A Personal Reflection on Scenario Writing as a Powerful Tool to Become a More Professional Teacher Educator

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SUMMARY  Reflection nowadays is a major goal in teacher education. One of the primary conditions for student teachers to become reflective professionals is the guidance of a reflective teacher educator. In this article we try to illustrate that teacher educators can benefit from the work of scenario writing to become more reflective professionals—theirseves. We will not give a scientific explanation about scenario writing, we simply tell the story of the adventure we were involved in during the past two years. Nevertheless, at the end we add some theoretical notions illuminating this ‘learners’ log’.

RÉSUMÉ  Aujourd’hui le développement de la capacité de réflexion est un aspect important de la formation des enseignants. Pour que les étudiants puissent devenir un jour des professionnels ‘réflexifs’, ils ont besoin d’un guide professionnel: un professeur ‘réflexif’ lui-même. Pour développer leurs capacités de réflexion, les professeurs peuvent certainement se servir de la technique du scénario. C’est ce que nous essayons de démontrer dans cet article. Nous ne donnons pas un exposé scientifique sur les techniques d’écriture de scénarios. Nous racontons tout simplement l’aventure que nous avons vécue ces deux dernières années. Néanmoins, nous ajoutons quelques notions théoriques pour illustrer ce journal d’un ‘apprenti’.

RESUMEN

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG  Reflexion ist heutzutage ein Hauptziel der Lehrerausbildung. Eine wesentliche Voraussetzung dafür, daß Lehramtsstudierende zur beruflichen Reflexion befähigt werden, besteht in der Reflexivität der sie betreuenden Lehrenden. In diesem Beitrag versuchen
Introduction

In 1998 I became involved in the activities of the Association of Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE). This association has a number of Research and Development Centres (RDCs). By joining RDC19, focused on Perspectives on Curricula in Teacher Education, I became involved in the scenario project of this RDC.

Looking back on this project, I realised that RDC19 and the scenario project has served as a powerful learning environment for me. With the preach-as-you-teach adage in mind I will reflect in this ‘learners’ log’ on the learning process that was stimulated by the scenario work.

The participants of RDC 19 of ATEE meet twice a year, once during the annual ATEE conference in three or four working sessions, and another time during an interim meeting at a teacher education college of one of the members of the group. Those interim meetings are scheduled during a weekend with working sessions from Friday afternoon until Sunday noon. My first participation in the activities of the RDC was during the ATEE Conference in Limerick (Ireland, 1998). I remember my being a little bit shy at the beginning but there was a hearty, welcoming atmosphere in the group and I got the impression that good work was done by all participants. So I decided to join the group for the next few years.

All RDC 19 meetings start with an ‘update’: all participants give a short overview of the developments in education in general and teacher education in particular in their respective countries. Since about ten different countries are usually represented at the meeting, this update always takes quite some time but also reveals very interesting ideas and topics to discuss and to reflect upon.

The Start

Some weeks before our interim meeting in Amsterdam (February 2000), we received some homework to prepare for the meeting. We had to study a text on the Internet about ‘Scenario Thinking’ (http://www.gbn.org/scenarios/NEA/NEA.htm). I remember being a little bit overwhelmed by this document. It seemed to me too theoretical and of no importance for the practice of my everyday work as a teacher educator. I also wondered what the group could do with it during a whole weekend. So I went to Amsterdam with a lot of questions about this kind of ‘educational futurology’. But from the introduction of the methodology of scenario writing and onwards we were involved in an amazing adventure of discussing, exchanging ideas about society, education and teacher education.

We started by making an individual inventory of changes in society and their impact on education and teacher education in particular. Common fields of change we identified were, for example, dualism (haves–have nots; employment–unemployment; etc.), environmental worries (ecological themes), multiculturalism, constant change, globalisation, English as the dominant world language, etc.). Concerning teacher education, the fields of change we identified were: the growing impact of teacher
education, changes in student and teacher educator populations, growing influence of politics on educational matters, quality thinking. Every participant gave some examples from their own country to illustrate some of these changes in society and education.

The next step was to identify some dilemmas that were typical for each field of change. Thereafter we had to decide which of these dilemmas could be used as the basic axes for our scenario matrix (see Snoek, 2003).

I remember being very involved in the work we did, especially in the fundamental—sometimes theoretical—discussions about the basic notions we had chosen to form the matrix. I really enjoyed the contributions of some participants about the notions ‘idealism’ and ‘pragmatism’. I seldom would take a book to read about those theoretical notions, but the dialogue with fellow teacher educators was a vivid and very powerful method to learn a lot about the philosophy of education, and also about the history of philosophy and some great philosophers … I was surprised to become so occupied with those topics, since I used to be a very practice-orientated teacher educator. One of the main insights I gained from this working weekend concerned the relationship between our daily work in the classroom and different kind of developments on the macro level. It became clear to me that lots of changes at schools and teacher education colleges indeed were embedded in a kind of actual hegemony of ‘economic’ thinking entering the educational ‘business’.

The Work Went On …

At the ATEE Conference in Barcelona (2000) the group continued its scenario work in a more concrete manner. For this purpose, the participants were divided into four smaller groups. Every group was to write out a small role-play; each of them illustrating one of the four scenarios.

I joined the group focusing on scenario I ‘individualism–idealism’ (ATEE-RDC19, 2003). At the beginning we had great difficulty in coming to a useful description … we weren’t able to produce any coherent role-play. Discussing this difficulty with the other groups, we all realised that we needed some structure and together we finally decided to construct a format guiding the work of each group.

This format (see Snoek, 2003) was the result of a very intensive process of cooperative thinking of all participants. I remember writing a first draft version of a proposal for the format on a sheet of paper and having doubts about presenting it. But after discussing it with the whole group we succeeded in constructing a useful handout for the writing of the scenarios. The work in the small groups continued, and at the end each group had some good, original ideas about a possible scenario.

At this stage we were so enthusiastic about the work done that we wanted to communicate our findings to other people. The proposal to give a group presentation about scenario writing during the next ATEE Conference (Stockholm, 2001) was an inspiring challenge for all participants. We decided to ‘go for it’.

After the Barcelona Conference I felt quite happy about the development in our groupwork: I really enjoyed the experience of a ‘learning community’ of teacher educators and was looking forward to the next steps we still had to take.

During the next interim meeting (London, March 2001) each group completed their scenario and presented it to the other groups. Through evaluative and vivid discussions every scenario finally got its definitive form. It was a very intensive weekend of work and joy in a group becoming more and more enthusiastic about the events to come.
... and Presented to an International Audience of Teacher Educators

At the ATEE Conference in Stockholm (August 2001) our RDC got the opportunity to organise a round table event for all conference participants. It must be said: we really felt a little bit nervous making the last preparations the day before. When presenting our scenario work we started with a presentation of the four role-plays: it seemed to me that most of the people appreciated this quite unusual way of presenting the scenario writing concept (since the general structure of conference is to sit down and listen to a lecture of a specialist. Now something completely different was going on!). A panel of international specialists afterwards presented their first reactions to the presentations followed by a vivid discussion with the audience. Afterwards we really felt happy about the job done, we received very positive reactions and our presentation seemed to be so inspiring for some conference participants that they joined our RDC the following day.

Preparation of a Thematic Issue About Scenario Writing

Our enthusiasm also led to a positive answer when we were asked to prepare a thematic issue about scenario writing for the European Journal of Teacher Education. We immediately started brainstorming about possible articles and each of us went home with new homework.

During the next interim meeting (Antwerp, February 2002) we discussed the first draft versions of these articles and decided to complete the job at the next ATEE Conference (Warsaw, August 2002).

Is Scenario Writing Promoting the Professionalism of a Teacher Educator?

My answer to the above question is a positive one. I want to illustrate this answer by referring to some theoretical notions concerning reflective teaching and professional standards for teacher educators.

Firstly, it seems obvious that a very important characteristic of good educators (including teacher educators) has to be a ‘reflective habitus’. Is scenario writing promoting reflective competencies? We have the experience that it really does. Zeichner and Tabachnik (2001) describe four traditions of reflective teaching: an academic version (a), a social efficiency version (b), a developmentalist version (c) and a social reconstructionist version (d). The academic version stresses reflection upon subject matter. The social efficiency version emphasises the intelligent use of generic teaching strategies suggested by research on teaching. The developmentalist version prioritises teaching that is sensitive to student’s interest, thinking and patterns of developmental growth. The social reconstructionist version stresses reflection about the institutional, social and political contexts of schooling and the assessment of classroom actions for their ability to contribute towards greater equality, justice and humane conditions in schooling and society. In addition to these four traditions, Zeichner (1992) identified a fifth tradition, a generic version of reflection, in which reflection in general is advocated without much specificity about the desired purposes and content of the reflection.

‘Reflecting’ on the past two years of experience of scenario writing it is clear to me that elements of different traditions of reflection were relevant especially the social reconstructionist version. But also the other types of reflection occurred. We will give some illustrations referring to the traditions of reflection: fundamental discussions and
new insights on idealism and pragmatism in education (a); a growing attention to the relations between changes in society and changes in the field of education and especially teacher education (d); a growing preference for educational themes on the macro level (c). This of course is an illustration of a developmentalist vision on the personal growth of the teacher educator himself; changes in student populations lead to new, more adaptive systems of teacher education (c).

Furthermore, Zeichner (1992) also describes some characteristics of the social reconstructionist conception of reflective teaching. One of those is the commitment to reflection as a social practice. Here the intention is to create communities of learning where (prospective) teachers can support and sustain each other’s growth. I think this is one of the most important positive experiences I had in the working process with the scenarios during the past two years: being part of a learning community of teacher educators ... Being part of a group of ‘soul mates’ gives you an enormous feeling and inspiration for the daily job as a teacher educator.

Secondly, another way to answer the question about the promotion of the professionalism of the teacher educator through scenario writing can be found by confronting our experiences to a professional standard for teacher educators. In the Netherlands a project developing such a standard has been going on for several years now (see Velon, 1999 and Koster, 2000).

Some of the competencies listed in this standard for teacher educators have been promoted by the scenario writing experience: The competence to:

- take charge of one’s own professional development;
- communicate one’s pedagogical views to colleagues;
- be dedicated, committed and involved;
- be oriented towards the stimulation of systematic reflection;
- acquire and maintain knowledge from a variety of sources;
- maintain a network of relevant professional contacts, both within and outside the world of education;
- cope with processes within groups of colleagues;
- evaluate with colleagues new developments in the field of education and in the area of teacher education;
- reflect systematically on one’s own pedagogical approach;
- make one’s own learning process explicit to colleagues and students.

Of course, all those kind of ‘reflective’ and other competencies can be promoted through other initiatives and some other interesting possibilities to use scenario writing as an instrument of reflection and learning are illustrated in this issue (Stomp, 2003; Hilton, 2003), but we hope that the story we have told may inspire some of our colleagues to start the exciting experience of scenario writing for themselves.

REFERENCES


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