

The apprenticeship of observation

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Although the term ‘the apprenticeship of observation’ is perhaps not widely known outside teacher education circles, what it refers to will be instantly recognized by most teachers. The apprenticeship of observation describes the phenomenon whereby student teachers arrive for their training courses having spent thousands of hours as schoolchildren observing and evaluating professionals in action. This contrasts with novices learning other professions, such as those of lawyers or doctors. The term was coined by Dan Lortie, in ‘Schoolteacher: A sociological study’ (1975), and this apprenticeship, he argued, is largely responsible for many of the preconceptions that pre-service student teachers hold about teaching.

One of the consequences of this apprenticeship period is that, whereas people entering other professions are more likely to be aware of the limitations of their knowledge, student teachers may fail to realize that the aspects of teaching which they perceived as students represented only a partial view of the teacher’s job. Lortie writes that a student ‘sees the teacher frontstage and centre like an audience viewing a play’. However, he adds that, whilst students can view the ‘frontstage’ behaviours, e.g. monitoring, correcting, and lecturing, they do not see the ‘backstage’ behaviours which are a crucial part of a teacher’s job:

Students do not receive invitations to watch the teacher’s performance from the wings; they are not privy to the teacher’s private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events. Students rarely participate in selecting goals, making preparations, or post-mortem analyses. Thus they are not pressed to place the teacher’s actions in a pedagogically oriented framework (Lortie 1975: 62).

Learning the ‘folkways of teaching’

As these teaching behaviours are largely unanalysed, they remain ‘intuitive and imitative’ (Lortie 1975) and have been described as ‘folkways of teaching’, that is ‘ready-made recipes for action and interpretation that do not require testing or analysis while promising familiar, safe results’ (Buchmann 1987: 161). This model thus provides student teachers with ‘default options’, a set of tried and tested strategies which they can revert to in times of indecision or uncertainty (Tomlinson 1999).

Teacher education

The net result of this highly influential period of observation is that teacher education courses are said by many to have a weak effect on student teachers. This limited effect and the reported tendency for novice teachers, once they have entered the profession, to revert to their default model can lead to teachers teaching as they were taught, hence exerting a conservative pressure on the profession. (Lortie 1975)

This point is well made in a study of four student teachers in the USA. Johnson's study (1994) offers an insight into the tension students face as they struggle to establish a teaching style that reflects their beliefs rather than simply applying the models learnt at school during their long apprenticeship of observation. Although student teachers recognized the limitations of the schoolday teacher-centred models they held, they record feeling powerless to change due to a lack of alternatives, and hence they found themselves reverting to these earlier models. One student teacher rather insightfully records in her journal:

It's been really frustrating to watch myself do the old behaviors and not know how to 'fix it' at the time. I know now that I don't want to teach like this, I don't want to be this kind of teacher, but I don't have any other experiences. It's like I just fall into the trap of teaching like I was taught and I don't know how to get myself out of that model. I think I still need more role models of how to do this, but it's up to me to really strive to apply what I believe in when I'm actually teaching. (Johnson 1994: 446)

Further reading

Other interesting studies which deal with the apprenticeship of observation include John (1996) who interviewed 42 history student teachers on a PGCE course in the UK, and a study of five novice teachers in Hong Kong who were followed for a year after graduating from a preservice BA degree (Richards and Pennington 1998). The authors of the latter study report that although the degree programme emphasized and promoted a communicative approach to language teaching, within a year the novice teachers had abandoned much of their training and largely reverted to the teaching approach typical of Hong Kong schools—that is, teaching with an emphasis on rote learning, examination preparation, and a teacher-centred style of teaching. (Richards and Pennington 1998)

Of course there are other factors which influence how people teach—for example, a teacher's own experience of what works in the classroom, in addition to life and other non-teaching work experience, etc. However the apprenticeship of observation provides student teachers with a powerful, albeit limited, intuitive understanding of teaching, which should not be underestimated.

References

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