Battling Against the Tide: the Perspective of a PGCE English Tutor on the Changes in ITE

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“There is no calling more noble, no profession more vital and no service more important than teaching.”

Michael Gove is unequivocal in his regard for teachers when introducing the 2010 White Paper: The Importance of Teaching. Me too. I have worked as a teacher and alongside teachers for many years, and now I have the privilege of training entrants to the profession.

As a teacher educator, I am part of a relatively small profession and, quite frankly, I am feeling a little under threat. The White Paper heralds a shift in teacher education, away from higher education institutions (HEIs) towards schools. It is difficult to know whether this change in the tide is just creating an uncomfortable current for me personally or whether, more seriously, it marks the erosion of fundamental principles and qualities within teacher training. A considered assessment of the effect of the changes on future English teachers is needed.

There are currently a range of ways to gain qualified teacher status (QTS) which cater for different needs but they centre around three routes: i) undergraduate (e.g., BA with QTS); ii) postgraduate study (PGCE); and iii) employment-based (e.g., GTP, Teach First). HEIs train around 80% of new teachers, and the quality of HEI provision has been acknowledged by Ofsted. At the end of the last three-year inspection cycle (August 2011) there was more outstanding provision from HEIs than in employment-based routes. This should cause no surprise; HEIs devote considerable resources to running and developing the schools and institutes of education that are devoted to initial teacher education (ITE). These resources include people and expertise (for example, experienced practitioners, research-active colleagues, essential administrative and support staff), professional partnerships with a wide range of schools and
practitioners, and the implementation of the systems that are needed to run a coherent and effective programme. What is surprising, therefore, is that the government is shifting the responsibility for ITE away from HEIs.

This paper will describe the cycle of a PGCE English course (my own), based at an HEI, in an attempt to draw out the qualities and features that are particular to such a course. I invite the reader to look beyond my undoubted partiality, and to consider what factors and elements are necessary and desirable in the training and education of new English teachers. Current practitioners might also consider which aspects of the workload will fall on them if there is a great shift from HEI to school-based training.

To set the context, this is the fifth year I have worked as course leader for a PGCE English course in the West Midlands. By the end of this year, I hope to have co-ordinated courses leading to the successful qualification of approximately 100 English teachers. My main partners in this enterprise are the students themselves, of course, who must be persuaded to exert just the right amount of Herculean effort to satisfy the demands of the classroom but not so much that they burn out in the space of a fortnight. Importantly, I also work in partnership with many others, both within my own institution and from schools, where I rely on the unceasing professionalism, expertise and generosity of teaching colleagues working in West Midlands’ schools.

Although the PGCE course lasts only ten months, the cycle begins nearly a year before the start of the course with the recruitment of the cohort. The numbers to be recruited are set by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). Heavy fines are imposed for over-recruitment, so it is vital to stick to the numbers allocated. Numbers at secondary level are currently declining overall, and consequently there has been a slight decline in the numbers of English places. However, the reduction of numbers in English is slight compared with some other subjects such as PE and RE where places have been cut drastically in some cases, leading to the closure of some courses.

Recruitment is an intensive task. Applications need to be viewed and assessed for suitability of qualifications, experience and outlook. Even a seemingly simple decision, such as whether a candidate has an appropriate degree, may not be straightforward. Which degree provides the most appropriate subject knowledge base for this breadth of content covered in the English classroom? In 2010, Blake and Shortis published an interesting study on the degree qualifications of PGCE English students. They surveyed 65% of courses offering a full-time PGCE English course,
and found ‘a general pattern of preference for applicants with degrees in English Literature or combined English Language and Literature, although preferences and levels of flexibility vary across institutions’. They also found degrees accepted in related subjects such as Media Studies, Drama Studies and Creative Writing. Some institutions accepted students with degrees in non-related subjects such as Law, Social Sciences and History. Decisions need to be made that affect the level of expertise going into future English departments. The degree class is also considered. In their study, Blake and Shortis found that 78% of degrees of students were upper second or first class. However, I also take heed of GCSE and A level grades – particularly as indicators of competent writing skills.

Personal statements are carefully scrutinised. Statements which reveal independent and creative thought as well as a clear interest in young people and in educational ideas, are prized. Experience within an English department (voluntary or paid) is also demanded—concrete experience of English teaching as opposed to an idealistic vision is essential!

Applicants invited to interview face numeracy and literacy tests (including proofreading and writing coherently and accurately), discussion tasks (to assess their ability to think on the spot and to work co-operatively), a presentation task (to judge potential classroom presence) as well as a formal interview. The recruitment task is rigorous and, with a ratio of applicants to offers of approximately 6:1, it is also time-consuming.

Once numbers have been recruited, information gathering begins, in order to help set up school placements for the new cohort. They are also given subject-related pre-course tasks such as a subject knowledge audit and reading a range of children’s literature. They may also have individual conditions and tasks to work on, such as gaining further experience in school. Students will need to ‘hit the course running’ and these tasks help to focus them.

In the first week of September, at the same time as schools start the Autumn Term, twenty-one English PGCE students embark on their journey to become English teachers at my institution. Bringing together a cohort of new students to learn and develop together is a real strength of this type of PGCE course. Working within a cohort, they will benefit from hearing, considering and contributing to the wider range of ideas, problems, questions and answers that can be raised in a group setting. They will gain practice in collaborating in a professional field, in ‘performing’ in front of others and will widen their sphere of potential resources and sources of support. They will gain reassurance from not being alone in finding things demanding or difficult. They will become
part of a team of sympathetic and critical friends that will support them through the course, and maybe beyond. This collegiate, challenging and supportive bond forms rapidly, and by the end of the first week it is fixed.

During the five weeks that follow, the students undergo an intensive set of lectures, seminars and workshops that introduce them to the basics and help prepare them for their first placement in school. A module on Whole School Issues engenders learning about key areas such as assessment and behaviour management. Within their English module, they will engage with the history and development of the teaching of English as well as with the national frameworks that support English teaching such as the National Curriculum. They consider the teaching and learning of the basic modes of reading, writing, and speaking and listening, and how to develop their own subject knowledge in terms of what pupils in schools need. Planning sequences of learning, whether for lessons, for units or for the whole year, is also taught in this period, as is assessment, differentiation and inclusion within English. Regular exercises in presenting to the rest of the group introduce the culture of observation and constructive criticism that will permeate their school experience.

These taught sections of the course are focused, intensive and practical. However, they also emphasise the academic ethos of the course. The students read. They research. They reflect and deliberate—with each other and with lecturers. Assignments are planned, researched and written. This is made possible by the provision of a good academic library. Even within a small institution, such as my own, we have a superb range of books, journals and resources dedicated to education and teaching. A key part of my own role is to seek out worthwhile research and reading, and to ensure that students have access to the latest editions of books and e-books.

Throughout this first teaching block, students are encouraged to develop their own philosophy of teaching English. These students are not being trained by or for one particular school. Rather, they are being prepared for a career in a profession which may take them to various workplaces and situations and which will take them to an educational future that I can’t foresee. Consequently they need to develop a philosophy of English teaching which is measured, robust, and influential.

In the third week of the course, students have their first school experience which is an observation placement. This is the first week of twenty-four weeks they will spend in schools. In fact, for two-thirds of their PGCE, the students are actually in school. Significantly, the students are supernumerary whilst in school. This means that each lesson taught by the student always has a member of staff attached to it. The teacher of the
class will support, guide and monitor the student throughout the placement and, importantly, will monitor how the class are faring. If the student is impeding the progress of the class, action will be taken. Ultimately, the student can be removed from the classroom if s/he is failing to progress. Being supernumerary also gives flexibility to the training; the teaching timetable can be adjusted as the students gain confidence and skills. This kind of swift intervention is not so easy where the trainee teacher is not supernumerary, but has her/his own classes, as is the case with programmes like Teach First.

Whilst on school experience, students have a partnership tutor from the HEI but their main support comes from a subject mentor in school. They will also have the benefit of a professional mentor in school and support from other colleagues within the English department. Students begin to put into practice what they have been learning during the taught part of the course, but most of all they learn of the complexity of teaching. Almost without exception, their preconceptions of teaching, built from their own experiences, crumble at the reality. They are astounded at how demanding and difficult it is to front up a lesson and teach effectively. They quickly learn to respect the teachers that make these skills look so easy.

By the end of the first placement students have often developed an attachment and loyalty to the school. The schools have imprinted on them one approach to teaching English. Their next placement will provide them with an alternative outlook, which will help them to further develop their own philosophy. Sandwiched between the two placements, are a further five weeks of tuition from both Whole School Issues and English modules. They have developed greater confidence and capacity for experimenting, but the content of the course is more demanding and challenging, so it proves a stimulating and exciting time. Furthering their knowledge of reading (e.g., with phonics), exploring poetry, considering how to teach challenging texts, such as Shakespeare’s plays and pre-1900 texts, using data effectively and investigating varieties of English are just part of their module for study.

This module is about more than content, and the methods used are also important. Reciprocal peer teaching is very popular, and is used for exploring drama skills. The tutor teaches skills to groups, who then have to plan and deliver teaching sessions for other groups of students, including MFL PGCE students. In this way, the students themselves become a live, but friendly class—and students can experiment with their teaching skills in a safe but challenging environment (nobody likes to lose face in front of their peers).
Problem-based learning is used to explore other aspects of teaching, including how data is useful to an English teacher, and what it tells us. The data used is authentic, submitted (in an anonymised form) from a local school. This term also sees students completing their M level assignments, which require a high degree of input from tutors and students alike to ensure they reach the required standard.

The main school placement is at a different school, and lasts for twelve weeks. The demands are greater in many ways, but particularly in terms of an increased timetable and higher expectations from colleagues in schools. On each school placement there are joint observations of students’ lessons by the HEI partnership tutor and the school-based mentor. These are important moderation opportunities—important for maintaining consistency of standards across the course. Moderation visits are also conducted by other HEI staff to ensure consistency across the secondary programme. This means that schools within the partnership can be sure that the standards they are working to are the same between and within schools.

The final placement within my own programme is a short placement where the students can gain enhanced experience in a specialist area. Students are encouraged to gain experience in the primary phase, for example, so that they can see how reading and phonics are taught to younger children. Alternatively, they may seek to gain further experience of provision for children with special needs, or English as an additional language. The students have a large element of choice in this placement, and it’s well received.

By the end of the course, the students will have benefited from twenty-four weeks of school experience, supported by the expertise, resources and systems of an HEI dedicated to ITE. A successful PGCE year will be followed by the induction year, and with that starts a career of finding out what English teaching is all about. It’s not the end of a process, but the beginning. However, it does provide a solid foundation.

Within this brief description, I have tried to illuminate key aspects of HEI provision which I believe are significant and important, and which I will take the time to summarise. First, an HEI-based PGCE helps to ensure that this professional qualification continues to be academic qualification, based on study, research and theory. A university library, monitored by a course tutor, is an essential element of this academic platform and M level study demands it. The second factor is that HEI PGCE courses work with cohorts, which allows for a collegiate, collaborative and supportive approach. As well as the potential for support and networking, cohorts enable individuals within them to learn from each other, to experiment, to
use each other as sounding boards and agony aunts when necessary. A third key strength behind students studying on an HEI PGCE course, is their supernumerary status in the classroom. Not only does this provide support for the student, but importantly it protects the class. If things go wrong, teachers have the flexibility to intervene. On an HEI-based PGCE course there is never any question that the pupils’ education comes other than first. The fourth strength of a PGCE course based in an HEI is the variety of school experience. Students undertake at least two substantial placements in different schools (in some other classroom-based programmes the second placement is only for one week), providing them with a wealth of experience from different practitioners, often in very different contexts. Moderation of school experience within the English course, between different subjects and across different schools, ensures that standards are maintained and consistent.

The final strength of the HEI model of PGCE is very simple: the course tutor. Student English teachers are my raison d’etre. My profession, as a teacher educator, is to ensure effective English teachers embark on the profession. Course tutors across the country have amassed extensive experience and expertise in this field. For a classroom teacher, the pupil is the priority. And this is as it should be. A student teacher may be a priority, but is not the main priority. When students return from a school placement, and share their ups and downs, I often have cause to say to a student ‘a school is not there for you’ and, rather wistfully, they agree. However, at the moment, during what is possibly the most traumatic year a teacher will experience, I can say that I am there—just for them. And it is good to do so.

References:
2) The possible routes into teaching can be found at TDA Teacher Training Options. www.tda.gov.uk/get-into-teaching/teacher-training-options.aspx
5) ibid., p.20.