

The Training of History Teachers in England

Education in England and Wales has undergone the most far reaching changes in the past five years that have ever been seen in the history of state education in the United Kingdom. The driving force behind these changes was a government belief that standards in schools were falling and that too many students were underachieving; the Department for Education was convinced that it had to take a far more pro-active role. Thus a central feature of these changes has been the imposition of a centrally determined curriculum and nation-wide testing at the ages of seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen.

It was hardly to be expected that Initial Teacher Training would remain untouched by the government's reforming zeal. As far as the training of secondary school teachers was concerned, this was largely in the hands of the University Departments and Schools of Education; in government circles there was a growing belief that much of what went on in these institutions was theoretical, divorced from the realities of the classroom and often dangerously subversive in tone. A series of right-wing pamphlets and articles (for example, O'Hear, 1988; Hillgate Group, 1989; Lawlor, 1990) reinforced this view and argued strenuously that teachers would never be properly trained until training was placed firmly where it belonged: in the classroom.

Such a view was based on the assumption that almost anyone can teach and that training should consist, as it did in the nineteenth century, of a period of apprenticeship where the tricks of the trade - and in particular the techniques of disciplining and controlling a class of recalcitrant children - would be learned. The Department for Education, strongly influenced by such arguments, decreed this year that from 1994 onwards, two-thirds of a postgraduate trainee teacher's one-

year course must now be based in a school. Training courses in future would have to be planned in close cooperation with schools, with the schools assuming the role of senior partner.

Trainees, of course, had always spent substantial amounts of time during their training in schools; but the tune had largely been called by the university or college training institution and schools had never seen initial teacher training as an important part of their work. For schools now to assume such a major responsibility for the training of new recruits to the profession meant something of a sea-change in attitudes and the development of a whole set of new skills and understandings. A two-year research project that I had undertaken in 1986 - 1987 into the training of history teachers had shown clearly how ill-equipped many history school teachers were to undertake the training of history graduates. They had little knowledge of what went on in the university or college-based part of the course; they had no understanding of the way in which the beginning teacher learns or of the ways in which the trainee's knowledge and skills could be developed; and many saw their role simply in terms of providing classes of children on whom the trainee could practice the ideas learned in the training institution and a shoulder to cry on when things went wrong. Observation of the trainee at work in the classroom was often sporadic and unfocussed; and debriefing afterwards tended to concentrate on matters of classroom organisation, management and control.

It was largely as a result of this research that the Department of Education at Cambridge University decided to run a series of training courses for teachers who were responsible for trainees. It is on the courses for history teachers from local state secondary schools that I want to concentrate. The courses address a number of questions which we feel are central to the training of history graduates. First, what are the key concepts and procedures of the subject which denote

its unique structure; can we articulate these and show how they determine the ways in which we translate a topic or theme that we have chosen to teach into the hard currency of the classroom? Secondly, what is the most effective way of inducting trainee historians into the craft of the classroom; against what criteria should we judge their performance and how can we best set goals for their continuing development? Thirdly, how should we prepare, observe and debrief a trainee before, during and after a history lesson?

By addressing these issues, both university tutors and history teachers felt we were building up a new, shared understanding of the structures and strategies needed for effective teacher training. We were beginning to abandon the artificial and untenable distinction between theory taught in the university and practice in the 'real' world of the school. Theory, we began to see, was not simply a remote academic preoccupation concerned with generalisations at a high level of abstraction; practice was not merely a matter of actions performed in the classroom. Theory is implicit in practice; practice itself generates new theory. What was needed was close liaison between training institution and school so that a symbiotic relationship could be developed.

To a large extent, therefore, we were anticipating the government's demand for training to be more school-based; and we were showing that a theoretical underpinning which derived from the nature of the subject and the realities of the school and classroom was an essential ingredient of the professional, reflective practitioner. But how was all this to work out in terms of the thirty-six week course we run to train graduate historians? The model we are working towards and which will become fully operational next year is as follows. The schools we work with have been grouped into consortia, each school in a consortium having a senior member of staff with overall responsibility for initial teacher training in the school and

with *subject* mentors responsible for the subject specific training. Each school takes between fourteen and twenty trainees, allocated by subject in pairs, threes or fours to subject departments. The historians, for example, this year were divided into seven pairs and two groups each of four. The course starts in mid September with a fortnight based in one school in the consortium, learning something about the routine of the school in general and of the subject department in particular. Part of this time is spent in one of the primary feeder schools. A detailed questionnaire focuses observation on such matters as the social and economic setting of the school, resources and staffing, discipline and control and the attitudes and values of the students.

The following week is based at the University Department of Education. Trainees reflect on their experiences during the past two weeks and how these fit into broader ideas about the nature and purpose of secondary schooling. In particular, they have their first encounter with their university subject tutors. In history, we spend time getting trainees to think about the nature of their subject and, in particular, the content and wording of the nationally imposed History National Curriculum. Many of us in teacher education feel that the History Curriculum's philosophical underpinning is sound, with its emphasis on the debatable nature of the discipline and its requirement that students are brought into contact with a wide range of historical sources - written, pictorial (including video and film), artefactual, oral - and that history should be studied in a variety of formats: thematic, broad sweeps, depth studies, political, economic social, cultural. We are less happy with the extent of the coverage demanded, given the fact that the majority of students in secondary schools have only about seventy minutes a week for the study of the subject in school (plus a thirty minute homework).

Armed with this knowledge of the structure and content of the History National Curriculum, the trainees are now in a good position to start building up their skills as history classroom teachers. From now on until the first week of December, the historians return for two days each week to the schools where they had their first experience. Here they work mainly with the history department, though on one day each week they attend a seminar with the other trainees in the school led by a member of the school's staff where an issue of general professional importance is addressed - for example, the school's policy on special educational needs or pastoral care. The University link tutor also attends the seminar; he or she has explored the same issue on the previous Tuesday with the group. The emphasis in this seminar is on group discussion of the topic within the context of school and society, often using video or role play; and the trainee's understanding and knowledge will have been shaped and informed by appropriate readings and articles with which they are issued at the beginning of the course.

The programme with the history department is carefully worked out. At first, the trainees observe experienced history teachers in the classroom; a detailed log analyses the lesson objectives, the teaching materials and methods used, and the students' responses. Their subject mentor has a designated time when he or she can talk to the historians about their observations and reactions. After the first week or so the trainees are encouraged to help the students when individual or group work has been set; within three weeks, the trainees are being asked to introduce a topic to a class. It is indeed a gradual induction into the art of teaching history.

The two days in school with the history department is complimented by two days spent at the University Department of Education, concentrating on the theory and practice of

teaching history. At this stage - as at school - the emphasis is on teaching students in years 7, 8 and 9: children who are aged between eleven and fourteen. I start by examining with the trainees the key issue of the nature of historical knowledge and the ways in which it is derived from a wide range of sources. We look at written documents and consider how we might introduce them to a class and how we can move the students from comprehension through to a consideration of the sort of evidence the document might yield - the questions it might be able to answer and the reliability or limitations of such evidence. We consider visual sources - pictures, film, video - and contrast them with written. We handle artefacts.

Thus the trainees are both seeing the use of sources in the classroom and reflecting on such use in their logs; and through practical workshop sessions at the University are practising and discussing the teaching of history based on sources. They are building up both understanding and skills. So far, however, they have been dealing with sources and they way they can be exploited in a classroom situation for say twenty or thirty minutes. Our next move is to address the complex question of how to turn a particular topic or theme into the hard currency of a lesson lasting sixty minutes or so. We start by considering a range of topics drawn from the History National Curriculum for students in years 7, 8 and 9. For each topic, we ask: what is to be the main thrust of the lesson, the major understanding we wish the students to go away with? Take for example the Terror and the French Revolution. We may decide here to focus on the reasons that terror was resorted to as an instrument of government during the period 1793 - 1794. The next major question to ask is: what are the students going to do during the sixty minute period to enable them to come away with an understanding of our objective? Here we review the teaching materials available and consider the ways in which we could structure

the lesson to allow for a balance of activities with the emphasis on student involvement. There could be for example a ten-minute introduction in which the importance of the topic is stressed and the objectives outlined. This might be followed by fifteen minutes of class discussion of the sources to be consulted - a map of Europe showing external and internal threats to the French government in 1793; statistics of the numbers and classes of executions; a contemporary picture of the guillotine at work; contemporary comments on the Terror and the work of the revolutionary vigilance committees. What evidence can these sources yield about the nature and causes of the Terror? Twenty minutes could then be spent by the students writing up their conclusions, with the remaining ten minutes of class for report back and discussion. Emphasis, too, is placed on the style of presentation and trainees are given the opportunity not only to present topics they have planned to the rest of the group but also to see themselves on video - they can check voice production, questioning technique, stance and so on.

At the same time as the university based part of the course is emphasising the thrust, planning and presentation of history lessons, the trainees are getting increasing experience of practising their new found skills in school. They are also in both school and university beginning to think about and practise the complex business of assessing the students' historical understanding. We consider the history of assessment and look at early history examination papers; we explore the difference between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessment; we look at a range of assessment exercises with their clear objectives and variety of styles; we assess the reliability of criterion-referenced 'levels of response' marking schemes and determine their reliability by applying them to examples of students' written work. And all this is reinforced by similar work with the history mentors in the schools.

The two days in school of the first term gives way to a block of school experience in the second term. This will usually be based in a different school though one which is associated with the cluster schools of the first term: that is, the teachers will meet with their counterparts and lecturers from the University to discuss the training programme and thus maintain that close partnership between theory and practice which is at the heart of the course. During this term, the trainee will increasingly assume responsibility for classroom teaching, working up to a timetable of about fifty per cent. of that of a fully qualified member of staff. Here the relationship between trainee and history mentor becomes of central importance. The mentor and trainee must be clear about the criteria against which the trainee's performance will be judged; they will have studied and discussed the list of nine 'competences' spell out these objectives in some detail. These cover both subject specific skills and knowledge as well as the generic understandings and abilities (such as the ability to control and manage the classroom) that the newly qualified professional should possess.

Discussion with the trainee of lessons plans, observation and debriefing is crucial; and in our joint training days when history mentors from the schools and university tutors get together we have spent much time on this. What and how shall we observe? What style of debriefing should we adopt? Didactic? Counselling? Listening to the trainee's explanation? Research I undertook on the trainee's perception of the role of the mentor shows how crucial this is and what a profound difference to the confidence and professional development of the trainee a competent and supportive mentor can make. A number of factors emerged strongly. First, the mentor must have time to undertake the labour-intensive business of helping the trainee. There should be a regular, weekly timetabled period for mentor and trainee to sit down together. Informal chats at break are no substitute for

this. Secondly, the mentor must be supportive and sensitive. The beginning teacher is often under considerable emotional and physical stress and the mentor needs to be aware of this. Thirdly, the mentor must keep clearly to the fore that the trainee is developing as a history teacher and that observation and debriefing should focus on this, with classroom management and control seen as simply the framework within which the learning of history can take place.

Increasingly now I am using with mentors during our training sessions videos of history teachers in action in the classroom. Most recently I showed a film of myself teaching fifteen year-olds about the causes of the second world war. Contrasting historical causation with causation in the sciences by presenting the students with an a corked flask of colourless liquid which turned blue every time the bottle was shaken - and then rapidly turned colourless again when placed on the table, I posed the question: 'Was it inevitable that the second world war broke out in Europe in September 1939?' The issue was addressed by using a role play exercise in which groups of students played the principal European nations and, with clear objectives, negotiated their way through the years 1933 - 1939. Had I achieved my objective, the history mentors were asked? I didn't want any comments on my classroom management skills - I felt confident with the students; nor did I want facile remarks about how the students seemed to enjoy the lesson. What was needed was a reflective dialogue between the mentors and me on what had been done, why it had been done and what learning had taken place.

One helpful way I find of initiating such discussion is take notes during the lesson under three headings. The first is a timed 'diary' of the major events and sections of the lesson itself; the second is a list of points to commend. There is nearly always something positive you can say to a trainee in a debriefing session; comments such as 'Your introduction was

clear and interesting; the students listened attentively' can often set the right tone for the rest of the session. My third and most important section consists of a list of issues or questions for discussion - for example, 'What evidence have you that the students understood the distinction you were making between historical evidence and historical information?' 'Were the reasons for the ending of the Terror really clear?' 'Was it possible for the students to answer the third question on the sheet on the basis of the sources you had supplied?'

I want to touch only briefly on the third and final term of the course. For the first six weeks the trainees are back at the University, largely concerned with finishing projects and written work - reflective pieces which will be based on subject-specific work done in the school and on issues of a broader professional nature relating to their school experience. Trainees are back in school for the final five weeks of the term; here the emphasis for most will be on some aspect of teaching which interests them - for example, the ways in which the school copes with students who have special educational needs - though one or two trainees who have shown weaknesses in one or more of the competences will be given the opportunity for more classroom practice.

Mentors with whom I work in the East Anglia region are increasingly understanding the complex, varied, demanding and key role they are now playing in initial teacher training. A culture of mentoring is being established in schools; teachers are not only enjoying the new skills and knowledge they are developing in their work with beginning teachers but are also realising that they are developing a new professionalism which benefits their own classroom practice. And the simplistic notions of an apprenticeship style of initial teaching training which some have purveyed are being undermined through the close partnership which is being forged

between the secondary schools and the University Faculty of Education; the resulting dialogue is leading to the creation of a tough, demanding and reflective course in which theory and practice are interlocked.

References

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Martin Booth
University of Cambridge