

Learning to teach in the secondary school: a companion to school experience (5th edn), edited by Susan Capel, Marilyn Leask and Tony Turner, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2009, 544 pp., £23.99 (pbk), ISBN 978 0415 47872 4

Books are never, of course, complete in themselves. There is always a space, and a need, for interpretation: they come to mean something when readers bring the text into some sort of conjunction with their life-worlds. This general truth takes on a particular significance in relation to a book such as *Learning to teach in the secondary school*, since it is, as its second title declares, *A companion to school experience*: what it is, what it *means*, cannot be judged in isolation from the specificities of the intended readership's exploration of the environment of the secondary schools in which they find themselves as student teachers. Thus one question that might legitimately be posed about such a guide is: will it help its readers to make sense of their experiences? And, by and large, the answer is yes.

Now in its fifth and even more compendious edition, *Learning to teach* achieves admirable breadth of coverage. Its main sections address aspects of school experience that must be confronted by every neophyte: teacher identity, classroom observation and classroom management, differentiation, learning and assessment as well as broader policy contexts and longer-term perspectives of professional development. Each main section is broken down into smaller units, each of which leads the reader through the topic, signposting its trajectory from opening objectives to final summary, encouraging active participation through the tasks that are interspersed throughout the text, opening up the field to further investigation in the suggestions for further reading with which each unit concludes. From the start, too, there is an emphasis on complexity and diversity, on the scope of what is involved in teaching and on the vital importance of intellectual engagement. In their introduction, the editors communicate a sense of the agency of the student teacher, of professional learning happening over time, and of the importance of sustained and systematic reflection on practice.

In another, more particular, sense, the current volume is not complete in itself. A companion website is promised – though, regrettably, the website was not live at the time of writing. Confronted with the increasingly marked differences in education and also in teacher education in the countries of the UK, the publisher has decided to focus attention in the printed volume largely on England (with a single unit devoted to Scotland); coverage of the curricular requirements in Wales and of the provision of schooling and teacher education in Northern Ireland will appear on the companion website. The website will also contain PowerPoint summaries of the published units as well as additional units on aspects of policy (such as Every Child Matters) and on research-informed practice. It seems eminently sensible that the publisher should be seeking to exploit the affordances of the internet to provide more comprehensive coverage of the field than would be possible within the covers of an already somewhat unwieldy single volume. What is much less clear, though, is the basis on which individual units have been allocated to the book or to the website. Would it not have been more consistent if all the units dealing with specific instantiations of curricular policy, in England and Scotland as well as in Wales and Northern Ireland, had been placed on the website? This would also have reflected a fairly clear distinction between the longer shelf-life of those units that address general principles – such as Graham Haydon's admirably concise introduction to the concept of the curriculum – and the more ephemeral appeal of those (such as Rob Batho's guide to the Secondary Strategy

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in England) which might more aptly be consigned to the easily-updatable *locus* of the website?

This new edition of *Learning to teach* attempts to address the new dispensation of masters-level initial teacher education. In part, it promises to do so through the website materials and through the publication of a companion volume, *Readings for learning to teach in the secondary school: a companion to m level study* (a companion to a companion!). The *Readings*, like the website, were not

available at the time of writing. I worry slightly, though, whether the very existence of such a companion might be inimical to masters-level work. Isn't it all just a little too packaged, too nanny-ing?

I have a second concern about the publisher's approach, which is that it tends to treat masters-level engagement as a separable sub-category of initial teacher education: so there is, in effect, one volume which is to act as a *vade mecum* to school experience – practice – and a separate volume of readings – theory – which will be the companion to M-level study: the two volumes enact precisely that divide between theory and practice, university and school, that tends (in practice) to foster a view of theory as irrelevant. This concern is further heightened by the editorial decisions that have been made within the current volume. The tasks presented in boxes throughout the units appear in two forms: regular, as it were, and those badged as masters-level tasks. I confess that I was unable to discern a clear or consistent rationale for the distinction (in what sense, for example, would an analysis of pupil talk – a task that appears in the unit on “Ways Pupils Learn” – *not* be masters-level?). More fundamentally, the operation of these two categories encourages the reader to view masters-level work as additional, and by implication peripheral, to the main business of learning to teach.

The issue, though, is not merely the badging of certain tasks. What is at stake here is what it is that should justify the view of initial teacher education as involving masters-level work. An instrumental or institutional answer might be couched in terms of the offer of M-level credits; a more principled answer would be that teachers are public intellectuals and that the formation of teachers should entail the development of qualities of critical engagement with complex issues. Criticality, though, cannot be turned on and off like a tap – and that does rather appear to be the approach taken in *Learning to teach*. In part, this would seem to be a product of the fact that this is only in a very limited sense a new book. Most of the chapters (or units) are slightly updated versions of ones that appeared in the previous edition. It might be legitimate, therefore, to look closely at the units that are entirely new in this edition for evidence of an underlying commitment to masters-level inquiry. The unit on ‘Personalised learning’ (Carrie Winstanley) offers an almost entirely uncritical account of government policy. As the objectives for this unit make plain, the student teacher's role is to understand the policy, recognise good practice and embed personalised learning in their own practice. The single mention of critiques of personalisation is not supported by any reference, nor is there any attempt to open up the policy to scrutiny.

Even more disappointing is the following unit, entitled ‘Brain, Mind and Education: an emerging science of learning’ (Jonathan Sharples). The reader might emerge from this chapter without any inkling that the very terms of the title are subject to vigorous debate. Sharples uses brain and mind as if they were synonyms, while his opening sentence implies that neuroscience and psychology are a single discipline. Most psychologists would be somewhat surprised to find that they are meant to spend

their time peering inside the brain to investigate neuronal activity. A more serious consequence of this approach in relation to education is that the questions that are posed – questions such as ‘Where in the brain is creativity?’ – resolutely ignore any social dimension to psychology or to learning.

The fact that I take issue with Winstanley or Sharples is, of course, precisely the point. Engagement in the intellectual activity of teaching entails entry into a series of debates. It means joining in conversations in which the participants will have sharply differing views, and it means evaluating the warrants for those views. In this dialogic space, a worthy *Companion* might be expected to alert the newcomer to existence of divergent voices and perspectives.

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