

## Maximizing vocational teachers' learning: The feedback discussion in the observation of teaching for initial teacher training in further education

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This paper draws on case-study research that focused on teaching observations conducted as part of vocational teachers' initial teacher training (ITT) in further education (FE) colleges in England. It analyses the post-observation feedback discussion, drawing on a rich sociocultural tradition within work-based learning literature. It argues that the feedback discussion provides a learning space that is particularly important for vocational teachers who cross boundaries from vocational contexts to learn to become teachers. To maximize learning from observation, vocational teachers need time and opportunity to develop their practice with others who mediate their learning and development.

**Keywords:** vocational teachers; teacher observations; further education

### Introduction

Learning through practice with others is an essential aspect of the development of expertise in workplaces and there is a rich sociocultural tradition that provides analytic and theoretical frameworks to develop our understanding of the processes involved. These signal the interrelationship of social practice and individual capacity in the development of expertise (see, *inter alia*, Billett, 2001; Engeström, 2004; Felstead *et al.*, 2005; Fuller and Unwin, 2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Winch, 2010). At their heart, these sociocultural traditions embrace a paradigm shift in the study of learning provoked by Lave and Wenger's (1991) ethnography of workplace practices. Their influential thesis on learning contrasted with the traditional or standard paradigm of learning that was concerned with understanding learning at the level of the individual and rooted in psychological theories of learning. Sfard (1998) named this approach, metaphorically, 'learning as acquisition'. In this characterization, learning is a product with visible, identifiable outcomes that takes place once knowledge acquisition is assessed as a change in the property of the individual. Learning, it is argued, is a psychological process and essentially goes on in an individual's head (Hughes *et al.*, 2007).

In contrast, Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that learning could be understood as a social practice. In this framing, learning is dynamic, ongoing, dialogical, and continually reconstructed as participants engaged in action. Sfard (1998) extended her metaphor to describe this as a form of 'learning as participation'. In contrast to learning as acquisition, learning is now construed as a process where individuals learn as part of social engagement with other people and resources (Felstead *et al.*, 2009) and as participants in communities of practice in workplaces (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Knowledge, in this construction, is created in social practice. This movement

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towards understanding learning as participation offers opportunities to shift the focus of attention from the individual's cognitive ability to appreciate the collective practice that underpins learning in workplaces.

Just how learning in the workplace operates in further education (FE) in England, with specific regard to the initial training of vocational teachers, was the subject of qualitative, case-study research on which this paper draws. The case-study research explored the use, value, and practice of teaching observations conducted as part of vocational teachers' in-service initial teacher training (ITT) in FE colleges in England. This paper focuses on an element of the teaching-observation process in FE ITT – the post-observation feedback discussion – and analyses its contribution to the development of vocational teachers' practice. Drawing upon the sociocultural traditions outlined above, it is argued that the feedback discussion acts to provide a learning space where vocational teachers and their observers collectively develop vocational practice as teachers in the workplace.

This paper is divided into three main sections. First, to set the context for the exploration of vocational teachers' learning, FE vocational teachers are defined. This is followed by a brief overview of ITT for FE teachers and the part that teaching observations have played in this. Second, a summary of the literature on FE teaching observations leads to a section explaining the methodology adopted for the case-study research on which this paper is based. Third, discussion of the findings centres on the feedback discussion in maximizing vocational teachers' learning. An argument is made for conceptualizing the learning gained from the feedback discussion as a social practice, given that it is dialogical and continually reconstructed in a work-based setting.

### **Further education vocational teachers**

The term 'further education' is used in England to describe a wide range of learning contexts and providers of education and training. FE is defined, therefore, by complexity, not only in terms of its institutional arrangements but also in terms of its provision and the range of learners it serves (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013). The national inspection service, Ofsted (2013), estimates that, while 3.7 million learners were engaged in some form of government-funded education or training across all FE contexts in 2012/13, over 2 million of these studied in the 237 FE colleges in England. The teachers at the centre of the research on which this paper draws were located in FE colleges in England, teaching on vocational courses.

The 'troubled history' of vocational education and training (VET) has been well documented (Fuller and Unwin, 2011) and, in England, it remains subject to the swings and roundabouts of government intervention. The 2011 Wolf Review of vocational education, for instance, confirmed that VET in England has never adopted an official definition and suggested that it was, therefore, 'extraordinarily complex and opaque by European and international standards' (Wolf, 2011: 9). However, the independent Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL) confirmed the centrality of work to any educational provision that was called 'vocational' (Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2013). The CAVTL identified key elements of vocational education that, critically, included a 'clear line of sight to work' and characterized the relationship between employers, colleges, and training providers as a 'two-way street' (Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2013: 7). It thereby focused on occupational specificity in its confirmation of VET. Within the wider research community, it is also acknowledged that the term 'vocational' is 'fairly elastic' (Pring, 1993: 60). Nevertheless, it is seen to include an occupationally specific context, coupled with an identification of knowledge, an appropriate pedagogy and opportunities to practise (see, *inter alia*, Billett, 2011; Fuller and Unwin, 2011; Stanton and Bailey, 2004; Unwin 2004; Winch and Gingell, 2004; Young, 2006).

Vocational teachers' entry into teaching is often described as happenstance, rather than as a planned professional journey from vocation to teaching (see James and Biesta, 2007; Lucas and Unwin, 2009). The acknowledged 'dual identity' (Robson, 1998) of vocational teachers means that, in training to become teachers, they face two ways. Their respective vocational settings and the expertise developed mean that vocational teachers enter teaching with an occupational identity already formed. Yet the development of pedagogical expertise brings with it the process of becoming a teacher and the adoption of a teacher identity (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005; Orr and Simmons, 2010). As Moodie and Wheelahan (2012: 326) have argued, unlike others teaching in FE, vocational teachers are also involved in the 'reformulat[ion] of vocational knowledge from work where it has mainly a productive function to a teaching-learning function'. It is, arguably, this reformulation that is being observed in teaching observations.

### **ITT for vocational teachers**

Bailey (2007) confirms that there was no provision of teacher training for those teaching in technical and FE colleges in England until the end of World War II. Unlike many other European countries, ITT for vocational teachers in FE only became mandatory in England in 2001, when professional standards were developed and teaching qualifications became a regulatory requirement. This does not mean to say that vocational teachers, in common with their non-vocational peers, did not undergo training. On the contrary; day-release, part-time courses have dominated the routes to qualification for teachers in FE since the World War II (see, *inter alia*, Bailey, 2007; Foden, 1992; Gomoluch and Bailey, 2010; Lucas, 2004). Figures suggest that some 80 to 90 per cent of teachers in FE colleges gain their initial training while already employed in the sector (Orr and Simmons, 2010). However, a reluctance to regulate the sector exemplified what Bailey and Robson (2002: 333) referred to as '25 years of official neglect with regard to the training of FE teachers'.

This reluctance to regulate was finally brought to a conclusion in 1999, and the requirement to gain a recognized teaching qualification for the sector was announced in 2001. At the same time, Ofsted became responsible for the inspection of FE teacher training (Orr, 2010). On 1 September 2007, legal and contractual requirements were implemented to support the reforms (Lucas and Nasta, 2010). For the first time in their history, teachers in FE were not only required to gain a teaching qualification, they were also expected to join what government decreed to be the preferred professional body, the Institute for Learning.

However, by 2011 a review panel under the chairmanship of Lord Lingfield took the view that regulation had not proved successful as a means of achieving a professional workforce (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012), although the criteria against which this decision had been made was not apparent. The government accepted Lingfield's view and revoked the requirement. At the time of writing, there is still much uncertainty regarding the training of *all* teachers in FE and the feeling of 'having come full circle' permeates the system.

Despite this history, teaching observations have been a universal feature of all ITT courses, though Lucas (2004) notes that the frequency and conduct of observations are far from consistent. Following Ofsted's first review of FE ITT, attention shifted firmly to the part played by teaching observations in the development of teachers in training. Ofsted (2003: 3) was critical of the frequency, assessment, and quality of practical teaching, stating that 'trainees' progress is inhibited by insufficient observation and feedback on their teaching ... [and the] ... Observation of trainees' teaching does not have a high enough profile in their assessment.' While seen as an essential (but non-mandatory) aspect of ITT programmes for all FE teachers prior to the 2007 reforms, the observation of teaching became a mandatory requirement of the 2007 regulations,

which insisted on a minimum of eight observations totalling a minimum of eight hours (Lifelong Learning UK, 2007: 23). However, little attention was paid to the process by which observations were conducted in ITT; the requirement to conduct them was seen to be sufficient.

### Teaching observations

While little attention was paid to the conduct of observations in ITT, the role of teaching observation in the self-assessment and inspection of colleges grew to prominence once Ofsted was charged with inspection. Two parallel reports published by Ofsted (2004a; 2004b) suggested that the schemes for observation of teaching and learning in so-called 'underperforming colleges' were both poorly conceived and inadequately implemented. The issue of grading was central to both reports and Ofsted concluded that ungraded observations conducted in colleges were less valid and unreliable. O'Leary (2013: 699) has argued that, by 2008, when a follow-up Ofsted report, *How Colleges Improve*, was published, graded observations were emphasized as being:

... a vital tool in the performance management of standards in teaching and learning. There were references to OTL [observation of teaching and learning] on almost every page, highlighting the importance attached to it by Ofsted.

The observation of FE teachers had therefore become an integral element of the standardization, inspection, and accountability agenda prevalent in FE (O'Leary, 2013; Orr, 2009). These pronouncements did much to associate the observation of teaching with a quality-assurance agenda in FE colleges. The dearth of research that focused on ITT observations did not help alleviate this association.

O'Leary's (2012; 2013) research therefore proved a valuable and timely contribution to the sparse literature on observation in FE. Carried out across ten FE colleges, its primary focus was observations conducted for quality assurance (QA) rather than observations conducted for ITT. However, the research did include an assessment of staff perceptions regarding the 'main purpose' of the observation of teaching and learning. O'Leary's (2013: 704) data showed that only 12.2 per cent (n=32) described their experience of teaching observation in the past year as fulfilling a 'professional development' purpose as opposed to a QA and/or performance-management purpose.

However, FE teachers in his study differentiated clearly between observations conducted for differing purposes, and this echoed a smaller-scale piece of research conducted earlier by Cockburn (2005). Cockburn's study, one of the few that focused on observations in this period, gathered data on the perceptions of those involved in the process of observation in one college and identified their respective attitudes towards observation. The principal models of observation that he identified were framed either by a QA/inspection agenda or by a more developmental agenda, as exemplified by observations conducted for ITT.

Perceptions of FE teaching-observation experiences can also be gleaned from research that focused on trainee teachers' experiences of FE ITT (see, *inter alia*, Harkin *et al.*, 2003; Maxwell 2010; Orr and Simmons, 2010). These studies also established that FE teachers differentiated between the value ascribed to observations conducted for different purposes, with a clear demarcation between ITT observations and observations conducted for QA and inspection purposes. The study by Harkin *et al.* (2003), which focused on the perceptions of teachers about the usefulness of their initial training, was one of the first to identify the value trainees' place on observations in ITT. From their survey, Harkin *et al.* (2003: 15) recorded evidence of 'the high value of being observed teaching, and observing others teach' and, in the interviews conducted with a sample of 50 FE teachers, it was noted that: 'One of the most significant findings from the

interview data was the importance of observation in the learning to teach process' (ibid.: 27). More recently, Maxwell (2010) also established that trainees felt observations of their teaching were one of the main 'learning affordances' of their ITT course.

Similarly, a series of studies for the Huddersfield CETT (Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training) showed that trainees perceived the observation process undertaken during their ITT largely in developmental terms (Peake, 2006; Burrows, 2008; Ollin, 2009). This meant that trainees saw observation as a progressive process designed to reassure them, on the one hand, but also to encourage them to develop their practice.

As well as confirming the differences perceived between observations conducted for differing purposes, the existing literature pointed to the critical factors underpinning what are seen to be successful ITT teaching observations. These factors include the establishment of a relationship between the observer and observee, and the opportunity to engage in discussion about the observed teaching. Maxwell (2010), like Cockburn (2005) and Ollin (2009), found that trainees highly valued the direct feedback on their practices and guidance on how to develop: 'Observations created a pressure to change, introduced new conceptual ideas, built their confidence, and made tacit aspects of practice explicit' (Maxwell 2010: 193). Similarly, Orr and Simmons' (2010) qualitative research into in-service teacher trainee experiences of their ITT confirmed that ITT observations were ultimately more constructive to their learning and professional development. As one participant explained: '...the [observations] from the teacher trainers are great because you *get loads of feedback* and that is really what you need' (Orr and Simmons 2010: 82, my italics).

From these differing sources, the existing research, although sparse, confirmed not only the developmental purpose of ITT observations in contrast to QA observations, but also established the centrality of the post-observation feedback on practice to the development outcome. Teaching observation conducted for ITT has, therefore, largely been construed as part of a developmental discourse as opposed to part of a QA discourse associated with Ofsted grading criteria for inspection. However, while those of us engaged in ITT as professionals had experience and knowledge of what actually happens when ITT observations take place, this had not been captured in the research literature. What, for instance, turned 'getting loads of feedback' into teachers' developing practice? More importantly, for the purposes of the case-study research on which this paper draws, what of the specific development of teachers who cross boundaries from their vocational heartlands into teaching? A consideration of the developmental significance of the observation of vocational teachers' practice was conspicuous by its absence.

The absence of attention given to the process of observation, coupled with a focus on the part observation played in vocational teachers' development, led to the research on which this paper draws. The research aimed not only to 'make visible' the specific practices of ITT observations conducted in vocational learning contexts, but also to conceptualize the process.

## Methodology

Decisions over methodology centred on the approach taken to data collection. Given the research aimed to gain an understanding of processes as well as outcomes in what are described as 'bounded systems' (O'Leary, 2004: 115), in-depth, qualitative case studies were identified as appropriate for exploring the processes involved in conducting teaching observations with vocational practitioners in situ. The case-study sample was mainly convenience in type, with purposive features (Robson, 2002). An ethical standpoint ensured that there was no previous knowledge of or relationship with participants in the research. The purposive nature of the

sample was to ensure coverage, where possible, of a range of vocational traditions within FE, as well as a gender balance.

Given that observation, as a research method, enables the researcher to literally see for herself the practices of others, observation of the processes involved in observing the practice of vocational teachers was considered central. To ensure that all participants were observed engaged in practice, observations of vocational teachers were conducted twice: once with the vocational mentor as observer and once with the education tutor as observer. Observations were followed by in-depth interviews with participant vocational teachers, education tutors and vocational mentors. There were three purposes to using interviews in the fieldwork. First, they placed the participants culturally and historically; biographies of the participants were therefore gleaned through interviews. Second, they were used to generate participants' accounts of the purpose of the teaching observation. Third, they offered an opportunity for participants to discuss practices that had been observed. Five case studies of teachers in different vocational contexts were finalized. The contexts were: catering; health and social care; specialist make-up (hairdressing); plastering; and painting and decorating. All were based in southeast England.

### **Findings and discussion**

In focusing on maximizing teachers' learning through practice, this paper highlights key findings from the research in relation to the role and significance of the teaching observation feedback discussion. Given the confines of this paper, findings are illustrated with reference to one case-study account. This centres on a catering teacher, Johnson, and his observing education tutor, Denis. Some broader findings are discussed first, to set the scene for the discussion of learning from the observation feedback.

The case study research evidenced and highlighted the *staged* nature of ITT teaching observations. Vocational teachers, their education tutors, and vocational mentors provided accounts of the sequences of the process of observation differentiated by time and context. The sequences varied in order and in the intervals between them but, as part of this sequence, all the case-study observations featured a post-observation feedback discussion and included a written account or report of the observation provided by the observer. In some cases, the feedback discussion occurred immediately after the observed session, while in others a few days or a week separated the feedback from the observation. Similarly, in some cases, the observation report was written as a guide to the post-observation feedback, while in others it was the product of the discussion. These practices not only reflected the respective ITT contexts but also exemplified the ways in which the sequences emerged as part of the norms and procedures in given workplaces. Yet this aspect of ITT teaching observation is, surprisingly, rarely documented in research. Arguably, this lack of attention to the staged nature of observation renders the process invisible and may serve to blur the boundaries between QA and ITT observations.

Given the clear, staged nature of the teaching observations conducted for ITT, observations in the research were conceptualized as 'activities', given that they were part of a process that extended beyond the observed teaching setting. This descriptor was thought to counteract the more common conceptualization of observation as a static 'event', frozen in time and place, where the processes involved are not made visible.

Secondly, the case-study accounts confirmed that all the vocational teachers valued the opportunity to discuss the observation with the observer. In common with the literature reviewed (Cockburn, 2005; Harkin *et al.*, 2003; Ollin, 2009), vocational teachers in the case studies relished opportunities to discuss their observed teaching and to consider their practice in more detail.

This was despite the anxiety that vocational teachers recorded in both preparing for and during the observation, as this reflection from the catering case-study teacher, Johnson, illustrates:

I feel nervous, very nervous, because they want to make sure you're doing a good job, or will do a good job. So ... all these things that they've taught you is going through your head, and it gets muddled up. Because you've got your students there, and you know some of them very well, you've got them down to pat ... And you've got this person stood at the back looking at you.

For Johnson, any anxiety provoked by the anticipation of being observed was transformed into something approaching relish by the conviction that feedback following the ITT observation was *developmental*. In order for the observation process to become a helpful learning experience, Johnson expected observers to specify what could be done about aspects of his teaching that were seen to need development. Where this had happened, Johnson saw the feedback process as 'useful' and 'constructive'. What he wanted from his observers were opportunities to think about ways in which aspects of his teaching could be improved. To do this he needed guidance and specific suggestions. Indeed, he saw parallels between what his students were receiving from him in practical sessions and what he felt he needed from observers, albeit in a different form:

...when I'm doing an observation [of students' practice in the kitchen] ... if they were doing an assessment and they presented a dish, I would taste it for seasoning, taste it for flavour, taste it for texture, and then I would tell them if it was too salty, or not enough seasoning. I would tell them if it was still tough or if it was not cooked, and so forth. And then I would turn and suggest to them 'next time maybe you should get this on first', or whatever.

Thirdly, in the accounts of the vocational teachers and their respective observers, the culturally valued concepts that framed the observation process were explicit. Education tutors approached the observation by focusing on the development of particular approaches to planning and organizing learning, and the use of associated learning and teaching strategies. Specifically, education tutors considered development in relation to vocational teachers' use of student-centred, active-learning approaches to teaching, including the integration of group and paired work; strategies for differentiation; clarity of communication; and use of language. These culturally valued concepts have their roots in cognitive and social-constructivist theories of learning. The dominance of these theories and their associated concepts reflects an orthodoxy underpinning ITT courses, exemplified in texts commonly set for study (see, *inter alia*, Armitage *et al.*, 2007; Gravells, 2012; Gray *et al.*, 2000; Petty, 2004). Vocational teachers accepted this approach to the development of their practice; this was what they were also working towards. Therefore, in all of the accounts of the vocational teachers, there was the acceptance that a more student-centred, activity-led approach to teaching students was desired and so expected of them in their observed classes. These observations were therefore construed as part of a process of the *development of pedagogic expertise*.

Fourthly, vocational mentors also approached the observation by considering 'what makes a good lesson'. However, this conceptualization alone did not satisfactorily capture the vocational dimension of the observation. Vocational mentors' accounts, with one exception, evidenced the extent to which both their vocational knowledge and awareness of the purposes of vocational learning impacted on their observation practices. The vocational concerns were evidenced by a focus on:

1. *speed of practice* – vocational students' development of more time-efficient practice
2. *health and safety* – vocational students' development of safe practice
3. *location of practice* – the centrality of the vocational context in the development of practice.

These observations were therefore construed as part of a process of the *development of pedagogic expertise for vocational practice*.

### **Observation feedback discussion**

As has been seen, existing research pointed to the discursive element of the observation process – the observation feedback discussion – as affording opportunities for development. However, it was difficult to arrive at any conclusion from the literature as to the process of learning involved in this aspect of the observation. In contrast, the in-depth qualitative case studies undertaken for the research described here have enabled insight into the discursive element of teaching observation.

By the start of the research, all of the case-study teachers had at least one experience of an ITT observation. This meant they had clear expectations of the learning opportunities afforded by the experience, as illustrated by Johnson's experience of the observation, above. The feedback discussion between Johnson and Denis followed observation of Johnson in a classroom, teaching a group of students (aged over 18) on a short course on food safety. The feedback discussion, which lasted more than 30 minutes, included examples of the inductive experience that Johnson was expecting and a form of modelling of feedback practice whereby he and Denis talked through the strengths of the session and Johnson's development needs. Evidence of this type of exchange, this modelling of giving feedback, punctuates the feedback discussion. Very specific strategies were indeed given by Denis and shared with Johnson. Examples of these strategies that Denis offered Johnson are given below to illustrate the suggestions, which were woven into the feedback discussion:

We need task, feedback, task, feedback ... Otherwise they don't actually know the answers.

Focused instructions: Don't forget to use 'RICH': Re-group; Instruct; Check instructions; and Handout materials.

Develop the directed questions [to bring in all].

The feedback discussion also addressed a complex issue of the frequency, use, and length of a number of anecdotal stories that emerged from Johnson's extensive catering experience and which were told to the students during the observed session. In Denis's view these lengthy anecdotes were illustrative of 'incidental language', during which students were seen to be 'just listening'. However, Denis did not simply say to Johnson that he should cut these down. Rather, he acknowledged the potential vocational value of such anecdotes but negotiated suggested changes in practice. He therefore began the discussion of language use with Johnson by commenting on the positive value of the stories and their use as a 'valuable resource', 'bringing to life' the topic under discussion. However, he also asked Johnson to consider ways in which these could be turned to more 'academic advantage in teaching'. He followed this with a number of examples of how the stories could be used as part of a more learner-centred activity, rather than just relying on students' listening. Once a couple of examples were given, Johnson joined in and indicated that he had understood what was being proposed:

**Denis** So, you tell the story and then get them to fill the gaps ... or make it a case study ... [or a] problem-solving activity ... this happens, then...

**Johnson** And they could say what happens next?

**Denis** Yes ... Yes ... Tweaking so it is less listening and more activity.



Clearly, while Denis can be seen to be moving Johnson towards a more student-centred, engaging experience for his learners, and confirming the culturally valued concepts underpinning practice, the feedback discussion also evidences the interrelationship of social practice and individual capacity in the development of expertise (see, *inter alia*, Billett, 2001; Engeström, 2004; Felstead *et al.*, 2005; Fuller and Unwin, 2010; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Winch, 2010). Additionally, while it may have been easier to say ‘cut these anecdotes down’ or to undervalue the contribution of real-life anecdotes to the vocational learner, it is here that Johnson and Denis can be seen, instead, to be actively engaged in developing strategies for practice.

### Conceptualizing the feedback discussion

Drawing from sociocultural traditions in the workplace-learning literature presented at the start of this paper, the learning space afforded by the staged observation process can therefore be conceptualized as a space where vocational teachers, their mentors, and their education tutors collectively develop vocational practice as teachers. In this conceptualization, and in contrast to traditional deliberations, participants in the feedback discussion are not simply engaged in the application of (educational) theory, vocational knowledge, or transfer of learning from one vocational setting into another. Rather, from a sociocultural tradition where knowledge is understood to be created in practice, participants are seen to be engaged in exploring new ways of practice. Drawing on the ‘learning as participation’ metaphor (Sfard, 1998), participants can be seen as engaged in finding solutions to problems, evidenced in the illustrative examples from the catering case study cited above. To some extent the feedback discussion – where it is defined by a developmental purpose as in ITT teaching observations – is a classic example of learning as a social practice, where participants learn as part of social engagement with others (Felstead *et al.*, 2009).

Two particular concepts from sociocultural theorists are of particular value in developing the conceptualization further: ‘co-construction’ (Billett, 2001) and ‘recontextualization’ (Evans *et al.*, 2009; Guile, 2010). Drawing first on Billett (2001), participants in the feedback discussion exemplified by Johnson and Denis can be seen as being engaged in a process of ‘co-construction’. That is, in order to construct and engage in feedback with the vocational teacher, the observer varies their selection of respective educational and/or vocational knowledge according to the situation. The feedback discussion can therefore be construed as a dynamic construction of the culturally valued concepts of ‘good’ teaching and learning rather than a static application of knowledge. In the catering case-study example, Denis and Johnson draw upon shared culturally valued concepts and use the space to develop practice by drawing upon their collective experience. However, the learning involved is not just about knowledge shared on the ITT course being ‘put to use’ in a teaching setting. There are wider issues involved in consideration of *vocational teachers’* learning from the observation.

An extract from the case study interview with Denis illustrates these. In it, Denis describes how Johnson had organized learning and teaching strategies and managed the class in an earlier observed practical session, although he had not been able to do this in the classroom observed in the research:

[In the earlier practical session, Johnson] does a little demonstration and the students then follow through the demonstration ... And he goes around and essentially monitors and checks what they’re doing and puts them right where necessary ... And that’s the kind of thing I would expect to see in a theory class as well. I’d expect knowledge to be conveyed in some way and then some practice with that knowledge to help consolidate, reinforce it; to help the learning. So he does that in the practical session ... If he could just apply that same, ‘get students doing something,

monitoring, helping, building on' ... And in the kitchens they're working together as well, they're collaborating. He gets students to look at each other's work, how they've cut something, how they're cooking something, and there's lots and lots of collaborative work going on!

Johnson considers Denis able to transfer the principles behind the organization and management of learning (learned on the ITT programme) to the kitchen but not to the classroom. Similarly, Denis thought Johnson tried to develop what he called 'students' higher-order thinking' in the practical session, but did not do so in the classroom. To illustrate this approach, Denis described how, following demonstration by Johnson, catering students made a hollandaise sauce and Johnson then used effective questioning to develop the students' 'higher-order thinking':

[Another] teacher would say, 'You're doing it wrong, do it like this'. When [Johnson] was doing it, he said, 'It's not right. What happens if you do this, what happens if you do that?', and actually forcing the students to think about the effect of adding more oil, or how you could change the egg, or mix it slightly differently ... And so it's that kind of question that I would look for in a theory class as well, but he doesn't do it there. But he does do it in the practical, he forces the learners to think and engage with the resources.

Denis was therefore frustrated by Johnson's apparent inability to apply what he did so well in a practical catering class to classroom-based learning, saying that: 'I suppose he thinks theory lessons should be done in a different way, and as a result I don't think they're very good.'

Johnson's apparent difficulties with developing practice in classroom-based teaching as opposed to practice-based settings might be characterized, traditionally, as an issue of 'transfer', but the concept of 'recontextualization' (Evans *et al.*, 2009; Guile, 2010) offers a conceptual challenge to this dominant metaphor in discussions of workplace and professional learning. Briefly, recontextualization involves 'reassembling' what is known and practised in one context for it to work in another context. It would acknowledge that the learning and teaching strategies Johnson evidenced so obviously in kitchen workshops need to be recontextualized for the classroom setting. Indeed, in Moodie and Wheelahan's (2012) definition of the distinctiveness of the vocational teacher, cited at the start of this paper, the 'reformulation' of vocational knowledge from work to teaching is a product of this process of recontextualization. The argument made in this paper is that recontextualization cannot simply be assumed to occur, tacitly or otherwise. Rather, it needs to be mediated and the post-observation feedback discussion can be construed as the place where such a recontextualization actively takes place.

### **Concluding comments**

Learning through practice with others is an essential aspect of the development of expertise in workplaces and this paper set out to explore how learning in the workplace operates with specific regard to the contribution made by teaching observations in the initial training of vocational teachers. Existing research pointed to the discursive element of the observation process (the observation feedback discussion) as affording opportunities for teachers' development. However, absences in earlier research meant that the processes involved were largely invisible. The research on which this paper is based made visible both the engagement and the nature of the discussion that took place during feedback, so that we can best understand the process of vocational teachers' learning in practice.

Drawing upon the case study research, it has been argued that the post-observation feedback discussion offers a learning space where the development of vocational teachers' pedagogy is situated. This space is seen to be particularly important for vocational teachers as they cross boundaries from their vocational contexts and learn to *become* teachers. It has also been argued that a conceptualization of this process is also required so that we might further understand the

learning from the experience of observation. Concepts from sociocultural theorists have helped develop this conceptualization. The concept of recontextualization helps in the recognition that vocational teachers cannot be expected to simply transfer learning across contexts. Rather, through engagement with ITT observers during the feedback discussion, learning is actively mediated and recontextualization facilitated.

Following from the insight gleaned from the research, some implications for practice are clear. To maximize learning from observation, vocational teachers need time and opportunity to develop their practice with others who mediate their learning as part of a thoughtful programme of learning from practice.

### Notes on the contributor

After 25 years' teaching in FE and HE, Ann Lahiff now teaches on the PGCE for Education and Training and observes practitioners in their work-based settings. She also teaches across MA programmes and is leader for the MA module 'Vocational learning: Policy and practice'. Her research interests centre on the initial training and professional development of vocational staff in post-compulsory education, with a specific focus on the role and significance of teaching observation in the initial training of teachers in FE.

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