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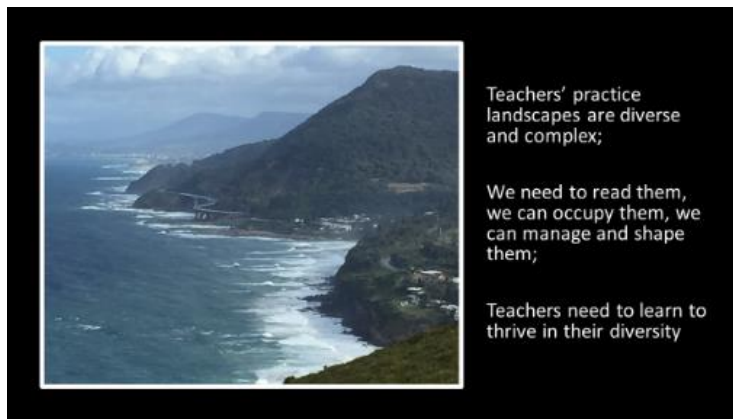
Teachers' Learning Matters:  
Exploring lessons from research  
and practice

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Carnegie School of Education  
Inaugural Lecture 28<sup>th</sup> February 2018  
Leeds Beckett University

## **Teachers' Learning Matters: Exploring lessons from research and practice**

Firstly, a thank you....

Thank you for being here, and thank you to the university for this opportunity to give my inaugural lecture. I am looking out at my audience and I know that I am in good company. Some of you are currently working as teachers, others are supporting or leading teachers, a few have retired from the profession and some of you may be looking forward to your first posts following by your PGCE or BA. Others amongst you are straddling the educational boundaries; working directly in teacher education, in consultancy roles, in policy making, in Higher Education or workplace learning or in research. There is even the odd inspector in the room (not that I would dare to call you 'odd' to your face). Most of us wear multiple hats, we have become adept at multi-tasking, and learned to consolidate and change direction at the same time. Some of you are actually here to listen to Jonathan, but I hope you will lend me your ears, your hearts and your minds nevertheless.



So, why are we here? Well, the theme of these two lectures and the title of mine give us a steer. As educators at every stage of our career and in every context we are constantly *addressing professional challenges in what is always a diverse and complex educational landscape*. And as such we share a belief that *Teachers' Learning Matters*. We may not always agree on how to read the landscape, what causes its characteristics, which parts to occupy (either singly or in our tribes), or how to manage or even shape it. But we can choose to focus on thriving in that landscape, and ensuring through our work that others do too. We can also (should we so desire) *explore lessons from research and practice*. That's what I intend to do in this lecture.

The research I will focus on is that which has supported my appointment to Professor of Teacher Education, but in doing so I pay homage to educational researchers and practitioners in my field who have been instrumental in shaping my understanding. My knowledge and ability to share and use that knowledge with others is constantly in formation, and in that way I have much in common with teachers. We are never the finished product; we are always evolving. So I also thank all those who enter and stay in and with the profession and have a desire to keep evolving. Without you and those you work with we are absolutely unable to meet the needs of learners and their communities.

So: to business.... (the abstract)

Teachers are responsible for learning; they inspire, teach, support and assess their students on a daily basis while also being subject to numerous expectations from parents, society, employers, government and their students. To engage with these challenges, teachers need to be enabled and motivated to continue to learn while operating within busy workplaces and a culture of performativity, and in the context of politicised and volatile teacher 'training' spaces. In this lecture, I will draw on my research in the contexts of both initial and continuing teacher professional learning and practice development, exploring potential lessons for school leaders, training providers, policymakers and teachers themselves. The research that informs my lecture represents a variety of lived experiences of educational practice – either my own or teachers'. My research does not neatly fit into one paradigm or another; sometimes I adopt an interpretive paradigm and at other times an action research paradigm. I will reflect on research-based evidence of teacher learning, both to illustrate and to analyse professional practices from which knowledge can be gained.

My research reveals the tensions for teacher educators, mentors, coaches, school leaders and teachers at all stages of their careers. Their professional

and personal need for learning and development coincides with a time when schools are dealing with ever-increasing demands to 'perform' in relation to pupil attainment, and a growing sense that they are covering cracks in a period of austerity. This backdrop creates new dependencies; for example, raising the demands on those within and joining the teaching profession to create a 'self-improving school-led system'. It opens up opportunities for professional learning but also creates contradictions as activity systems collide. I can't do all of these themes full justice in the time that I have but I do hope to help you to engage with them.

A little background to my research....



Although this lecture is not autobiographical I do think it is essential to acknowledge some of the influences on my research. In 1990 I took my PGCE at Newcastle University, starting my journey like many others in a time before QTS, prior to Ofsted ITT inspections and with neither student fees or bursaries. A lasting memory of my PGCE is my tutor (now Professor David Leat) arriving at a school with a spiral notebook to observe my lessons and asking afterwards if I'd like the notes ripped out for their later reference. I have a folder in my attic with these and other artefacts from my PGCE and there are no tracking documents, no standards referenced reports and no action plans. I do however also have very strong memories of discussing teaching (at micro and macro levels) in some detail with David and during long PGCE days with my fellow students. David even helped in very practical terms - indeed at one

point a piece of turf from his garden (I only had a concrete back yard) was drying out on his log burner to simulate desertification for a lesson I was due to teach. Some of my most lasting memories of learning to teach during my PGCE include those associated with collaboration and not just with my tutor, but critically also with mentors, peers and school colleagues.

This carried on.... As a new teacher I was part of professional networks; the Thinking Through Geography group at Newcastle University, a development and writing team for a new Edexcel Geography GCSE, and the Northumberland local authority Humanities thinking skills network for example. I was both a mentor to student teachers and (through a TDA research project) a coach to colleagues.

I didn't take any more formal qualifications until I eventually gained my PhD by publication 24 years after joining the profession and 15 years after becoming a teacher educator. But that didn't stop me learning. In ontological and epistemological terms, I believe that knowledge can be generated through participation and reflection, and that we can use systematic enquiry to investigate and learn from our own and other's practices. I believe that co-construction is possible and formative, and this has determined both what I research and how I do it, as well as motivations in and for my own teaching.



My interest in how teachers learn is framed by asking questions about where, with whom, in what ways, and through what actions they learn. I care about the impacts of that learning; but I don't take the processes for granted, and I

want to know how we can improve teacher learning by design, rather than rely on lucky coincidences or hoping for the best in teacher training landscapes which are now extraordinarily complicated. If teachers' learning matters, then it matters that we know how to foster it to enable it to have the greatest possible beneficial effect.

We need to know how we can create contemporary learning experiences in which our student teachers will experience solidarity with each other and with their learners, will be given permission to be productively creative and do so in a safe space in which each of them can become the best teacher they can be. And beyond ITE we need to know what can we do in the university sector and wider teacher education community to support teachers in gaining through professional learning throughout their career.

So, what lessons can be learned from my research?

In terms of what contributes to teachers' learning I am going to focus on strands from my past published research, all of which extend into current research interests and projects. Having offered some insights into what we know supports teachers' development (as part of the professional learning jigsaw), I will then recognise some of the tensions in making it work. This is not a 'what works' lecture; these are not all the answers we need. It is a lecture in which I will address the issues, and I will illustrate key propositions through reference to examples of my research.

Let's focus on the good news first.....

I want to draw your attention to three key concepts: creativity, solidarity and authenticity.



Firstly, I want to consider the significance of creativity; or more particularly the importance that to support their learning new and existing teachers are given permission to problem-solve; opportunities to innovate; and access to alternative practices and perspectives. Through this they can become open to a range of other ideas; gaining the capacity to develop original thinking and the confidence to go beyond routine practices.

Secondly, I want to focus on solidarity. Developing a sense of solidarity allows teachers to understand others' needs, to take responsibility for what matters and to be part of a democracy of accountability; and to do so by engaging with their peers, their students and the wider community. To develop solidarity which allows them to see beyond their personal experiences and immediate concerns teachers need opportunities for professional dialogue, chances to engage in collaboration and joint enterprises with others, and the spaces to create shared values.

Thirdly, there is the matter of authenticity. For me this means seeking to understand the socio-cultural characteristics of the broad educational



landscape and specific contexts, and to recognise how these create tensions and priorities of the educational setting in which teachers work. This is only possible if teachers are motivated to learn and take account of the ethical dimensions and dilemmas of their practice. Teachers need to bring their own values into their practice and let their learning result in the evolution of their values over time.

So, how do we know these three elements matter to teachers' learning? To illustrate their importance, I will draw on examples of my research.



As an early career PGCE tutor and academic I engaged in practitioner research as illustrates through the joining up Art and Geography PGCE students from two different HEIs in a two-day role based enquiry at the Baltic Art Gallery. Our purpose was to model a specific immersive pedagogy, but also to take the students out of their subject silos and the classrooms which they had become relatively comfortable in during their PGCE. We were interested in what learning resulted. Our analysis formed the basis of a paper called *'Creativity and Enquiry in Action: a case study of cross-curricular approaches in teacher education'* which was co-authored by my Newcastle University colleague Ulrike Thomas, and the Art PGCE tutor Sophie Cole of Northumbria University. What resonated from our analysis of the student teachers' responses to this event was the role of creative thinking and a sense of solidarity as contributing to their emerging professional practice and learning.

And so to another example, while still a teacher I became part of a TDA funded North-East Schools-based Research Consortium which was focused on developing approaches to teaching thinking skills. I was first involved as a participant teacher-coach and then as a teacher educator. In a paper co-authored with colleagues David Leat and Sally Taverner called *The Road Taken: Professional pathways in innovative curriculum development*, we identified phases in teacher engagement in pedagogic innovation, from initiation, through developing questions from practice to commitment. Underpinning the transitions between the phases (which not all teachers made) was the necessary space for pedagogic creativity. This was fostered by access to new ideas, problem solving, professional conversations and the permission to think and act creatively to make connections between ideas and practice. In the same project three stages of teacher development and engagement were identified which can be summarised as follows:

Stage 1: the personal. Teachers focused on their own understanding rooted in developing classroom practice and analysing data which emerged. They arrived at generalizations, and perceived its relevance to their teaching situations.

Stage 2: the collegial. The group setting (typically at a school level) became significant as a community in which research was designed, conducted and analysed, in an environment characterised by professional intimacy.

Stage 3: the collective. The collegial group had developed sufficient confidence to work with others across the consortium (in other schools, the Local Authorities and university), allowing the research evidence to be more commonly recognised, and collectively explored across a wider range of settings.

Again this analysis reinforces the significance of solidarity, through the emergence of the collegial and collective networks, and also recognises the role of authenticity. These are teachers learning to develop a metacognitive-based pedagogy in real time, with their own students, colleagues and in extended networks within which they became confident professionals.

In other research I have focused on coaching, mentoring and the role of professional learning activities such as lesson study and action research. Analysis of themes emerging from these areas of research provided strong steers towards the significance of collaborative developmental practices situated in schools as complex workplaces.

This is perhaps best illustrated in a paper co-authored, once again, with my Newcastle University colleague Ulrike Thomas called '*Concerning collaboration; teachers' perspectives on working in partnerships to develop teaching practices.*' In this research we investigated different ways in which teachers work in close partnerships to develop teaching practices. We took the cases of mentoring, coaching and an adapted paired lesson study from both initial teacher education and continuing professional development, as they have in common practices of one-to-one meetings, planned activity and shared reflection. The participants' perspectives on these practices were investigated through a multiple case study using semi-structured interviews. We established the degree to which their experiences could be considered to be

collaborative, basing our analysis on the extent to which there was evidence of working 'together', not just working 'with'; and working towards a common goal, pooling knowledge and problem-solving.

We concluded that collaboration for the development of their own teaching practices allows teachers to engage in more informed decision-making and to construct a shared understanding of the nature of the desired learning outcomes and how they might be achieved in their own contexts. The teachers indicated that this experience often ran counter to their experiences of the school cultures driven by performativity (of which more later).

My focus on lesson study is illustrated in a chapter called *Lesson study: an opportunity for collaborative teacher inquiry*, co-authored with my husband Colin Lofthouse (a primary Headteacher), an educational consultant he worked with, Claire King, and one of my former Masters students, Steph McElwee.

Lesson Study is a form of teacher inquiry which relies on professional collaboration and focuses teachers' attention to specific pupils that they are currently teaching. It uses a cumulative and cyclical plan, do, review structure and draws teachers into conversations. Here they consider plans for teaching, develop hypotheses about pupil learning and engagement, participate in inquiry-based lesson observations and experience meaningful reflection and evaluation. Evidence from our case study schools illustrated the significance of the focus on case pupils. It also reinforced how engagement in Lesson Study can allow individual professional learning and whole school development to come together, through paying close attention to the mechanisms through which teaching practices and teacher learning can realistically be developed.

A final illustrative example comes from collaborative action research I have conducted and co-authored with speech and language therapists Jo Flanagan and Bibiana Wigley, and published in two papers *'Developing the use of communication rich pedagogies in classrooms'* and *'A new model of collaborative action research; theorising from inter-professional practice'*. This research was undertaken across both primary and early years' settings in Derby where high concentrations of children with speech, language and communication needs attend schools in socially deprived wards, and many of these schools also serve populations of children whose first language is not English. We used a Theory of Change Methodology as an evaluative tool, with a working hypothesis that specialist training and interprofessional video-based coaching could mobilise the knowledge and skill sets of both the teachers and speech and language therapists to better enable the teachers to critically reflect on and enrich their practices.

The last three of these research projects demonstrate again the importance of solidarity built through cycles of collaborative practice, located authentically in the complex school contexts of the teachers. They also rest on well deployed expertise and the need for good practices of coaching, facilitation or professional dialogue. Teachers' learning here doesn't happen by accident its happens by intelligent design.

And now to the tensions....



I want to consider tensions as educative opportunities which are often missed, or activities started but not sustained or which are too frequently poorly planned for. My research (including that already cited) suggests that when teachers learn and develop their practices there is the potential for their own learning behaviours to change (remember they are constantly in formation), and for the organisations and the wider system that they work in to change too; but that this is not guaranteed, and indeed sometimes it is quite actively suppressed.

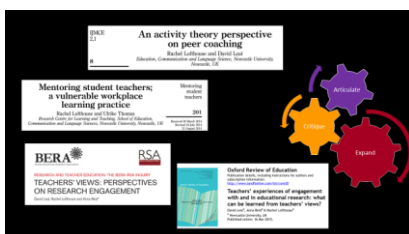
Here I want to introduce three more critical concepts; of the necessity that teachers are able to articulate their learning, to engage in and with critique and also to expand on their learning. These are the opportunities that are too often missed because the educational landscape that teachers inhabit can be relatively restrictive, too often performative and sometimes even punitive (not to mention fractured, unforgivably busy and underfunded).

So first let's focus on the importance of teachers 'articulating' their learning. Ask yourself what opportunities teachers have to explain their practices and their thinking to others and to make their learning public. How often do we ensure that teachers have genuine opportunities to contribute to an accessible professional knowledge base? What work do we do that ensures that we develop a shared language between education practitioners, for examples between the early years, schools, college and university sectors? What about between academics in the relevant education research disciplines and with those people in the community and in other professions with whom we share responsibilities for learning and wellbeing?

Secondly I want to be realistic about the importance of critique. Engaging critically is not the same as being the bearer or recipient of criticism. It means that teachers put effort into analysing practice evidence, are encouraged to reflect critically on practice, research and theory, and become open to engaging in processes of critique. Ask yourself how often we create a safe space for this? Is the culture that exists in schools one in which professionals are invited not just to be evidence-informed, but also to critique the forms of evidence they are offered or asked to collect. How often do teachers get to work slowly and intelligently, where they are allowed to tune, attune and refine their own practices, rather than be nudged or forced to adopt someone else's at someone else's speed? How often do teachers get to engage with and

create networks of critical friends, who provoke them to think, to experiment and to aspire?

Unless we create these opportunities the final unresolved tension will be that we have fostered restrictive rather than expansive learning environments. If teachers' learning does matter, it is because we have allowed that learning to expand educational practice, opportunities and outcomes. To enable this means that we have allowed teachers to develop dialogic thinking and self-regulation; to develop personal theories and models to inform their practice and to make better use of sound evidence to contribute to organisational development. Ask yourself whether we have given teachers the tools to do this and whether we allow them to develop educative values which help them to develop values-based policies, cultures and practices.



These constraints to teachers' learning are all evidenced in my research. This is particularly highlighted as impacting on mentoring and coaching practices. For example, in *'An Activity Theory Perspective on Peer Coaching'* David Leat and I conducted an analysis of teacher coaching through cultural historical activity theory. This enabled us to demonstrate that the potential of teacher coaching, which depends on trust-based partnerships, is constrained by the standards agenda, or performativity culture, in many schools. This culture is so strong that when coaching is introduced by senior leaders it gets conflated by



performance management discourse and tends to meet resistance from staff. In addition, where it develops through a more organic, “bottom up” approach, it may well clash with managerial cultures which demand accountability and surveillance.

Through another project Ulrike Thomas and I concluded that the desirable positive experiences of mentoring of student teachers are also not universal, and that *‘Mentoring student teachers needs to be considered as a vulnerable workplace learning practice’*. Mentoring interacts with the required processes of monitoring and reporting, and in some cases the power structures associated with these processes conflict with the less performative, more educative, aspects.

In both of these cases the potential of coaching and mentoring to enable teachers at different stages of their career to articulate their thinking was easily diminished because interactions were too often driven by target setting, or underpinned by one person making judgements about the other’s practice. Rather than looking outwards for relevant research and theory to reflect upon the participants tended to look inwards and think only in the short term. Instead of being safe spaces for critique they became spaces where monitoring, accountability and even self-surveillance squeezed out expansive, exploratory and dialogic opportunities of good professional conversations.

Even when teachers engage in and with research (a much recommended activity for an already busy profession) we know that sometimes teachers are boxed in rather than given opportunities to learn and develop sustained effective new practices. In a literature review undertaken with David Leat and

another Newcastle colleague Anna Reid, commissioned as part of the BERA / RSA enquiry into research and the teaching profession we focused on *'Teachers' experiences of engagement with and in educational research, and specifically what can be learned from teachers' views.'*

We drew upon international contexts in order to suggest ways of utilising the benefits of research in practice. While the available evidence of teachers' experience of research was overwhelmingly positive, providing an acceleration of professional understanding and new perspectives, which re-invigorated those teachers who did engage, it is not always experienced as such.

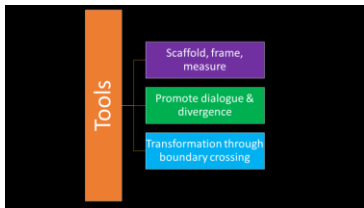
Our analysis underlined the importance of dialogic approaches and ecological agency, which related to teachers' multi-dimensional perceptions of, and participation in, research. Dialogic approaches rest on being able to articulate learning, and ecological agency is dependent on the culture and relationships that exist which support both critique and the expansion of new learning to change practices and allow educational settings and the teachers in them to evolve.

And so to conclude and look forward. ...



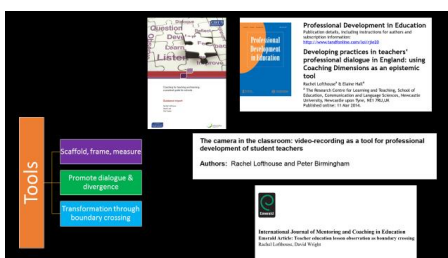
As a teacher educator I have long been in the business of looking forward, supporting prospective teachers to prepare for the profession; working with

established teachers to consider new approaches, to consolidate their professional learning and continue to thrive; connecting research and practice in formative ways. Looking forward was part of what brought me from Newcastle University to Leeds Beckett University. From a city of many bridges to one with fewer, but nevertheless iconic ones in their own way.



One aspect of this has been a consideration of how well-designed and effectively-deployed tools can support professional learning, practice development and the role of research in positive educational change.

I conceptualise tools as serving distinct functions, such as scaffolding, framing, and measuring learning. I recognise language and artefacts as potential tools, and this is illustrated through the research-derived development of the coaching dimensions (undertaken through research alongside David Leat and Carl Towler) and the application of these coaching dimensions in practice development as illustrated in my research with Elaine Hall.



In *'Developing practices in teachers' professional dialogue in England: using Coaching Dimensions as an epistemic tool'* we found that the coaching dimensions could act as a metacognitive tool for mentors and coaches,

providing them with the opportunity to engage with the complexity of their practice. The good news is that such self-knowledge enabled mentors and coaches to experience productive practice development, and to develop a shared language to talk with peers about how their practice is developing. This can help them to plan for, and be more responsive within, coaching or mentoring meetings, and thus make them more impactful.

In research on using video recording of lessons within PGCE mentoring practices, undertaken with Peter Birmingham, and shared in the article *The Camera in the Classroom: video recording as a tool for professional development of student teachers*, we found it to be a tool with potentially transformative effects.

Other research conducted alongside my colleague David Wright '*Teacher education lesson observation as boundary crossing*' used a design study methodology to develop, deploy and research a new lesson observation framework based on principles of practitioner enquiry. Our research evidence demonstrated that this observation framework acted as a boundary tool and altered the quality of the mentoring relationship through focusing on enquiry as its foundation. We concluded that it enabled this by offering students and their mentors opportunities for divergent learning outcomes, through which each student teacher had the opportunity to transform teaching practices, not simply replicate existing ones.

And finally a note on professionalism ...



We are facing what seem unprecedented strains on the teaching profession. It is harder to attract new teachers, and harder to retain qualified ones; despite a significant increase in the number of routes into teaching. My body of research does have something to add to the debate about this dilemma. Instead of being compliant to, or reinforcing common educational cultures underpinned by a degree of suspicion, surveillance or blame, collaborative learning opportunities and shared supported boundary experiences allow teachers as professionals to work and learn in ways that are authentic and take account of the realities of their contexts.

Teachers and the wider educational community can also engage in more inclusive professional learning practices based on participation and dialogue and enter spaces in which co-construction is possible. My research leads me to conclude that we need to re-think approaches to professional development

through collaborative and authentic learning activities which create and sustain opportunities for professional learning at all career stages.



As educators we need to deliberately slow down, locate ourselves in our landscapes and with our tribe. We need build bridges across the boundaries of our complex practices. Unless we, as professionals take care with our own learning and development, our most vulnerable children and young people in society will remain at risk of being isolated and disadvantaged by education, our teachers will not find the means to continue to evolve, and our educational institutions will stagnate. Each teachers' professional life will be a series of missed opportunities to effect the changes our society demands, and of misalignment between our optimism for the power of education and the realities of the job. Transformation may be a far-away destination, but collectively we can journey towards it.

Thank you for your attention. I hope that this has given food for thought, and I look forward to your questions.