Discussion

Dreyfus and Dreyfus[4] argue for the staged movement of the intelligent actor from *novice* to *expert;* a movement that is characterized by a shift from rule following to fluidity and from a calculative approach to action to one move responsive to perception.

Inquiry based approaches tend to draw attention to the rule following and the calculative ends of the spectrum, that is to the approach of *the novice.* Yet, developmentally, the focus is on moving to the fluid and perceptual end; namely the *expert.*

The 'competency' stage is key when thinking about inquiry approaches to teacher development. It indicates the point at which the complexity of the demands on the actor cannot be addressed by rule following and calculation. Complex 'rules of thumb' might be deployed to plan in order to avoid mistakes, but action must be increasingly directed by fluidity and perception.

Conclusions

In conclusion, teacher-inquiry approaches to teacher development ought to:

1. Consciously reflect a model of human agency, and have a clear narrative of the ways in which teachers, as intelligent actors, are supported towards expertise.
2. Take care in providing a comprehensive risk assessment of the possible and likely impact of inquiring on teachers' ability to teach – this is, judge the cognitive and performative dual demands of teacher and researcher.

Additionally, in the case of early career researchers, they ought:

3. To ensure that a focus on the principles of teaching do not encourage a regression towards *novice* status
4. Pay attention to, and assess more precisely, the developing expertise of the teacher, and question whether some inquiry foci might be unhelpful for their professional development

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