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Researching the role of dialogue, writing and critical reflection in unlearning for students with professional backgrounds

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Abstract
This article discusses three case studies, each of which presents insights about how "unlearning" may be understood in relation to different contexts within education. The first case study examines the habitus of teaching and learning in school contexts. It finds that teachers have deeply embedded beliefs and practices re-enforced by conditioned learning and are unlikely to "unlearn learning" if they do not question their own practice or their own learning. The second case study examines the use of Problem Based Learning (PBL) to develop students' ability to "unlearn learning." It identifies the role of attrition and conflict in creating uncomfortable space in which "encultured" knowledge and beliefs are "unlearned" to create room for new learning. The third case study is of Master's Degree students who approach their learning with a relative openness to "unlearning learning." The role of dialogue is central to this process. In the latter two case studies, the value of thinking anthropologically becomes apparent in terms of revealing strategies that create opportunities to "unlearn learning" (notably, making familiar practices "strange," and vice versa). The article concludes that the strategies used in the second and third case studies were successful in enabling students to be more open to new learning. We recommend a more anthropological approach to teachers' professional development, such as those in the first case study.

Introduction

This article explores the concept of "learning unlearning" (or unlearning learning) through three projects. It questions whether it is necessary to "unlearn" in order to truly accommodate and synthesise new ideas into a reflective praxis. It suggests that perhaps we do not really "unlearn" but loosen some of the threads of our knowledge and experience so that they are not bound so steadfastly. The untangling of some of our thoughts does not simply make room for the addition of a new body of knowledge, but assimilates the new knowledge in the light of previous experiences, re-organises connections between previous experiences, brings new insights and alters our understanding, beliefs and behaviour. In this article, evidence from three projects is used to examine the idea of 'unlearning' with professionals who work with young children. The projects are:

1. A case study of teachers dealing with the transition of children between two key stages and curricula, who showed limited interest in their own learning
2. A study of students engaged in a Problem Based Learning (PBL) course and how they reflected on their "learning unlearning"
3. A study of Master's Degree students on a module which got them to challenge and reflect on their behaviour in relation to an aspect of their provision as leading professionals in early years education.

The unintended outcome of the first project was that professionals were predominantly unquestioning in their beliefs and practices (there was no evidence of unlearning). The second and third projects used an anthropological approach, that of developing a sense of anthropological "strangeness," to explore students' learning. That is, students employed strategies to create conditions that might stimulate the questioning or "unlearning" of deeply embedded beliefs and practices. We now proceed to examine the findings of these case studies in turn.

Case Study One: A Case Study of Teachers

The first project, the case study of teachers, was part of a larger phenomenological study of children's experiences in the Early Years Foundation Stage, involving provision for children from birth to five years and in their transition to Key Stage One of the English national curriculum (Orlandi 2009). An ethnographic approach was adopted, based on naturalistic observations in which the focus was not pre-determined but emerged during the observations. It was in the research process itself that the main questions arose (Walsh 2012). Unsurprisingly, the study found that teacher expertise had a significant impact on children's experiences. Like the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) project (Moyles et al., 2002), it found that teachers and other practitioners rarely reflected on their own practice and appeared to be unaware of the impact this was having on the children's experiences. When prompted they struggled to articulate their philosophy about the experiences of young children in their care. It is suggested here that much of the practice of teachers and other practitioners in early childhood settings is influenced by conditioned learning. One example of this was the development of a new children's centre in which an advisory teacher met strong resistance to change in practice, and reluctance to reflect on this. National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and nursery nurse qualified staff, some with many years' experience and others who were new to the role, focused on the general wellbeing of the children. For instance, during lunchtime, all the "toddlers" (regardless of their individual stage of development) were placed and fastened into chairs in a row. They were all systematically spoon-fed the same food by the adult. None of them were supported in becoming independent or engaged in verbal interaction with the adult. As in other activities observed, speech from the adult was about functions, for example "come on, into your chair." There was an overall sense that the children were fed, cleaned and kept away from harm and that this was the main task. On the other hand, the teachers in this centre had a focus on learning, planning resources and activities to support this. The care and the learning were seen by both sets of practitioners as separate components and there was resistance to challenge or "unlearn" this assumption. There appeared to be an unspoken understanding of role expectations that had not been formally agreed.

According to Bourdieu, practices give evidence of the structure of the habitus that generated them: in this case, the problem for the researcher was to analyse the behaviour in order to disclose the habitus (Nash 2010). It is necessary to understand habitus if one is to challenge or indeed change practice that is well embedded. Brownlee and Berthelson (2006) assert that "more sophisticated epistemological beliefs" enable student teachers to see the complexity of the classroom and to seek other's viewpoints before taking action (2006: 20). However, they found that student teachers who came to higher education with knowledge, gained through experience and observations, were likely to view the process of learning and teaching as common sense and would consequently encounter difficulties when meeting new ideas and theories. As in this first case study, this may be because of the habitus which generated their values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Habitus has a history and "discloses the traces of its origins in practice" (Nash, 1999:176). We suggest that some learning may be so embedded and hardwired through enculturation" (Osberg and Biesta 2008) that it is not possible to "unlearn," but rather space needs to be created within prior learning for a new set of experiences and understandings to be developed in order to truly achieve new learning. The seemingly automated responses from staff to questions about aspects of practice provided evidence of conditioned learning of practitioners, in the form of the unquestioned principles underpinning their specific pedagogy, and its link to practice. For example, when asked about how they valued the outdoors as a context for teaching and learning, a common response from practitioners was that "the outdoors should mirror the indoors;" and yet the outdoor provision was seldom planned for at all, in contrast to the detailed planning for the indoor environment. This was a uniform response which came with no rationale. The teachers were asked about their role in supporting children's learning and development through play. All of them responded that this was important, but almost all of them were unable to articulate how or why they should have any involvement in children's play. Two possible reasons for these conditioned responses are a) cultural and historical influences on teachers and other professionals about what is expected of them which are so embedded that they are seldom questioned; and b) the provision of 'professional development' that trains (or conditions) them to implement policies and procedures that are politically driven. The dispositions owned by practitioners, or their habitus, is the "product of early experience" and is subject to the "transformations brought about by subsequent experiences" (Nash 1999: 176). The promotion of formally sanctioned educational outcomes, deemed by others to be vital, is a strong influence on the focus of the teacher who has a responsibility to create learning environments in which these goals can be met (Osberg and Biesta 2008). If teachers' performance is measured by achievement of those outcomes, there is likely to be less enthusiasm for creating new ideas or challenging old ones. Statutory curriculum requirements in this way stifle innovation and behave like a "straight jacket" that reinforces habits of mind (Mason 2002:13). Questioning the dogma of agreed practice

requires a willing participation by the practitioners in order to "unlearn" what has formed an integral part of their practice hitherto.

According to Ghaye and Ghaye (1998), reflection links critical thinking to practice by asking probing questions so that transformation can take place. However, the level of critical thinking or reflexivity required of teachers and other practitioners working with young children is not just about linking theory to practice, but also requires the interrogation of assumptions. This case study indicated that the adults involved did not challenge the guidance they were given and did not challenge their own assumptions and habits of practice. There is a strong case here for teachers, and others in education, to adopt an attitude of anthropological "strangeness," in which they are able to expose the social and cultural constructions of those they serve in order to be open to new learning (Walsh 2012).

Reflexivity and Anthropological Strangeness: Lessons for Teacher Education

This case study did not investigate ways of addressing the lack of reflexivity in the teachers' practice, but highlights why there is a need to "learn unlearning" in order to gain useful insight. We suggest that this has implications for teacher education. Teacher educators in university or those providing continuing professional development will have objectives for their sessions which, even if the intent is for the participants to develop their own learning and emergent meaning, may nevertheless encourage particular kinds of meaning to emerge. However, if learning and new knowledge is to be developed from the participants, the meanings to emerge should not be pre-determined (Osberg and Biesta 2008). We argue that there is a tendency to focus on the transfer of meaning from the professional leading the development courses, rather than on the creative involvement of participants. McIntosh (2010) believes that the current professional world has difficulty with abstraction and focuses on "what is there" rather than "what might be," and refers to this as "professional autism" (2010: 86). Government guidelines and requirements, in addition to culturally embedded practice for professionals involved in the education of children and young people, must compound this suppression of potential creativity. Evidence of this filtering through from the training and professional development of teachers to the education of children is abundant in the planning systems used in which there *must* be clear learning objectives. As mentioned above, from one perspective the primary purpose of education is to promote outcomes and to provide an environment to enable this (Osberg and Biesta 2008). The culture of the settings in this study was not conducive, along these lines, to adults "learning unlearning."

Case Study Two: A Study of Students Involved in Problem Based Learning (PBL)

Osberg and Biesta (2008) go on to explore the concept of education as enculturation or training in the context of multicultural societies. If new learning emerges from individuals with different cultures there must be complex situations in which communities of learning are interacting. An example of this would be in the multidisciplinary practices that are increasingly common in the UK children's workforce. The challenges presented by different cultures meeting and attempting to share meaning may provide a sense of attrition between different bodies of embedded knowledge. Similarly, the drive to have multi-professional teams working with families in the UK has resulted in situations in which deeply embedded knowledge and traditions have been challenged when meeting with those of other professions (Gasper 2010). This may not be "unlearning," as prior experiences and concepts may be retained in memory, but a different or enhanced meaning may develop as a result of exposure to conflicting ideas.

With this in mind, this case study of students involved on a PBL course explored the operations of a multi-professional team. The team of tutors examined the students' reflections on their own learning through the use of PBL. The students worked in "multi-professional" teams of four, on a problem in which they were to analyse and produce a range of solutions that would impact on the family at the centre of the case study. The students used reflective journals to record the team meetings and their thoughts following the meetings. They used the journals to a) analyse the process through which they reached their decisions; b) reflect on how they used other's ideas to accelerate their own thinking; and c) acknowledge how the feedback from group members might influence them, and cause a change of opinion or decision. The use of learning journals for professionals and students helped the process of accommodation, namely the incorporation of the ideas of others into their own understanding. This may sometimes involve a change in belief and knowledge, which could be an uncomfortable process (Moon 2006). To question or risk losing prior knowledge is a cause of anxiety; the students on the PBL course expressed concern about the unfamiliar approach to the course and the expectation that they would be

self-rating themselves as learners. Tutors admitted that they had to work hard to persuade the students to have confidence and belief in the process.

It was not until near to the end of the course that the students realised how much they had learned and how the process had allowed them to review what they had learned previously. They commented on how they realised that, although they thought they had seen something from the same perspective as another group member, this was not accurate. It was the process of a) writing reflections in their journals; b) using these to articulate thoughts to the group in the next meeting; and c) listening to the reflective thoughts of peers on the same topic, which brought about this realisation. Understanding that they had interpreted a conversation differently or had a different understanding of the decisions made in the meeting, helped them to question the nature of the knowledge and beliefs they held. They acknowledged that the conflicting interpretations of what had previously been said and agreed forced them to think more carefully about how they would articulate their thoughts, taking into consideration the possible perceptions of others. In this way, they began to anticipate different ways in which an audience might interpret what they had written or said (Moon 2008).

The process described above enabled to students to "unlearn learning" and to make space for new learning. The students explored the language and jargon associated with the workplace and the differences in how this was used and interpreted by different professional groups. One aspect of the case study workshops created frustration. This was when the students were trying to establish who should lead a meeting. This usually focused on their perceived ideas about which professional role would have the most appropriate knowledge for the particular circumstance being explored. Although this was seen as problematic at the time, it resulted in new learning which students acknowledged had not been anticipated and was valued by them. Biesta (2006) suggests that situations in which it is difficult to be the master of one's own actions creates precisely the "frustration of intentions" that makes education possible (2006: 73-75). Difficulties and frustrating encounters may generate situations requiring re-evaluation of the individual's understanding and actions, resulting in "unlearning."

The findings of this study support the notion that it is necessary to "unlearn," or open up spaces in our previous learning, in order to learn. It indicates that people need to experience an uncomfortable process during which, for a short time, the individual loses meaning and connection with knowledge they believe they possess. The students had to experience the process through a framework of team meetings, recordings, discussions and decision making which forced a situation in which they had to relieve themselves of prior learning in order to open up to new learning. For the teachers and practitioners in the first case study there had been no framework or process to bring this about.

Case Study Three: A Study of Master's Degree Students

The third case study is about students engaged on a Master's Degree module. The students engaged on this module were professionals and were distinctive in their readiness to "unlearn." The purpose of the module was for students to examine their own learning through critical reflection and its application to the concept of children's participation in relation to their human rights. The module focused on a study of Hart's (1995) ladder of participation and Shier's (2001) model for enhancing children's participation in decision making. In brief, through exploring their own developing knowledge and understanding of the concepts involved in children's participation in decision making, they were also to analyse their own learning.

The students on this module were experienced and leading professionals, mostly from the field of education. They were different from the other two groups already referred to in that: a) they were well established in a profession and part of their role was to ensure that local and national government policy was implemented in schools and other children's settings; and b) they had chosen to return to postgraduate study and expressed an openness to learning. It could be argued that the students' prior experiences in successfully implementing government requirements would have resulted in conditioned learning and that they had developed habits of mind which were well embedded. However, there are at least two reasons why they were open to 'unlearning' and new learning:

1. As leading professionals, they visited many settings and saw variations in the way policy guidelines were interpreted. This may have triggered the questioning of existing knowledge and understanding.
2. They had not been directed to study for their continuing professional development but had chosen to pursue further study for themselves.

The topic of children's participation proved to be a challenging one for the students. It fulfilled a possible criterion, suggested previously, about the need for an uncomfortable process to occur if we are to "unlearn

learning" in order to make space for new learning. It was uncomfortable and challenging because the expectations of high levels of decision making for children sits in contrast to the school situation. Within schools, it might be argued that children are given choices today, especially with the curriculum guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, even the choices on offer are determined by adults who have particular objectives planned. Coming from such backgrounds it was difficult for the students to "unlearn" deeply entrenched practices. It is not difficult to see that there is a conflict between providing children with opportunities to decide for themselves and an adult's perceived expertise in which he or she feels more able to make the right decisions. There is a danger that the adult may be organising the provision based on well-established habits and practices rather than being open to new ideas, some of which may come from the children.

The module's objectives were about the students examining their own learning in relation to a particular concept. This would contradict the view of Osberg and Biesta (2008) that the meanings to emerge should not be pre-determined. Paradoxically, in this instance the objective was to provide an environment in which meanings could emerge from the students. It is difficult to provide an environment in which this is to be achieved without having some influence on the emerging meaning; this required a high level of self-awareness on the part of the facilitator.

The learning and teaching environment and processes involved small tutorial groups, reading material provided by the tutor and supplemented by the students, reflective journals, practice in settings and dialogue. Each of these informed the other in a multi-dimensional process of thinking. The process created a situation in which students were faced with different meanings derived by their peers from similar experiences or from the reading. Occasionally, conflicting perspectives created situations in which the participants articulated their changing understanding as it happened and were able to articulate their prior knowledge and how they had come to "unlearn" deeply embedded ideas. The process of articulating ideas verbally and through text should not be underestimated. Sharing thoughts with others and clarifying misconceptions provoked an analysis of participants' own learning, raising more questions, challenging personal understanding and creating new learning (Moon 1999). Of similar significance was the representation of that learning using the journal reflections during dialogue with peers in the tutorial group and with others in professional settings. Critical reflection was central to the strong changes in attitude and understanding, or "unlearning learning," that occurred during this module. Reflection is possibly more closely linked with practice in education today because it gives opportunities to "critique existing institutional and management practices" (Forde et al. 2006:68). There was evidence, manifested during the course of this module, of students "unlearning" for example in the way they articulated their changing attitudes, beliefs and understanding. Some students became very critical of their prior practices.

Conclusion

There are common aspects in each of the three projects that have been discussed in this article. The students involved in each case were from professional backgrounds within education. There was evidence of deeply embedded ideas and beliefs established through "enculturation" and reinforced by professional training. There was evidence in the second and third case studies of a link between the degree of challenge, attrition, discomfort and insecurity and the students' awareness of new learning. In each project there were procedures, situations and activities that stimulated or perhaps forced situations in which individuals were challenged. Bringing together people from different cultural backgrounds and different disciplines provided challenges in terms of jargon and perceptions. Whatever terminology is attached to these processes – whether we consider these experiences "learning unlearning," or simply loosening the threads of existing learning – the projects provide ample evidence of the need to challenge prior learning in education. The articulation of thoughts to peers, the use of reflective journals, and the realisation that others were seeing the same things from different perspectives provided an atmosphere in which it was "safe," if uncomfortable, to "unlearn" or loosen prior learning. This enabled the students to be more open to new learning. It may be more difficult to achieve this in professional environments unless a more anthropological approach is adopted, such as the fostering of anthropological "strangeness" when looking at existing practice in order to support a more reflective engagement with the questions of why and how individuals frame their professional experiences in certain ways. With this in mind, an emphasis on reflexivity and on embracing the "strangeness" of familiar practices has significant implications for continuing professional development, and this article recommends a more anthropological approach to learning for education professionals.

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