Using an informed understanding of styles to enhance learning and teaching in twenty-first century learning environments

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Using an informed understanding of styles to enhance learning and teaching in twenty-first century learning environments

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Introduction

There have been significant advances in our understanding of cognitive styles, however the effective translation of these into practice has been limited, especially within the school context (Evans & Waring, 2012). Cognitive style represents individual differences in cognition that help an individual to adapt to the particular environment (see Kozhevnikov, 2007). Cognitive style is in turn also shaped by an individual’s interactions with an environment. The notion of style modification involving interplay between individual characteristics (e.g., general intelligence, personality) and external requirements operates at a number of micro and macro levels including familial, educational, professional, and the global cultural context. Using this definition, all styles if they include cognitive processing can be referred to as cognitive styles (Kozhevnikov, 2013). The examination of the key principles underpinning styles is highlighted by Zhang and Sternberg (2005) in their use of the term intellectual styles to capture all style dimensions, as well as in the development of the Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy (PLSP) (Evans, 2013b; Evans & Waring, 2009). When discussing differently named constructs (cognitive styles, learning styles, approaches to learning, and/or patterns of learning), there are over-arching themes that apply to all these areas of study which have important implications for learning (as argued by Evans and Vermunt, 2013).

We know that cognitive styles do matter, impacting on how individuals navigate their learning (Zhang, Sternberg, & Rayner, 2012). Styles are hierarchical in that they operate at a number of layers of information processing from simple to complex, involving perception, concept formation, higher order cognitive processing, and at the highest level: metacognitive processing (Kozhevnikov, 2007). To support self-regulatory development and specifically metacognitive
skill development, learners need to be aware of how they learn; understanding the role of styles as part of this is important (Sadler-Smith, 2012).

With a focus on the development of early career teachers (ECTs), that is, those teachers within their first five years of teaching, this chapter considers how an understanding of styles can be used effectively to support learning and teaching within a higher education postgraduate context. In so doing, we will address two related concerns: (i) translating effective styles research into practice, and (ii) the provision of appropriate support for ECTs that enables the development of their critically reflective practice. In relation to the first of these concerns, the limited effectiveness of the translation of styles research into teaching has been attributed to “a lack of consensual theory; confusing terminology; difficulties in identifying valid and reliable measures; and vague practical implications” (Evans & Waring, 2012, p. 295). Such translation has also been hampered by insufficient information being available on pedagogical interventions (Evans & Waring, 2012). Martin (2010) has argued that this problem is compounded by the fact that few teachers use information from the research community to inform their understanding of styles. More effective brokers are therefore needed to provide more accessible information to practitioners (Goswani, 2006). In sum, more visible and explicit ways of judiciously using styles research to inform learning and teaching practice are required as part of teacher professional development courses and activities. In relation to the second concern, it has been argued that early career teacher support, especially the induction of newly qualified teachers within the UK, represents a deficit model of teacher development (Haggerty & Postlethwaite, 2012). It is vital that early career teacher development programmes promote more than an understanding of how to teach to also include an awareness of why we teach in specific ways (Biggs, 2001; Korthagen, 2010). As part of this it is essential that authentic and aligned experiences are planned into these programmes.

Having identified what constitutes effective styles pedagogy, we will explicitly outline the translation of effective styles research into practice by showing how the PLSP was employed in the design and delivery of a postgraduate level professional development course for ECTs as part of promoting critically reflective practice. The implications of our findings for research and practice will be identified.

What is an effective styles pedagogy?

The PLSP is informed by research in education, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology. It demonstrates integration of cognitivist and socio-cultural theoretical perspectives (Cobb, 1994; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Saxe, 1991; Tynjälä, 1999), and social critical theory (Butin, 2005). The PLSP provides an example of an inclusive participatory pedagogy that can be used in a wide variety of educational and workplace contexts to examine and manage the role of individual and contextual variables impacting learning (Evans & Waring, 2011; Evans, 2013a; Scott et al., 2014).

In the PLSP framework (Evans & Waring, 2009) we acknowledged that: (i) cognitive styles are complex and predominantly multidimensional; (ii) different style constructs measure different aspects of style; (iii) the development of specific styles may be more or less relevant to certain contexts; (iv) preference for one type of processing does not preclude development of alternative processing options; (v) cognitive styles can be developed, however style specialisation may be more appropriate in particular contexts; (vi) the range of cultural contexts that an individual inhabits impacts on individual use and development of styles; (vii) cognitive styles interact with other variables; and (viii) greater awareness of cognitive styles can enable individuals to make more informed decisions about their learning and support the development of learner autonomy (Evans & Waring, 2009). Evans’ (2013b) extensive review of styles approaches in education identified key characteristics of enriched styles pedagogies which included: a holistic approach considering the whole learning experience of the learner and interrelationship of individual
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difference and contextual variables impacting on learning; measured use of approaches in relation to the requirements of the task; emphasis placed on development of style flexibility; active involvement of learners in order to develop self-regulatory skills; judicious use of instruments focused on the metacognitive potential of styles training to support learners in managing their own learning through critiquing research and finding solutions; understanding and using styles to underpin curriculum development. By way of contrast, impoverished styles approaches included the following: an unthinking use of styles through a lack of awareness of the complexity of a learner’s cognitive style profile; an unthinking use of strategies with little regard to contextual needs and learner history; accommodation rather than development of styles; “styles done to students” rather than active involvement of learner in the learning process; indiscriminate use of instruments and limited interpretation of findings for example, to label but not develop learners; training in styles not integrated into curriculum but seen as “one stop shop”; lack of challenge – little emphasis on developing styles.

Using the personal learning styles pedagogy in practice

Key components of the Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy (Evans & Waring 2014, in Waring & Evans 2015, 2014) include: (A) Exploration of student and teacher beliefs/modelling and support; (B) Careful selection and application of styles to suit the requirements of the learning context; (C) Optimising conditions for learning/Sensitivity to learner context; (D) Design of learning environments – to promote an integrated approach to the application of cognitive styles to learning and teaching; (E) Supporting learner autonomy: choices in learning and student voice. These components of a PLSP were used to design a professional development course for 57 ECTs which supported them in developing their understanding of learning and teaching within the classroom as part of critically reflective practice and the translation of effective styles research into practice. The year-long course (from September to September), involved three taught days (November, March, July) and ongoing online support via a virtual learning environment (VLE). The summative assessment for the course was in the form of a critically reflective portfolio of 5,000 words on a self-selected area of their own practice to be submitted in the following September.

When utilising a PLSP to inform the curriculum design and integrated assessment, care was taken to ensure (i) authenticity – focusing on supporting ECTs in the development of their teaching in context and their identified priorities within their first few years of teaching (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald 2009; Korthagen, 2010; Kosnick & Beck, 2009); (ii) agency – encouraging ECTs to critically reflect on their own practice, build resilience, self-understanding and acknowledging individual perspectives of learning and teaching; (iii) inclusivity and accessibility – building on learners’ previous personal learning and teaching histories; (iv) modelling good practice – using and modelling appropriate pedagogical tools to explore specific dimensions of practice with ECTs in order to make learning more explicit (Kazemi & Hubbard, 2008). The rationale informing the development of the postgraduate professional development course was shared with the ECTs in oral and written form from the start to address those concerns that new learning designs aimed at promoting deeper approaches to learning can have significant unintended negative side effects, with students adopting more surface approaches to learning when the intentions underpinning the design are not clear to students (Abraham et al., 2008).

Table 12.1 identifies how particular sub-components of each of the five components of the PLSP were applied in practice during the case study ECT course. In relation to (A) Exploration of student and teacher beliefs/modelling and support, attention was focused on exploring ECT beliefs about learning using a variety of tools to assist the process in an integrative and iterative manner throughout the year. This approach was informed by the understanding that learners’ perceptions
Table 12.1 ECT course alignment to PLSP components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of a Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy</th>
<th>Examples of practice</th>
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| **A Exploration of student and teacher beliefs/modelling and support** | **Focus:** (Ai)  
  Tools and approaches:  
  - Use of emotional line graphs for learners to explore their own individual teacher learning journeys and to share with others.  
  - Exploration of fit within organisations.  
  - Exploration of networks of support.  
  - Ongoing discussions and use of prompts/questions within lectures and seminars.  
  - Peer coaching activities. |
| i  Focus on the learning histories of student and teacher. | |
| ii Holistic understanding: Consideration of the whole experience of the learner. | |
| iii **Exploration of learner (student and teacher) beliefs about learning (e.g., ability, self-efficacy, identity and sense of fit within learning contexts).** | |
| iv Enhancing learner awareness and application of styles as part of ongoing instruction on individual learning differences. Understanding of individual differences central to the design of learning environments. | |
| **B Careful selection and application of models** | **Focus:** (Bii)  
  Tools and approaches:  
  - Inventory of Learning Style-Short Version (Donche & Van Petegem, 2008).  
  - Measures of resilience (e.g., Short Grit scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009)). |
| i  Judicious and informed use of instruments/styles models. | |
| ii **Critical analysis of styles as part of instruction on individual learning differences. Appropriate application of styles models: Instruments used as metacognitive tools to support understanding of the learning process.** | |
| iii An integrated approach: Awareness of the interdependence of cognitive style and other individual learning differences – role of cognitive style as a moderator variable. | |
| iv Development of cognitive styles as an integral element of culturally responsive pedagogies. | |
| **C Creating optimal conditions for learning** | **Foci:** (Ci) and (Civ)  
  Tools and approaches:  
  - Pre-course preparation focused on tasks relevant to the level of experience of the student teacher and focused on essential information that student teachers need to know. |
| i  **Sensitivity to needs of the learner: Recognising unique starting points. Addressing the emotional dimension of learning: Working with students to ensure readiness (will and skill)** | |
ii Enabling a positive learning environment: Focusing on supporting students during important transition points in their learning.

iii Care afforded to how new ideas introduced as to the level of cognitive complexity in order to support learner flexibility.

iv **Supporting learners’ integration into communities of practice.**

v Attention given to learners’ networks of support and development of identity within academic context.

D **Design of learning environments**

i Housekeeping attended to (organisation of resources; information for students and lecturers etc.).

ii Teaching methods informed by an understanding of cognitive styles and attuned to the requirements of the content and context (constructive alignment).

iii Aimed at supporting learners in developing understanding of learning to think within a specific discipline and to become part of that community.

iv Judicious use of accommodation of cognitive styles and the concept of matching.

v Judicious approach in promoting development of the most appropriate cognitive styles for specific contexts.

vi Teaching strategies aimed at stretching the student through careful addition and removal of scaffolding and sufficient constructive friction: Aimed at developing and broadening cognitive styles and strategies as and when appropriate.

- Interspersed nature of three taught days to allow experimentation, consolidation and development of ideas related to every day teaching experiences.
- Provision of all resources on the virtual learning environment to ensure ease of access.
- Organisation of resources – clear signposting of key resources for each day.
- Preparation tasks sent out a month prior to each taught day with subsequent reminders to ensure learners warmed up for learning.

Focus: (Dvii)

Tools and approaches:

- Authentic opportunities for ECTs to discuss elements of their teaching.
- Opportunities for dialogue within taught sessions linked to pre-session warm up tasks.
- Explicit discussion of ideas and concepts and in relation to assessment requirements.
- Coaching activities to support learners to explore their approaches to learning and teaching.
- All materials available for learners to be able to self-manage.
- Early opportunities to submit portfolio proposal and to get quick feedback on this.
- Feedback focused on how to improve. Prioritised and focused on specific areas for development rather than an ‘overfull shopping bag of feedback’ which could easily be dropped by the learner.
- Feedback acknowledging the strengths of performance prior to focusing on areas for development.

(continued)
### Components of a Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy

**Examples of practice**

| vii | Designs focused on encouraging learners to adopt deeper and more self-regulated/directed approaches to learning (constructivist approaches with a strong emphasis on the development of metacognitive skills).  
Supporting learners to reflect critically on the learning process to include self- and co-regulation. Appropriate use of tools to support process. |
| viii | Maximising learning opportunities: Design of learning environments focused on enhancing awareness of different learning strategies through explicit guidance and exposure to diverse learning experiences: Different ways of seeing and doing, observation, modelling, practice, application, reinforcement, and transfer. |
| ix | Authentic and appropriate assessment designs to support the development of deep approaches to learning. |
| x | Appropriate use of technology to support learning. |

**E Supporting learner autonomy: choices in learning/student voice**

| i | Focus on the centrality of the learner as a co-constructor of knowledge. |
| ii | Focus on the role of the student in managing the learning process. Learners as co-designers of their learning experience(s). |
| iii | Learner control afforded through design of curriculum (content, process, product) including e-learning possibilities. |
| iv | Flexible designs facilitated through, for example, organisation of resources to maximise access; choices in pathways through programmes; nature of assessment. |
| v | **The importance of guided/informed choice for learners.** |
| vi | Informed and responsible use of grouping individual and group work. Collaborative learning opportunities informed by understanding of styles (e.g., dangers/limitations of labelling, justification for groupings). |

**Focus: (Ev)**

Tools and approaches:
- ECT choice in assessment – guided support.
- ECT choice in use of peer assessment.
- ECT self-reflection on what they have learnt and what was problematic as part of summative feedback.
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and beliefs are strong and significant predictors of individual change (Karagiannopoulou & Christodoulides, 2005) and that in order to support self-regulatory development sufficient attention needs to be placed on exploring with learners their experiences and beliefs about learning.

With regards to (B) Careful selection and application of models, cognitive styles instruments were used judiciously with ECTs using a “second-person perspective” (Rosenfeld & Rosenfeld, 2011) to ensure ECTs were actively involved in the process of sharing and debating results within lectures to elaborate on key issues impacting on learning and teaching. We were judicious in our choice of reliable, valid, and relevant measurement tools. All inventories could be completed in a short time-frame with limited impact on ECT workload; they were completed at the beginning of the first two taught days (November to March) and results were discussed in the following lectures (March to July). ECTs were asked to consider the findings and the implications for their own teaching when supporting pupil flexibility, development of pupil self-regulatory skills, and pupil resilience in learning. Building on the work of Allcock and Hulme (2010) it was essential for the ECTs to understand why specific theories and tools were being used and how teaching strategies were related to this.

When (C) Creating optimal conditions for learning, sensitivity to the needs of the learner was facilitated by ensuring that ECTs had the opportunity to share, discuss and reflect on their own learning experiences. Importantly, as part of this the ECTs were given explicit guidance regarding the preparation they needed to undertake for each taught day and access to relevant resources on the VLE. Sensitivity to the ECT’s context was important in supporting their readiness, that is their “inclination to own the learning and to think through into action which has positive consequences for the well-being of one’s self and others” (Hyde, 2010, p. 266). The VLE informed by an understanding of cognitive styles was “adaptable” in that it provided learner choice when engaging with the learning resources, rather than being “adaptive” to specific learning styles (Akbulut & Cardak, 2011).

With regards to (D) Design of learning environments – to promote an integrated approach to the application of cognitive styles to learning and teaching, an emphasis was placed on supporting ECTs’ development of self-regulatory skills through the use of: critical reflection tools and coaching approaches in lectures and seminars (e.g., Brookfield, 1995; Tripp, 1993); peer engagement in providing feedback on assessment tasks; and a range of feedback techniques. Informed by a critique of assessment feedback research and in particular focused feedback (Evans, 2013a), ECTs were given opportunities to submit a draft portfolio outline of two pages on their chosen focus and to specify what they would like individual feedback on. The emphasis was on providing early formative feedback to address the emotional dimension of feedback and increase the potential of feedforward compared to feedback. The rationale for involving early focused feedback and peer support rather than feedback on full drafts was explained to all ECTs at the start of the course. In order to value and promote the development of ECTs’ self-assessment skills as part of the portfolio summative assessment, they were also asked to evaluate what they knew well, what they remained unsure about and why. They were also asked to consider how they gave, received and acted upon feedback (Barnett, 2011; McMahon, 2010).

(E) Supporting learner autonomy: choices in learning/student voice was addressed by providing ECTs with choice in the assessment. ECTs in selecting a focus for their portfolio submissions were asked to consider what aspect of learning and teaching was most important for them to develop at this particular stage of their career. They were then supported (via seminars and online) in refining their focus, thus acknowledging the varying self-regulation capabilities and experiences of learning and teaching of the cohort. Importantly, ECTs chose their level of peer engagement beyond the taught sessions. Existing and new networks of support were explicitly discussed in lectures and seminars with all ECTs.
Discussion of findings

A key aim of the ECT development course was to adopt a research-informed approach by inviting ECTs to use a number of pedagogical tools to critically reflect on their practice in order to move their learning and teaching forward within context. The importance of the interweaving of research and practice to inform ECT development was therefore highlighted. Pedder (2013) acknowledges the greater reliance of teachers on experimenting with their own practice (internal orientation); drawing on practice from other schools (external orientation) and learning with colleagues (collaborative orientation), rather than using research to inform practice (research orientation). We advocate the importance of addressing the research dimension as part of ECT learning. Martin (2010) has acknowledged that teachers do not use styles research to develop their practice. The ECT course aimed to make styles and individual differences research more accessible in part by attending to housekeeping issues (resource accessibility); demonstrating the relevance and practical utility of ideas (ideas accessibility); providing access to the research literature and approaches to interrogate findings (critique accessibility); and supporting students to examine their own beliefs and interpretations of ideas in order to be confident and able to translate ideas into practice (readiness accessibility).

A variety of data were used in the analysis: (i) ECT completion rates; (ii) quality of ECT portfolio submissions; (iii) ECT feedback during taught sessions; (iv) ECTs’ perceptions of the course from anonymised questionnaires completed at the end of each teaching session. Closed questions using Likert scales were entered and analysed within IBM SPSS (version 20). Open-ended questions were thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify key themes.

Forty-two of the 57 students who enrolled on the course completed a portfolio assessment (74%). Of those who submitted, 98% were successful at their first attempt. The quality of the submissions was high with all successful submissions demonstrating Masters level work. Analysis of the quantitative data extracted from the final student questionnaire (response rate 78%) identified the following:

The most useful elements of the Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy Approach: When asked what they personally considered to be the three most useful aspects of the PLSP, 49% of ECTs identified the opportunity to critically discuss ideas; 44% valued the opportunity to explore their own values and beliefs – something they felt there was little opportunity to do within their working contexts; 22% commented favourably on the focused feedback and advance provision of resources; 20% commented on support provided to them to explore networks of support and explicit discussion of assessment.

What elements of the PLSP have you used in your own teaching? There was a level of disconnect between what ECTs said they most valued and what they felt most able to implement within their own teaching. Sixty-eight per cent of ECTs said they had focused on exploring ideas critically with their own pupils; 37% had tried to implement authentic assessment into their own practice, although only 10% had previously rated this as one of their top three areas; 27% had implemented focused feedback techniques with their pupils. While the ECTs had felt exploration of values and beliefs about learning to be important, only 15% claimed to have tried to develop this with their own pupils. Only 6% claimed to have had discussions about assessment with pupils and while in the study, the ECTs had found advance provision of resources valuable, only 10% claimed to have enacted this with their own students.

The main gains from undertaking the course: 73% of ECTs felt the course had developed their capacity for critical reflection and their ability to use theory in practice; 56% felt it had increased their resilience; 27% felt it had directly enhanced their teaching; and 22% commented that it had enabled them to share ideas with colleagues in schools.

The themes which emerged from the thematic analysis of the questionnaire qualitative data were: ECT agency; confidence and independence; collaborative enquiry; specific learning tools.
ECT Agency

The development of ECT agency was an important factor. ECTs left the taught days feeling “empowered and ready to take a few more risks” (ECT 37), “re-energised and positive” (ECT 13), with a “new lease of teaching momentum” (ECT 22), and able to [take] more risks in class and that’s really paying off” (ECT 32), and “empowering – a huge confidence boost” (ECT 3). The value to the ECTs was that they were able to focus on what they wanted to improve on in their own teaching and something relevant to them in their context: “the portfolio is a reflection of our practice and our journey . . . to build on theory and create new theory” (ECT 41). The focus on ECT beliefs as part of the course was seen as an important part of supporting both the ECTs’ own personal development and their teaching practice: “Focusing on our own experiences was a fundamental influence on my own practice and the emphasis on self-regulation . . . it will impact on me being able to give feedback to me and my children” (ECT 6).

ECTs reported that the advanced provision of resources and direction to sources of information as follow up reading were important in supporting and developing their sense of agency: “Advanced provision of resources and tasks allows us to make the most of the time we have. Critical reflection with course leaders and [peers] allows us to think deeply about issues” (ECT 16); “having resources available in advance is great. I could think through things and feel prepared, confident to contribute in sessions” (ECT 32).

Confidence and independence

The importance of authentic assessment opportunities, as an integral element of a PLSP, have been acknowledged and the focused feedback provided on portfolio drafts was seen as a constructive part of their development by 94% of ECTs. Particularly welcomed and frequently reported by the ECTs were the value of: comment boxes on feedback so they could see exactly what comments were related to; the direction to further resources and focus on process – what needed to be done next; the “punchiness” of feedback – “good to know exactly where I stand”; positive reinforcement “that I am on the right lines”; “concise and to the point”.

In discussions about self-regulatory practice, ECTs were asked why some (44%) had used the opportunity for feedback to get answers to their own focused questions and others had not. Reasons given for not seeking out answers to questions included: feelings of insufficient knowledge to know what to ask; insecurity and not wanting to ask something silly; wanting to wait for feedback from the tutor first; and having confidence in one’s own proposal and comfort with the existing feedback and support structures that were in place. An important part of a PLSP is identifying these different positions at an early point in learners’ learning careers because it provides the scaffolding to enable the learners’ (ECTs) to take more responsibility for generating questions about their own work (Evans, 2013a). An important aspect of this is also looking at ECTs’ networks of support and working with ECTs to enable them to acknowledge and develop more effective support networks for themselves. Of note was that 24% of ECTs did not feel supported by their wider school community even if they felt supported within their department. This impacted on how they saw themselves and their role(s) within the school community.

Specific learning tools

ECTs considered the theoretical background to the course useful as a basis for critical reflection. Pedder’s (2013) finding that teachers’ own learning comes mainly from self-reflection on practice was borne out in our case study. This highlights the significance of supporting learners
through the provision of appropriate tools to undertake more deliberative critical reflection (Wilson & Demetriou, 2007). Out of 45 responses, 46% of ECTs felt most of their learning occurred through trial and error in the classroom and personal reflection on this; 18% cited colleagues; 8% noted the role of CPD, observations and pupils as the main source of learning; 2.5% cited internal and external CPD opportunities.

The design of the course ensured that ideas were raised and revisited in lectures and seminars, quick and short focus questions were viewed positively. The learning tools were used to frame discussions about learning. The CSI (Hodgkinson & Sadler-Smith, 2003) was used with the ECTs to demonstrate how analysis and intuition can be used effectively in teaching situations. Analysis relates to reflectivity, rational, sequential, and logical thinking; intuition relates to impulsivity, creativity, and thinking on one’s feet. In alignment with previous research findings with UK student teachers (Evans & Waring, 2011), mean analysis scores were higher than intuition scores (Means: analysis = 26.32 (SD = 8.2); intuition = 23.5 (SD = 8.2)). Looking at their learning strategies (Donche & Van Petegem, 2008) ECTs were able to explore the relationships between deep processing and self-regulation (r = .614, p = .01; n = 54) and those between surface processing and external regulation (r = .375, p = .01; n = 54) and the implications of these for their own development and that of their pupils. Although most of these ECTs could be classified as high achievers given their university entry qualifications and degree classifications, some rated their lack of regulation highly. This is an important area to address given that perceptions of regulatory ability may impact on performance (Helle et al., 2013). Similarly, looking at perseverance and commitment to goals using the grit scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), ECTs found it useful to consider how they managed their own teaching and learning contexts and supported their pupils to develop these skills. Rychly and Graves (2012) have argued that to support the development of self-regulatory skills, students need to be explicitly taught to reflect if they are to thoroughly consider their own preconceived ideas and expectations about learning and teaching. However, it is important that learners are exposed to a range of tools so that they can critique their value in relation to their own needs and the requirements of the task; accepting that different tools will be more useful to different types of learner (e.g., Dewey’s (1910) framework for reflection; Brookfield’s (1995) lenses; critical incident analysis (Tripp, 1993). The opportunities for ECTs to stop and think about how to improve through coaching and reflective opportunities in collaboration with peers was seen as valuable. In the first taught session a third of ECTs noted the value of discussion with peers, whereas in the second session over 84% of ECTs commented on the value of engaging with peers in dialogue about their ideas and practice: “group discussions have facilitated purposeful discussions and allowed us to share experiences and support one another” (ECT 3). In this case study peer support was progressive; it was built upon and had incremental value. Considerable care needs to be taken in the use of peer and self-feedback initiatives to ensure ECT autonomy within the assessment process. More attention is needed on supporting ECTs to become active feedback seekers (Evans, 2014).

The PLSP enabled ECTs to re-engage with critical reflective practice, something which the ECTs felt had been “easy to lose sight of in daily practice” (ECT 7); “I felt the critical discussion . . . brought me out of practice and [enabled me to] reflect upon how my practice ties with theory” (ECT 14). Several ECTs noted the impact of critical reflection on how they were taking their learning and teaching forward with pupils: “Re-engaging with myself as a learner and therefore regaining empathy for students” (ECT 17); “helped to understand the importance of reflection to both myself and my students” (ECT 31); “made me think about my teaching from their [pupils’] perspectives” (ECT 16).
Higher education institutions have a key role in supporting ECT development through the application of research informed participatory pedagogies such as the PLSP. Drawing on the work of Cole (1996), Boyle and Ravenscroft (2012), and Kek and Huijser (2011) we argue the importance of considering ECT experiences from a “nested contexts” approach which highlights the importance of understanding how a context operates at different levels (e.g., at the level of a lesson – teacher within the classroom, and how this is framed within the context of a whole scheme of work; at departmental level; at year group level; whole school level, and beyond the school – government policy agendas, wider learning environment, employment etc.). Within such a model, ECTs can engage in developing their teaching, but how they engage depends on both their conceptions and those of their pupils regarding the immediate context and how it is nested. We argue the need for using inclusive participatory pedagogies such as the PLSP so as to be more able to consider the importance of specific contexts and person-environment interactions at the micro level (teacher–student interaction in classroom) to the macro level (cultures, belief systems, social interchanges) (Kek & Huijser, 2011). Therefore, examining how ECTs interpret their role(s) at various levels within the school system and how this impacts on their perceptions of learning and teaching is a fundamental aspect in supporting ECT development.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have demonstrated how an inclusive participatory pedagogy such as the PLSP can be used to support learning and teaching within a postgraduate higher education context as part of enhancing the potential and efficacy of learning environments for all ECTs and their translation of effective styles research into their practice.

This case study has highlighted a number of key issues regarding the application of the principles underpinning the PLSP to promote enriched cognitive styles pedagogies: Firstly, the importance of supporting ECTs in finding ways of combining old and new conceptions of learning so that they were “aware of the contextual nature of their learning processes, and the relationship between the two sets of ideas [to ensure the process was] not one of substitution but rather of extension and interaction” (Wang & Byram, 2011, p. 407). Secondly, it emphasises the importance of attendance to housekeeping issues (e.g., provision and organisation of resources and teaching, explicit guidance, timing of assessment, authentic assessment; development of blended learning environments) in order to support ECT self-regulation of learning. Thirdly, it facilitates ECT agency by ensuring that: requirements of assessment were explicit; the timing of assessment enabled maximum participation in the assessment process; ECTs had a choice in their assessment focus; and support in how to be proactive in seeking and using feedback. Fourthly, the value that ECTs place on the various pedagogical tools and interventions to support their critical reflection on practice and the extent to which this enabled them “to step outside of practice” to think. A key issue in supporting new entrants to the teaching profession is ensuring sufficient support for their professional development. It was evident in this case study that the majority of ECTs attributed most of their learning to trial and error in the classroom. The government drive in England towards an apprenticeship model of teacher education as heralded by the Importance of Teaching (DfE, 2010) and Training our next generation of outstanding teachers (DfE, 2011) places increasing emphasis on schools to provide high quality professional development opportunities for teachers. Feedback from ECTs in this case study suggests that such provision is highly variable; such a finding highlights the importance of exposing ECTs to research- and practice-informed participatory pedagogies such as the PLSP to support their own development and that of their pupils.
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References


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