

'Talking teaching' – the Master of Teaching

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In this paper we argue that that the University of London, Institute of Education's innovative Masters' degree, the Master of Teaching (MTcg), offers a new distinct way for teachers to learn professionally. The aim is to foster teachers who see teaching as complex and contestable and who are aware that there are no simple solutions to the challenges and issues they face as part of their daily practice. This we do by way of several interlinked approaches. First, our mixed mode 'delivery' seeks to generate shared knowledge construction largely through computer-mediated communication. Second, the course is aimed mainly at teachers upon successful completion of their initial teaching qualification, ensuring that professional learning is unbroken in the transition from initial training to continuing professional development. Third, the focus of the professional learning is located in the students' classrooms and schools, and in talking with other teachers which creates a professional learning academy that is beneficial to individuals and the profession as a whole. Fourth, the course does not presume a dichotomy between the practice and theory of teaching, emphasising instead the interdependence of both. Fifth, by taking an essentially inductive approach the course ensures that the students learn what it means to be educationally and research literate teachers and leaders of learning. Through these approaches we endeavour to create scholarly teachers who are able and willing to engage with theoretical and practical teaching opportunities that are challenging and stimulating for their pupils as well as themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The Institute of Education's modular, yet semi-linear Master of Teaching (MTcg) programme (<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/courses/mtcg/>) was first introduced in 2001-2. It aims to provide a framework of support for talented new teachers in challenging schools as well as to enable and encourage high level early and continuing professional learning to take place and accredits this at Masters level by nurturing an enquiry approach to understanding teaching and leading learning and by raising levels of educational and research literacy and practitioner research capacity.

In essence, the MTcg requires participants to provide public accounts of several aspects of teaching – e.g. classroom interactions (incl. pupil/teacher talk, teacher questioning, grouping), the management of learning environments, the active engagement of learners, the design of materials, the evaluation of outcomes, the assessment of learning, the provision of feedback, the teaching of learner strategies etc. – and learning – e.g. understanding personal and professional learning, understanding and evaluating pupil learning, leading and managing change – all of which receive critical review from peers and the tutor. Much effort is expended on asking and refining probing questions and pursuing investigations and enquiries. This is done in order to provide the basis for productive professional conversations. Discussion, dialogue and debate ('talking teaching') across the 'academy' are rooted in professional practice and aim to engender a sense of responsibility in each participant as well as the acceptance that the source for their professional learning (and of meaningful professional knowledge creation) lies in their classrooms, schools and education contexts. The MTcg, therefore, does not focus on education as an academic discipline, rather it requires participants to examine closely their own classrooms as places of learning as well as their own role in the leadership of learning within and outside them. Participants are, therefore, not preoccupied with engaging in epistemological debates, but are concerned with understanding their own practice as well as that of their colleagues more deeply in the context of the imperative of participating actively in a learning culture, importantly against the background of thorough engagement with pertinent conceptual and theoretical frameworks in the field.

INNOVATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION

The MTcg differs from more traditional Masters courses (including Master of Education [MEd] courses) in its mixed 'delivery' mode and locus of control, for it is based on the notion of shared knowledge construction at a distance through computer-mediated communication (CMC) supported by some face-to-face (f2f) meetings. Also, and unusually, participants can start the course upon successful completion of their initial teaching qualification (P-Route) – rather than requiring a certain pre-requisite period of professional practice – whilst the course is also available for participants wishing to pursue a more traditional engagement with Masters level work upon successful completion of their statutory Induction period (I-Route) or, indeed, as experienced teachers (E-Route).

The methodological innovation of the MTcg lies in its distinctive pedagogy based on discussion templates which engage learners in the construction of shareable pedagogical practice-oriented texts and encourage the 'on-the-fly' recording of thoughts and impressions whilst examining learning materials. They provide a framework for information gathering, the stimulation of recall of prior knowledge and the guiding of knowledge construction. Together they form what we have called the 'professional learning academy' which has at its heart a number of linked online learning communities (in effect MTcg tutor groups) consisting of participants from different schools and a

Year 1	Module	Attendance	Assessment	Credits
Summer	Professional Development Portfolio 1	Group viva	Portfolio and viva	20
Autumn/ Spring/ Summer	Understanding Teaching	2 Saturdays and online participation	Subject/ phase-specific coursework	20
	Professional Development Portfolio 2	Online and face-to-face support	Portfolio	20

Year 2	Module	Attendance	Assessment	Credits
Autumn	Research and Professional Practice	1 evening and 2 Saturdays and online participation	Coursework (critique and proposal)	20
Spring/ Summer	Practice-based Enquiry	Online and face-to-face support	Report	20
	Option Module or Dissertation	Varies	Coursework	20

This table shows the typical structure of the MTcg P-route as taken over two years.

university tutor and in time, we hope, other colleagues involved in educational provision with whom participants regularly work.

THE PEDAGOGY OF CHANGE

The MTcg stresses the ‘change agent’ dimension of teacher development, i.e. the reciprocal, symbiotic relationship between practice and intellectual reflection – rather than more narrow self-referential notions of reflection on and in practice – fostered by the potential of CMC. Consequently, the knowledge base of the course is not located in the Institute of Education, nor in the ‘set’ (digitised) readings, nor in the tutors but in the interactive environment of the electronic forums themselves: these forums help constitute and mediate the so-called professional learning academy, at the centre of which lies the notion of corporate professional responsibility for teacher learning. Nevertheless, tutors play a central role, for example in stimulating, facilitating and mediating online discussion.

The pedagogy of the MTcg was developed through the shared spaces of interdisciplinary, cross-curricular and cross-phase planning focussing on common themes at micro and macro level such as ICT, literacy, gender issues, specialist schools etc. aimed at facilitating a better understanding of teaching amongst participants across diverse contexts and (perceived) epistemological boundaries and, at the same time, at enabling a greater engagement with subject pedagogy.

Apart from its articulation in module outlines, content, material, discussions etc, the programme's strong focus on professional practice finds reflection in its grade-related criteria which were specifically written for the MTcg. To achieve Grade A, the following criteria need to be satisfied:

Candidates show evidence of outstanding professional, academic and personal powers of communication, and through their writings and other productions will show considerable capacity for leadership. Professional knowledge will be refined through processes of research, scholarship and critical reflection, and applied creatively and with success in work with children. The candidate will demonstrate the clear capacity to analyse pedagogy within their immediate and wider professional contexts, drawing from appropriate intellectual perspectives, showing a good understanding of learning and an acute awareness of the values underpinning or influencing pedagogic practice.

In order to allow participants to meet these criteria, rather than traditional 5,000 word assignments, a diverse range of assessment opportunities is being deployed including professional development portfolios (comprising inter alia a philosophical statement, evidence of reflective writing informed by background reading, a critique of educational literature and/or policies, so-called evidence studies, evidence in relation to national performance indicators such as national standards or threshold criteria etc); a critique of educational research; a proposal for a school-focussed, practice-based enquiry; a critical evaluation of a professional 'artefact'; a reflective diary, a report/dissertation on a practice-based enquiry etc. These assessment opportunities are rooted squarely in everyday pedagogical practice. However, MTcg participants are required to engage *critically and analytically* with teaching and learning thereby avoiding the tendency of many traditional Masters courses to deal with hypothetical questions and problems removed from contextualised professional practice.

Participants' critical engagement with practice, policy and theories of teaching and learning is of an inductive nature. In practice, this means that the knowledge created by and in the professional academy is largely self-generating. There is stimulus from the course team, in the form of briefing papers for the online discussions, the selection of topical issues and materials for f2f and online sessions, tasks and activities. However, through the offer of choice about tasks and activities and the provision of a wide range of materials, participants are able to steer online and f2f discussions. This inductive approach means that participants can develop criticality about practice, research, ideas and theory through interaction with actual experiences and texts instead of through the passed-down wisdom of the course tutors and the prevailing 'grand narratives' of the

field. This interaction is predicated on individual agency and the willingness of the members of the professional learning academy to collaborate and share with peers whereby the course provides participants with a corporate framework within which to critique practitioner activity, evidence-based policy and research findings.

Out of this framework participants develop their critical understanding of teaching and learning in relation to their own practice and that of colleagues and the evidence bases that inform it. Through their 'guided engagement' with research and evidence-based policy documents they develop the confidence where necessary to 'work against the grain' of the pervading macro and micro cultures, which encourage and, at times, demand working to an externally prescribed 'script'. Participants are asked to 'put their thinking caps on', to the point where they can make decisions about if and when to work *with or against* the grain of the dominant pedagogical discourse and prescriptions.

INDUCTIVE APPROACHES

The inductive approach adopted by the MTcg leads to participants regarding their individual and corporate learning as the most effective tool for improving their teaching and as the vital component in enhancing their students' learning. It is this reflective approach to their professional practice that brings about participants' development of new meanings about teaching and learning from reflection. Whilst a more deductive approach can also encourage reflection, this often does not go beyond looking back at past meanings in a summative manner. Indeed, there are clear indications in the coursework that the inductive approach enables participants to learn through the conduit of the professional learning academy and to advance professionally in a dynamic and dialogic fashion.

Amongst other things, we want participants to emerge from the MTcg with the following three learning gains:

1. to be educationally literate teachers, able to synthesise and assimilate theory and practice in their everyday work and to be articulate about their professional practice in a scholarly manner;
2. to possess educational research capacity, characterised inter alia by a critical understanding of the value and benefits/limitations of educational research and an enhanced understanding of what impacts on their professional practice; and
3. to be able to lead learning; our focus is on pedagogical – rather than managerial – leadership and on enhancing participants' understanding and application of innovative as well as more orthodox ideas and developments in teaching and learning.

The three elements have a common underpinning rationale, namely the sensitising of participants to the problematic nature of many educational issues. In practice, this means opening up the possibility that there is more than one way of looking at and doing things in teaching and education. Teaching is a highly complex endeavour which demands clear

thinking and effective solutions. Quick fixes and short-term solutions may be politically expedient, but will – in all probability – not improve the quality and capacity of teachers or learners. The significance of the MTcg is that it places itself consciously ‘between the regulatory force of government and its agencies, and the profession’, with the intention of encouraging the hope and prospect of professional autonomy for teachers in the very early stages of their professional development. With hope, based on values, principles and moral purpose, we posit, will come greater professional satisfaction and, perhaps, improved teacher recruitment and, more importantly, retention.

CASE STUDY: A PRIMARY SCIENCE COORDINATOR

‘I became a science coordinator after my NQT year and remained in touch with science education through partnership contacts with the Institute and doing the MA Science Education course. This has definitely broadened my perspective beyond my classroom and the individual school and encouraged me to try teaching approaches which were new to me. Fundamentally the Masters helped strengthen my understanding of the links between theory and practice: I am more confident and consider myself to be a ‘thinking practitioner’. The MTcg is an exciting initiative as it offers the opportunities I am talking about to a wider range of teachers.’

NATASHA WILSON

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The professional learning academy operates in a way that does not separate MTcg work from teaching. Rather, one of the distinguishing features of the MTcg is its emphasis on the – in our view – natural inseparability of the scholarly dimension of academic study and the practice of teaching. For many beginning and newly qualified teachers there has been a tendency to see a theoretical discussion of teaching or concepts related to notions of knowledge or learning as something one has to get out of the way before engaging in everyday professional practice if, indeed, one has to engage with it at all. But for MTcg participants an understanding of the interdependence of the theory and practice of teaching and learning is seen as key to professional learning. In this way discussion in the professional learning academy, for example, of an educational artefact or an evidence-based policy document seamlessly combines theory and practice. The combination of both parts, the theoretical and the practical, in our view make for more confident and informed individual professional teachers and a body of teachers, who are making their own learning the focus of developing of their pupils’ learning.

Does every teacher need to be scholarly? Not always and not all the time. And, progression need not be conceived as unidirectional. However, our experience on the MTcg suggests that teachers can and want to engage and re-engage with the scholarly

dimension of their work. And, some have found the necessary detachment from a sadly widely prevailing culture of 'doing what you are told' and 'scripted' to do and to move into the more complex realms of contested points of view and different theoretical and practical opportunities challenging and invigorating.

Where do we go from here? One of the most significant challenges facing the course team is how to manage the rapid expansion of the course in the last two years, how to consolidate emerging practice whilst at the same time ensure we do not become complacent but continue to provide for the needs of different and new target groups by building on baseline data gathered through starter tasks at the beginning of key modules as well as through the nature of tasks, the topics and themes chosen, the (digital) readings selected as well as the online environment used.

NOTES

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