

How do teacher trainees learn how to teach?

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This brief paper considers the kinds of learning opportunities available to teacher trainees and analyzes them from the perspective of what is known about teacher education. I will begin my discussion by examining opportunities for preservice teacher professional learning that are available to teacher trainees. Some are formal; many others are informal. Subsequently, I will examine the topic of teacher trainees as learners from the perspective of their beliefs, attitudes and values and conclude that teacher trainees learn by constructing and deconstructing their experiences.

First, teacher trainees learn how to teach and possibly construct their professional identities by making connections between theory and practice. As they progress through their Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme, they learn to understand the theories and principles of learning, and familiarize themselves with practical approaches to instruction and evaluation commonly used in schools. This helps them to consider effective ways of learning as they begin to think about how to plan lessons. On campus, trainees often carry out lesson preparation in groups initially and then individually and try these out with mock lessons, teaching each other. They get formative feedback. They evaluate and think about what went well and what needs development for them as teachers and the pupils they are teaching. Off campus, during which trainees have opportunities to develop their practical teaching skills in assigned schools, they observe, make reflective notes and carry out 'learning conversations' with the school staff. This helps them to develop their ability to collect, examine and justify their own classroom decisions, reflectively change ineffective practices, experience different contexts, recognize the diversity of learners and facilitate the development of a supportive teaching community.

Secondly, teacher trainees learn how to teach by deconstructing and reconstructing their views on teaching and learning. Through their previous experience as students, they collect a wide range of experiences, both positive and negative, and come onto the ITE programme with understandings about the nature of the subject specialism (e.g., mathematics), what it means to know and how to teach it. These experiences, understood as their epistemic beliefs, act as a filter to their thought process, decisions and actions and do not only affect the way they learn but also what and how they teach their pupils in future. In my PhD study, for example, I found that prior experience of mathematics appeared to have filtered through teachers' current understanding of the nature of mathematics and learning. The role their mathematics teachers played in the classroom and the types of activities they were often engaged in, along with memories of a good teacher and of negative experiences as students of mathematics determined their conceptions of the nature of mathematics and its teaching. Thus, beliefs and experiences trainees had learning mathematics throughout their academic career may potentially have an impact on their learning and performance in their ITE programme. Of course, as they progress through the programme and even after they have graduated, they keep shaping and reshaping their beliefs about their subject specialism and

its teaching and learning. But the argument is that their present experience is a function of the interaction between their past experiences and the present situation. For instance, a trainee's understanding of a good mathematics lesson can be constructed by taking account of how their present teacher structures and facilitates the lesson, as well their past experience of similar lessons and teachers.

In sum, preservice teachers learn how to teach through a combination of both theoretical and practical understanding of teaching and learning, often developed formally and informally. They do this by constructing a solid understanding and philosophy about teaching, teaching methodology, and student learning through their coursework (theory) and through their practicum experiences (practice).

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