The intuitively theoretical mentor – or – A defensive fear of theory

Carol Gray, University of Birmingham

The umbrella against theory

When our student teachers return for 'review afternoon' at the university during their first school placement, we still hear that a few of them have been told to 'forget about all that theory that they teach you at the university'. Thankfully, this is mostly from other teachers in the department or the school, not normally the mentor! Nevertheless, why do a persistent number of teachers still hold up their umbrellas and deny the potential of 'theory' to help their teaching garden grow? Is it pure arrogance? A case of 'what I do is the only right way'? Is it the 'fossilisation' of teaching skills, where the teacher, like a 'stuck' language learner, has learnt enough to meet his/her own needs and sees no need to improve? I wonder if there is perhaps a strong element of self-defence, a fear of not measuring up to the 'theory', or the 'ideal' – including the ideals we set out with at the start of our own teaching career. We are never going to achieve the ideal, so acknowledgement of it in principle highlights our own failure and also commits us to a slow, long-term struggle towards it when we may already feel overwhelmed by the necessities of everyday survival. Rejection of theory can therefore become a powerful way of protecting our own self-esteem.

theory

Teaching and learning to teach

What exactly is theory anyway?

Theory for me is not 'grand theory', but interaction with the minds of others which helps to clarify, refine, develop and add to my own ideas; perhaps more importantly it gives me the confidence that I am not alone and am not expected to have all the answers, or even necessarily all the questions. It is a supportive but flexible background against which to lean when I need to act, it gives me a greater range of informed options and allows me to be more proactive and effective. Mitch Waterman's world-changing talk about blue boxes and red boxes a few hours before the workshops helped me clarify this idea of theory as the basis of all action – the more theories I have in my blue box (long-term memory), absorbed from so many different sources, the more are available to me to work with in my red box (short-term memory) in order to control my responses and actions. A simplified and possibly misinterpreted version of his fascinating presentation, but

that's what I always do with other people's theories. In fact, it is often difficult after a while to remember where each tiny part of my self-constructed world view originated. Perhaps this is another reason why so many teachers reject 'theory' – the time they spend in the classroom is so intensive, challenging and demanding, so alive in the conscious awareness, that they begin to think that that is the only source of information available to them, that 'learning by experience' means 'learning by doing'. If our 'red box' is so taken up with the moment for so much of our time, it's easy to ignore the potential value of the 'blue box', but 'teachers learn just as students do: by studying, doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see' (Darling-Hammond, 1999: 18). Sykes compares teaching skill to sporting performance:

> Michael Jordan may be a great natural basketball player, but he is also a highly disciplined student of the game who acquired his knowledge and skill from coaches and mentors, which he then perfected through long practice. A hallmark of all excellence is seemingly effortless performance, making the difficult look easy. Great teachers have undertaken careful study, and have learned their craft through both formal education and informal experience. Personality alone does not produce great teaching. (Sykes, 1999: 37).

I want theory when it's useful to me!

The challenge seems to be to get the theory from the student teachers' blue boxes into their red boxes, i.e. to make them consciously aware of the information which they have 'passively' absorbed so that they can use it effectively to inform and control their actions. Just like our pupils with their 'grammar', the 'theory' of language teaching and learning can only come really alive for our student teachers when it means something to them in the intensity of problem solving. The mentor's job then, is to activate and contextualise 'theory' whilst student teachers are actively engaged in the cycle of planning, preparing, teaching and evaluating on site in the school:

> The recommendation for mentoring, then, is that student teachers need to be exposed to all the relevant considerations entering into the choice and application of particular teaching strategies, from their functional rationales through to tips on what it takes to 'make them work in practice' (Tomlinson, 1995: 92).

But mentors often don't feel comfortable with 'theory'!

And neither did I when I first came to my current post straight from teaching, until I discovered that like any teacher I was an 'intuitive theorist'. The challenge was to unpick the whys and wherefores that were deep in my blue box. What we need to do, therefore, is to work with mentors:

* to break down their defensive reactions to theory by helping them to realise that the theory is not 'out there' but 'within them';
* to help them gain access to that intuitive knowledge;
* to build their confidence in their ability to meet this challenge.

The workshop

The workshop activity was designed to begin to articulate some of the theories which language teachers intuitively hold and to demonstrate their relationship to practice. We looked at some common practice scenarios arising from our work with beginning teachers to work out what kinds of understandings or personal theories would help them teach more effectively. Just as the Standards for the Award of Qualified Teacher Status expect beginning teachers to be aware of the common misconceptions of pupils in their subject area, we as teacher educators see common scenarios which illustrate student teachers' misconceptions or their failure to 'attend' to certain basic understandings which seem to drive the work of experienced teachers. The mentor/tutor challenge for any typical scenario is:

* to work out what detailed 'misunderstandings' are taking place;
* to work out what 'theories' the student teacher needs to develop in order to overcome those misunderstandings;
* to work out how to articulate those theories in a relevant manner and help the student learn from them and in so doing …
* to work out what factors or perceptions might hinder this learning and find ways to challenge them.

The example which we addressed together in the workshop to illustrate the process was:

> A student teacher moves too quickly from repetition to expecting production.

At first it felt quite taxing, but eventually we started to brainstorm a list of possible interpretations of the 'symptoms':

* The lack of interim steps suggests a 'transmission' model of teaching which will need to be challenged.
* There is insufficient awareness of the difficulty of hearing sounds in a new language effectively enough to store them in memory.
* There is an association of repetition with memorising, therefore a lack of understanding that repetition can be carried out without much thought or understanding.
* It may also indicate insufficient awareness of the need for context and meaning to forge connections in the brain which support memorisation.
* There is lack of awareness that the pupils might need physical training to allow their mouths and vocal chords to cope accurately with the new sounds of a different language.
* There is also lack of awareness of the many different learning styles which pupils may need to employ before an item is properly learnt, such as visual and kinaesthetic support.

Identifying patterns in the behaviour of a particular student teacher should help us to unearth their underlying beliefs and thus to provide more targeted input, so that we start to address the cause rather than the symptom. Perhaps what is needed is a kind of 'reference volume' which starts to identify and investigate the reasons behind the common misconceptions of language student teachers in an easily accessible form as a springboard for mentors' work. Is that a book proposal I see before me?!

Footnote

1 The scenarios were taken from Gray, C. (2001) *Mentor development in modern language teacher education*. Clevedon, Multilingual Matters Ltd.

References

– Darling-Hammond, L. (1999) 'The case for university-based teacher education'. In: Roth A. R. (ed) *The role of the university in the preparation of teachers* (pp13–30). London and Philadelphia: Falmer Press.
– Sykes, G. (1999) 'No standards or new standards? The future of teacher certification'. In: Roth A. R. (ed) *The role of the university in the preparation of teachers* (pp31–40). London and Philadelphia: Falmer Press.
– Tomlinson, P. (1995) *Understanding mentoring. Reflective strategies for school-based teacher preparation*. Open University Press.