

The use of portfolios in initial teacher training

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Learner autonomy and me

Let me begin by presenting myself and my background as regards my involvement in the development of autonomy within the teaching profession. I came into contact with Leni Dam and learner autonomy through a colleague, Rigmor Eriksson, who was an ardent promoter of autonomous learning in Sweden during the 1990s. For a few years I tried to implement autonomous learning at secondary school among 16-18 year olds. I could see that it suited some students in some classes well, whereas others found it difficult and too demanding to take responsibility for their studies and ways of working. According to this kind of student it was so much easier to do and learn the tasks set by the teacher, take the tests and then feel that the goals had been reached. Other students, on the other hand, were pleased to be able to make their own decisions, have an influence, be actively involved and consequently took on a lot of responsibility for their work.

During the last 20 years I have been a teacher educator at Karlstad University, Sweden. I have visited students in their practice in school and seen many lessons by student teachers and read reports from their practice teaching. According to what I have seen and what student teachers tell me after practice, teacher centered teaching seems still to be predominant in schools. A change from teacher centered teaching to learner involvement seems to be hard to achieve. Many teachers wish to work differently but find it hard to know how. Often teachers and student teachers hesitate to try new approaches as this takes time and effort. It may not even be successful. As can be seen from Frank Lacey's article in *Independence* 42, change is possible but takes time. We can also see that it is possible to introduce ways of working that we, as teachers, believe in. Change *is* difficult and for new teachers it is usually hard to bring in new ideas where there is a well-established staff before they themselves have proved that they can manage as teachers. As very few student-teachers have come across autonomous learning in their previous learning and there are few opportunities for them to observe learner autonomy oriented practice in schools, it is important that they become familiar with the underlying ideas not only in theory but also in their own work at university (see Anja Burkert's contribution above). What we can do in teacher education is to challenge students' pre-conceptions

of teaching and learning and have them experience more autonomy in their own learning situation.

Outline of a methodology course

In order to have the students experience at least some degree of autonomous learning in their own situation, I have myself tried to involve the students in their own personal development during their teacher education. In the short time available, I try different ways to make the students experience some kind of autonomy and responsibility in their methodology courses, as follows:

There is always a general outline of the course. The students are provided with the goals for the course and a timetable indicating the number sessions at the university. As the students come from different backgrounds and have studied other and different subjects, their needs may vary considerably. The students write a 'Record of professional development' (Coyle, 1995), where they reflect on what they bring to the course and what they wish to work on or develop. Therefore, the students are invited to suggest areas or ideas that they wish to include in the course, in addition to two areas which are necessarily included: autonomous learning, and testing and assessment. By doing so they have an opportunity to make decisions regarding the content of the course

Areas that very often appear are:

- How to teach grammar
- Lesson planning
- Writing
- Feedback
- Classroom management
- Dealing with disruptive students
- Becoming a good teacher
- Everything!

Together, we decide on a plan for the work, which also involves individual plans.

The use of a portfolio

In order to let the students have the freedom to make their own decisions, choose their own material and work towards their individual goals, the students put together a portfolio (Miliander, 2001). This constitutes the basis for assessment at the end of the course. In the portfolio they document what they have studied and learnt. The students are required to write a reflective report on their portfolios. The reflections should be related to the goals of the course, theories on language

learning and teaching, to the teaching practice in school (and the school syllabus) and to the material that they have collected. They can include anything they think is important for their own development in the portfolio.

During the course they study literature on teaching and learning and they work on their own language learning experiences. They try out various activities on which they base discussions on factors that contribute to or impede learning and they relate their ideas to the literature they have studied. Part of the course is a work (teaching practice) placement of two or more weeks. Apart from including a report on this in the portfolio, the students carry out a small action research study during their placement. They can choose their own area of investigation depending on the school, the context and their own plans of professional development. They are also required to teach a certain number of lessons or part of lessons and carry out self-assessments of at least five of them.

An important part of the course is a final seminar where the students carry out peer-assessment of each other's portfolios. The purpose is twofold. The most important reason for doing this is to give them a chance to see what other students have done and so take part in each other's experiences. Secondly, I, the teacher, get a good insight into what has been done by the individual students as they make a quantitative estimate of each other's work.

The students then hand in their portfolios for assessment by me. Here, I assess what they have included in the portfolios and how they have reflected on what they have read, collected, taught and tried out in school. I write a personal letter to each of the students where I comment on each portfolio, discuss issues that have been raised, give suggestions for further reading and decide on a grade for the course. Reading and providing feedback is a time consuming task but very worthwhile as you get to know your students very well.

The effect of the course

It is hard to say to what extent the course contributes to the students' development for learner autonomy and their future profession. However, many of the students say in their course evaluation that they appreciate the opportunity of having a choice and influence which they have found lacking at school and at university. Many students have become more observant of ways of teaching and learning in schools (and at the university) and say they will work differently when they start teaching. Some have already started to include their own learning experience during the teaching practice in schools, by asking the learners about their opinion, how they learn, what they would like to learn and

by letting them choose material and activities. Some students have even managed to persuade their supervisors to be allowed to let their learners work on projects (one example is to be found in EuroPAL, forthcoming). In that example, the pupils had the opportunity to work in groups and choose areas for their work. The 'projects' have often turned out very well - to the astonishment of the supervisors.

Concluding remarks

I believe that learner autonomy must come 'from within' and that students (and teachers) have to become aware of approaches to autonomy. What, then, can we do as teacher trainers to provide means and opportunities for change? The methodology course and the use of portfolios described above are ways that have seemed to work.

References

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