

The New Alliance: Pedagogy and Student Experience in Intercultural Professional Learning

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Abstract

The Faculty of Education in the University of X collaborates with a consortium of French universities to provide a 'double diploma' for students: a 2 year Masters FLE (Français comme Langue Etrangère) and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) in teaching Modern Languages. The first cohort of French students to do this programme recently completed the PGDE in X. The students were interviewed at the beginning and at the end of the academic year in order to investigate how their attitudes to teaching and learning had developed through their experiences in the X environment, how they viewed the process of becoming a teacher in a system which is different to the one they had been used to in their native country and if they felt they were offered adequate support during the PGDE year. This article describes the background to the collaboration and provides an overview of initial interview findings, which appear to indicate that the students valued the combination of theory and practice which the two courses offer.

Keywords: PGDE; pedagogy; European collaboration; intercultural practice; reflection; theory and practice;

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Introduction

This article is a case study of a group of students from a consortium of French universities, who undertook study of a Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) at the University of X while concurrently completing the second year of a Masters degree in the Teaching of French as a foreign language (FLE), the first group completing a 'double diploma'. We wished to investigate if the support structures provided by the Faculty were adequate and how the students had adapted to the demands of a different education system.

Student interviews explored perceptions of the support they received from Faculty and school-based staff. However, we were also interested in the students' development as teachers within a culture which was different to their own, particularly as the French system of teacher education appears to be largely theory driven, in contrast to the more practice driven approach taken by Scottish teacher education. This article describes the initial findings of the study. The first section contains a short description of the background to the collaboration between the French universities and the University of X, followed by analysis of the contrasts between the French and Scottish courses that the students followed.

Background

Ongoing reforms of higher education related to the Bologna Process mean that universities nowadays have to be international in their outlook. Many thousands of students have already taken advantage of Socrates Erasmus exchanges (British Council, 2005) and other international opportunities. The benefits of which are found not only in terms of the advantages that they bring for learning and future opportunities (Messer & Wolter, 2007), but also in terms of the advantages they bring of many positive personal characteristics and a greater intercultural appreciation (Hansel & Grove, 1986; Kneale, 2008).

The Faculty of Education in X always welcomes a significant number of native speakers of other languages, wishing to train as secondary teachers of modern languages. These foreign native speakers have usually been foreign

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conversation assistants in schools before deciding to stay in Scotland. In the academic year 2007-08, for the first time, the Faculty welcomed a new cohort of French postgraduate students who had opted to follow the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) course as the context for the second year of a Masters programme in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) at a French university.

It was envisaged that research into these students' experiences would give a greater insight into issues, both personal and professional, which they faced as they progressed through the PGDE course, while working on their Masters dissertation (mémoire). A small pilot sample might shed light on any issues emerging and could be borne in mind when developing further European links, as well as ensuring that future high quality students from this source continue to enjoy a positive experience.

When planning the research, two main questions needed to be addressed:

- What is effective practice in the host university in developing and supporting their teaching skills within a 'foreign', i.e. Scottish, system of schooling?
- How do students compare the theory-led and practice-led pedagogies they experience?

Background to the study

In 2005 France began the 'Masterisation' of diplomas as part of the 'Europeanisation' of levels of postgraduate study, to conform to the model of the Bologna process of three years of undergraduate study followed by two years of postgraduate study at Masters level. In the same year the Faculty of Education in the University of X was approached to join a consortium of eight French universities, which had recently developed a two year Masters degree in teaching French as a foreign language.

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Masters Professionnelle Fle

The PGDE option is only one of a series of pathways open to students in the Masters programme of the universities in the consortium. Although each university has developed its own programme, in general the first year includes courses on the acquisition of French as a foreign language, linguistics, French and Francophone literature and culture, phonetics and pedagogy. In the second year, in addition to the PGDE option, students can choose courses which have a business focus, or courses which develop a more theoretical approach. The PGDE teaching pathway is viewed by the students who opt to do it as a practical option which will allow them to work abroad, as the additional qualification allows them opportunities to teach in mainstream schools, not only in the UK, but also in all the Commonwealth countries.

Secondary teaching in France

There have been a number of reforms in the French education system, the most radical being the change of entry requirements to become a teacher in the secondary sector, '*le second degré*'. From 2010 candidates who wish to teach in secondary schools in France will have to have a qualification at Masters level although the CAPES competition, which candidates have to pass in order to teach in the secondary sector, has stayed the same. Emphasis on academic excellence has always been central to the selection of secondary teachers in the French system. In Scotland, although academic excellence is also viewed as fundamental to being a successful teacher, students for the PGDE course are also selected on the basis of their personal qualities such as good interpersonal and communication skills which are considered indicative for successful teaching performance (Andrew et al, 1996).

PGDE X

The PGDE course in X is validated by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/Home/home.asp>) and students are assessed against benchmark statements for Initial Teacher Education. The aim of the course is to develop 'reflective practitioners', who have a good

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theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning dimensions on which to reflect and against which to evaluate their progress (see Calderhead (1987) for discussion on the role of reflection in teacher education).

The PGDE course is organised round school terms. The course lasts for 36 weeks, 18 of which are spent in the Faculty, with the rest spent on placement in schools, the practical element being distributed over the three terms. The modern languages element of the PGDE course concentrates on the Scottish Education System, as it is a new context for many students, and on the principles underpinning communicative methodologies, focusing on planning and preparation for pupils in the secondary school. Teaching and learning is organised in seminars and collaborative workshops in which students are encouraged to work together to produce resources and presentations, so that they experience support not only from university tutors but also from each other. Students also study generic educational issues.

One perceived advantage of the Scottish system of teacher education is that successful completion of the PGDE course automatically leads to an Induction Year in which all newly qualified teachers are employed on a reduced timetable while being paid as a full member of staff, working towards specific targets for full professional registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. If students agree to be placed anywhere in Scotland in this probation year, they receive a one-off payment of £6,000 in addition to their salary, this enhancement being offered due to recruitment problems in rural communities.

The students

The five students who started the course, four women and one man, had all had experience of living and working or studying in another country for at least a year. Four of them were in their mid-twenties. The fifth was in her early forties and had spent a large part of her life travelling throughout the world due to her husband's occupation.

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All had degrees in French language and literature and had also studied English and in three cases, another language to degree level. They all said previous experience of living abroad had broadened their horizons and given them additional positive life experiences which led them to decide to apply. Students who have spent time in another culture as part of their studies are 15-20% more likely to decide to live and work abroad (Parey and Waldinger, 2007). This may increase to 50% if they are studying at postgraduate level (Oosterbeek and Webbink, 2006).

A motivating factor for these students may have been the likelihood of better employment opportunities than in France:

'There's a lot of unemployment in France...but here there's more opportunities.' (Student 3)

Mobility is seen as furthering the EU goals set out in Lisbon of creating a more dynamic and competitive economy, which requires a workforce that is flexible and skilled in an open and accessible market. It appears that better educated, more affluent and young professionals accomplish living and working abroad very successfully (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2006).

All wanted to teach secondary age learners, but the possibility of entry into the French education system through the competitive CAPES examination seemed very daunting, particularly when the number of successful applicants is generally low. They saw their Masters study as supplying the theory required to teach French as a foreign language although it appeared that practical aspects of the teaching profession, rather than the emphasis on theory, appealed to them:

'I did the training for the CAPES, but it's not the same; it's more about academic excellence in the theory, rather than if you have a good personality for a teacher.' (Student 5)

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These views and others were explored in the individual interviews which took place with the students.

Research methodology

Case studies are often criticised because they are too small for generalisations to be made (Gomm et al, 2000). They are usually seen as simply an exploratory tool, although this view is refuted by Yin (1994) who describes the case study as an 'all encompassing method' (p.13), which allows the inclusion of contextual conditions to be taken into account. In this case it seemed appropriate as the situation the students found themselves in was new, not only to them but also to their tutors, who were keen to explore the students' experiences not just within the dual situational context of the Faculty of Education and the School Experience placements, but also within the context of the dual demands of the scholarship required to be successful in the PGDE course and the Masters' dissertation.

The PGDE course starts in the middle of August, before other University courses, in order to fit in with the rhythm of the school year. It was decided to use semi-structured interviews in the middle of September and again at the end of the course to explore the students' impressions of and attitudes towards their experiences on the course and in schools, and their perceptions of language pedagogy and their own development as teachers of Modern Languages. Mid-September was chosen in order to give the students a 'settling in' period in which they would have time to gain first impressions of the course and their surroundings. The second interview took place after the course had ended, in June, and focused on the students' reflections on their progress and the issues they had encountered over the year.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for greater depth of response and analysis. An interview schedule was developed identifying key areas for discussion, which was circulated to the interviewees one day in advance of the interview. The first interview concentrated on their first impressions of the course, focusing on links to the work they had done the previous year in the

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first year of Masters study and exploring any areas of contrast which could be further investigated. Each interview lasted no longer than 30 minutes and the resultant data were analysed to identify central themes relating to the issues faced by these students.

When the transcripts of the interviews were studied, it was striking how similar the responses of the students were. This is perhaps not surprising given that they socialised together and their common background meant that they would inevitably discuss their experiences. It is impossible to say whether any of the students had been influenced by others' views, however, in the interviews they were clear that the views they held were their own.

Initial results: first interview

First impressions of the PGDE: a blend of theory and practice

The students highlighted the usefulness of the first year of their Masters course in terms of giving them a theoretical base from which to develop and prepare for the practical realities of the PGDE course and the teaching experiences within it:

'I like the links between the Masters 1, which is very theoretical, and the PGDE. This is more practical, because we know we're going to teach, so ...'
(Student 1)

Initial impressions from these students' contributions to discussion in class were that they appeared perceptive and well grounded in pedagogical theory. Their apparently thorough preparation in the first year of the Masters enabled them to contribute knowledgeably to dialogue about teaching methodology and the underlying principles of different approaches, although they were less prepared for the practical aspects of teaching.

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Comparison between France and Scotland: An interactive approach to learning

One of the most prominent features of the students' responses in the first interviews related to the contrast between the French and Scottish systems. They all remarked on the differences in the way the courses were taught:

'I cannot find any similarities actually ... in France most of the time, I won't say we're passive, that would be really negative, but it's not the same way of teaching so we're more into taking notes and listening for hours...' (Student 4)

They welcomed the stress put by the tutors on the practical nature of the course content and the collaborative work in groups on lesson planning, producing teaching materials and demonstrating how these could be put into use in the classroom:

'Here you are asked to work in groups. I like it because you can learn from others. It's not just the teachers; it's also about us.' (Student 3)

Working collaboratively allows students to assist each other and can provide the existence of a strong social affective support through shared goals in a constructivist approach to learning (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997) as their discussions allow them to develop understanding and construct meaning with the help of those with more experience of the system within which they are working (Vygotsky, 1986). A supportive atmosphere and collaborative practice provides a model which they may wish to adopt with their classes. Working in this way to construct knowledge collaboratively, although normal practice in the course, was new to the students who reacted very positively. This appears to confirm current educational theory which places an emphasis on process rather than product as illustrated in approaches such as collaborative and active learning and critical skills.

The students at no point criticised the French system that they had left, but they were very positive about the chance to experience a different approach,

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which although no less rigorous, was perceived as highly relevant to their needs as teachers in training:

'I like the idea of developing our identities as teachers, which is not the case in France.' (Student 1)

Comments such as the one above demonstrate how the students had started to think about the concept of professional identity which was new to them at this early stage.

In these first interviews the students expressed themselves satisfied with all aspects of the course and highlighted important differences in the French system they had come from. As newcomers to the Scottish system, they were able to compare their experiences and highlight the links between the academic approach taken in France with the more practical style in X. The first year of the Masters and the way it was taught in France was seen as very theoretical and taught using 'transmission' methodology, while in Scotland the students' perceptions were of a much more practice-driven methodology and teaching and learning achieved through collaborative practices. This came as a surprise since although the PGDE has a focus on the practical, the theory underpinning the methodology is made very explicit to the students.

Second interview

The second interviews took place after the students had completed three teaching placements. The focus in those interviews was on their development as beginning teachers and the support they had received throughout the course. One of the students had, by this time, decided to withdraw, to concentrate on further university study. The four remaining students expressed strong satisfaction with their experience. The main focus in these interviews was on their professional development as beginning teachers and how their experiences in schools and the Faculty had facilitated this.

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Theory and Practice

In the initial interviews all the students had mentioned the complementary nature of the two parts of their Masters: the theory that they had done in their first year in France, combined with the practical nature of the X PGDE course. In the final interviews, having had experience of different schools, they reiterated the value of the theory that they had learned in the first year of their Masters and how it integrated with the PGDE course:

'The good thing is that it's really complementary with what we've done with [our French tutor].' (Student 4)

The school experience part of the course was seen as very valuable, although the students all liked the balance of time in Faculty and in schools:

'In France we don't have a school placement and they are so useful.' (Student 2)

There appears to be a need to balance both elements of a teacher education course, i.e. theory and practice, to give students a solid base on which to reflect in order to make sense of what happens in classrooms as both elements work together (Prestage and Perks, 2001, in Dickinson et al, 2004). The students seemed to have a greater recognition that the theory studied on the PGDE course developed the theory on teaching and learning a foreign language in their first year of the Masters.

Reflective Practice

Although the emphasis in the PGDE course is on the practical skills needed to teach effectively, one of the main aims of the X course is to produce beginning teachers who are reflective practitioners, who can evaluate and analyse their practice with a view to improving it. The students found reflective practice a difficult concept to grasp; at the moment reflection does not appear to feature systematically in the French education structure, but in the final interviews

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they maintained that they had found it a very useful skill, not only in understanding their practice in the schools but in general:

'The way of reflect as well, the way of learning by writing a journal; in the beginning it was quite tough ... but now it's like a companion, it's something really useful.' (Student 2)

The process of reflection helps professionals to evaluate and improve their practice (Schön, 1983). Johnson (1994) stresses the need for beginning teachers to reflect critically on their practice from the earliest stages of their teaching experiences to ensure further learning and to challenge any existing conceptions. However, if left unsupported, students may focus only on negative aspects of their teaching (Moore & Ash, 2002). The presence of a mentor to guide students through their development as reflective practitioners helps them to make progress in the difficult skill of analysing their practice and facilitates positive outcomes (Atherton, 2005).

Support and Teamwork

The students indicated that because they all had a mentor in the school, usually the Principal Teacher of Languages, they felt supported and able to talk through issues that arose, not only with their mentor, but with other teachers as well:

'I could share my problems and she [Principal Teacher] took time to talk about it with me.' (Student 4)

'I could tell my colleagues, "Oh I found them difficult" and we discussed what went wrong and what I could do the next time.' (Student 2)

The students all appreciated the level of support and teamwork in the schools and departments and the way the schools were organised in subject departments:

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'...it's better for teachers to have opportunity to share their way of teaching and their feelings. I think that collegiality doesn't exist in France.' (Student 2)

The development of teamwork is one of the characteristics of effective leadership identified by HMle in their publication 'Improving Leadership in Scottish Schools' (HMle, 2000) and has been highlighted as a success indicator in their review of inspections in Scotland between 2002-05 (HMle, 2006):

'As part of a team, I think I was involved as much as I could. I was able to understand what was happening and feel part of it.' (Student 3)

Although these students were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences, there were still some issues for further development that they identified in the final interviews, most importantly a broadening of their knowledge of the Scottish education system:

'I'm still confused about many things. I think it's very complex.' (Student 1)

Their comments were echoed by students from other parts of the UK, used to a different system of examinations and syllabuses. As a result, directed study tasks have now been set up, in mixed background groups, where these students will be able to access peer support from Scottish students to gain a fuller understanding of the system in which they will be working.

Discussion

The study was undertaken in order to provide the Modern Languages programme team in the Faculty of Education at the University of X with information which would allow them to develop a supportive framework for future Masters FLE students. In the initial interviews the students focused on the comparison of the teaching methodology and content in French and Scottish universities. In the second interviews they concentrated more on their

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development as teachers and how the support they had received in school and in Faculty facilitated the process.

Throughout the PGDE course they experienced a collaborative approach to learning in the Faculty and working in their placement schools, which exposed them to a different pedagogic culture from the more didactic methodology more common in France. They enjoyed working collaboratively, while also appreciating the robust theoretical underpinning that they had received in the first year of the Masters course, which they saw as effective preparation for the theory studied on the PGDE course.

It appears that the encouragement of their colleagues in school played a big part in their positive experiences in the classroom. The collaborative working practices within schools and departments made them feel welcome and smoothed the progress of developing their teaching persona.

Understanding the structure of the Scottish education system caused the students some difficulties, which appeared still not fully resolved by the end of the course for some. It is now planned to provide pre-induction information linked to a 'buddy' system where students will be paired or placed in groups with others who have come through the system themselves or have previously worked within it. Such an arrangement also allows students to make social contacts early in the course.

Conclusions

The four students from 2007-08 who have now taken up posts in different regions in Scotland were all able and motivated students who came with a good theoretical competence but had little knowledge of just how to put theory into practice and no knowledge of the Scottish system before they arrived. They were able to contribute to the collaborative nature of the work done in Faculty and the schools, by offering an outside view of the Scottish system and the PGDE course, which benefited all of the students in the PGDE class. The initial results of the interviews indicate that the balance of collaboration

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and support and the interactive approach to learning present a positive experience.

Scotland and France have for many centuries been linked in what is known as the 'Auld Alliance', an ancient political partnership stretching back to the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots, who was betrothed to the Dauphin of France. Our current experience suggests that a 'New Alliance' of shared professional training offers benefits to teachers and teacher educators in both countries. In a European context, pedagogy and professional development can deepen intercultural understanding and co-operation between nations and their educational systems. Pupils and their non-native teachers can be equally the beneficiaries, but only where practical support and reflectiveness inform both teaching and learning.

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