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## 13. ‘Tell me what to do?’

**Andrew Slater, Susan Shaw, Andrew Read, Donna Hurford: University of Cumbria**

### **Summary**

The paper discusses and critiques the development of a new Education Studies course for student teachers on a distance learning programme. The course was developed in line with the principles of Assessment for Learning with a strong focus on enabling independent learning. Students’ perceptions of independent learning are reviewed and an alternative strategy, designed to scaffold independent learning with a focus on success criteria, is trialed through the Round Table event. The significance of opportunities for reflection and collaborative engagement with new approaches is discussed.

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### **Keywords:**

Independent learning / Assessment for Learning / success criteria / Professional Standards / distance learners

### **Introduction**

This paper reviews the rationale and processes that led to the development of a new Education Studies course for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students on a distance learning Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course. The expectation that students would be self-informed and critical participants in discussions on current educational policies and approaches is apparent through the nature of the new course. Whilst the course was built upon Assessment for Learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002) principles with a clear focus on independent learning the paper also reveals that not all students embraced this approach. The notion of having unrealistic expectations about students’ readiness for independent learning is discussed and the reasons why some students found independent learning challenging and potentially de-motivating are explored. The paper goes on to present alternative strategies to scaffold student engagement with independent learning and AfL (Assessment for Learning). Learning gained from trialing a strategy to support independent learning at a Round Table event at the ESCalate conference in Carlisle, 2008

is discussed with recommendations for further course-innovations.

### **Rationale for the development of a new Education Studies course**

Following the changes to the Professional Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (TDA, 2007) the implementation of the Primary Strategy (DfES, 2003) in schools and the development of the ‘big picture’ (QCA, 2008) it was felt appropriate to look at the content of the Education Studies module, which is part of a wider Flexible Modular (FM) Distance Learning Programme for student teachers to study for a combined qualification: QTS and PGCE. The FM Programme attracts a wide variety of students who are looking for an opportunity to study for QTS as distance learners. Many of the students manage other commitments such as part-time work and care responsibilities alongside their studies and school placements.

The content was reviewed by Education Studies tutors, but also, importantly, students who had just finished the programme and were now teaching. Their feedback provided the students’ perspective

on how the Education Studies course complemented the whole Programme, a view that subject-based tutors can often miss. Other colleagues including teachers from placement schools, the Programme Leader and the External Examiner were also involved in the critique of the old course and the development of the new version.

Discussion took place regarding key areas that were felt to be important to explore through the nine Base Day, face-to-face sessions e.g. Assessment for Learning, Behaviour Management and Planning. In view of the limited number of face-to-face sessions, alternative pedagogies such as interactive online units and the use of discussion boards were also discussed. It was also the opinion of the planning group that there were fundamental underlying themes that needed to be blended into the seminars; these were reflective practice, inclusion and the Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004) agenda.

The philosophy for the new Education Studies course emerged from these initial discussions. It was apparent that the new course would be based on the tutor team's commitment to enabling the student teachers to 'broaden(ing) responsibility...for their own learning' (Light and Cox, 2001:84) as independent learners and reflective practitioners. Students would be expected to participate in discussions, during Base Day sessions and through on-line forums, about educational issues from informed and critically evaluative perspectives. The tutor would adopt the role of facilitator and would be open and responsive to innovative ideas and pedagogies that could foster more effective independent learning. To achieve these aims the new course would redirect the focus to formative feedback and assessment and accommodate more personalised learning.

Prior to the review of the Education Studies modules on the Flexible Modular Programme the students were required to engage with mainly summative, online, multiple-choice tests related to the old QTS standards as well as submitting two PGCE assignments. The review highlighted the need to reduce the assessment load as students were feeling overwhelmed and there was little evidence of deep engagement with the online, multiple-choice tests. As the students are enrolled on a dual-award course the assessment had originally been designed to rigorously assess their engagement with the TDA's Professional Standards for QTS and to assess their capability to engage with academic assessment at the appropriate PGCE level. However, after consultation with the External Examiner and the Programme Leader it was agreed that the assessment load could be significantly reduced and that school placements would provide sufficient scope to assess the student teachers' capabilities to demonstrate their engagement with the Professional Standards.

In response to student feedback, that indicated that they did not always see the links between the course and school practice, opportunities were sought to establish more overt connections between the course and the students' school-based placements. These connections were highlighted through questions for dialogue between the students and their school-based mentor. The intention was that these discussions would guide the school-based mentors and the student teachers, enabling them both to make more informed reflections and assessments of the student teacher's engagement with the QTS standards in the classroom. This formative method of feedback and was seen as more effective assessment than using online multiple-choice questions and answers. The focus on formative assessment was closely aligned to the notion of Assessment for Learning in the classroom.

Although the students were still required to submit two PGCE assignments for Education Studies, which would count towards the summative assessment for their PGCE award, the new course was developed around these assignments. Sessions and activities related to the assignments were incorporated into the face-to-face sessions and the online discussion boards. It was made clear to the students from the start of the course that we would focus on enabling them to engage with the assignments by providing support for them as independent learners. Personalised Learning was defined by the Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group: ‘Put simply, personalised learning and teaching means taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child’s and young person’s learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate...we must begin by acknowledging that giving every single child the chance to achieve their full potential...is the fulfillment of it’. (Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group, 2006:6). As teacher educators we are no different in wanting our students to progress and achieve their full potential. Through this personalised approach to learning and assessment with our students we can model current classroom pedagogy.

The new course is currently being trialed with students. There is on-going development of the course as new classroom pedagogy and government policies change the goal posts for the students and require them to embrace further new ideas.

### **Links between the new course and current educational policies and approaches**

In an era when the concept of ‘teacher training’ rather than ‘teacher education’ tends to be prioritised there is a danger that some students may approach the training process with unrealistic expectations about the path to be followed. The title of our presentation captures, albeit with some

degree of irony, this phenomenon: for all too easily some students may perceive training to be simply about the achievement of required ‘standards’ by the careful and somewhat mechanical following of tightly focused advice and guidance. Of course, it is important that this claim is not overplayed. The students who opt for the Flexible Modular Distance Learning route to QTS have typically pursued a wide variety of degree routes in their undergraduate studies. The differences between the students are at least as marked as any obvious similarities. These days many degree programmes may be informed by a network of transferable work-related skills. But they are also characterised by huge variations in content and approach. And no two students are the same.

Beyond differences in prior academic achievement there are complex variations in motivation, experience and confidence. The students beginning the Flexible Modular Distance Learning PGCE course are faced with the expectation that they will readily understand that a capacity to work independently will prove beneficial. In practice students may initially vary in their capacity to cope with such work. Prior to beginning the course students may have experienced undergraduate courses offering meaningful opportunities for ‘independent learning’. Yet there can be no easy assumption that all of the students have risen to the challenge presented by such opportunities with equal success.

The changes embedded in the new Education Studies modules represent a response to all of these factors, taking into account the central imperative to cultivate a more obviously ‘personalised’ approach to learning. At the same time the changes are designed to offer a framework which supports the students as they continue to develop as independent learners. The developing approach is underpinned by a determination to take the new emphasis

upon Assessment for Learning seriously, drawing upon the work of the Assessment Reform Group (2002). Research shows that the focus upon Assessment for Learning can help to transform learning experiences in primary and secondary classrooms (Black and William, 1998). But how can progress at school level be sustained? It is arguable that this implies a parallel willingness to innovate in ITE programmes. Certainly it is important that student teachers recognise that the skilled application of the core approaches associated with Assessment for Learning will have a positive and enduring impact upon children's learning.

The new Professional Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (TDA, 2007) are noteworthy in this context. The importance of formative assessment and the provision of constructive feedback are clearly recognised - see, for example, Standards Q12 and Q27. Equally significant is a strong emphasis upon reflection: Standard Q28, for example, focuses upon the need to support and guide learners as they reflect upon their own learning.

The continuing dialogue relating to the primary curriculum should also be highlighted. Currently the QCA's 'big picture' identifies the need to encourage all children to become successful learners - that is, learners 'who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve' (QCA, 2008). In thinking about the organisation of learning the 'big picture' also stresses the need to 'involve learners proactively in their own learning'.

One key question must be raised. How can student teachers genuinely gain the sense of imagination and vision which will encourage the adoption of innovative approaches to learning in their own classroom work? One helpful starting point is surely to embed these approaches within the student teachers' learning experiences whilst accessing the PGCE course. By seeking to support student teachers in their continued

development as confident, independent and constructively reflective learners the revised Education Studies module seeks to promote this change.

### **The new Education Studies course**

One of the key aims for the new course was to move Base Day session content away from tutor-centred input and to provide instead opportunities for students to participate in critical discussions informed by preparatory work. The new course framework (see Fig. 1) places high expectations on students to engage with online units related to specific session content.

At the end of taught sessions, students are directed to the online unit appropriate to the next session. As noted the overview of Base Day sessions addresses themes and approaches, such as reflective and inclusive practice, that run throughout the course. However, this could be critiqued on the basis that, although students can access the overview, the 'current themes and approaches' are arguably often only implicit in sessions. Students are also introduced to tutor-facilitated discussion boards, via Blackboard, where forums continue to explore issues raised in face-to-face sessions.

The online units follow a set model: after explicit reference to QTS standards, a series of questions lead to a range of relevant readings and web-based materials; reference to further reading and links to related units are also provided (see Fig. 2). The new course no longer requires online assessment: we felt that non-assessed study of the online units would allow students to engage at a higher level and therefore come to face-to-face sessions with a deeper understanding of issues. The online units do not provide answers but information and opinion, leaving students to develop their own perspectives and understanding. By dividing the online units into a series of questions we felt that students would be able to make choices about which areas to focus

'Tell me what to do?'

Figure 1

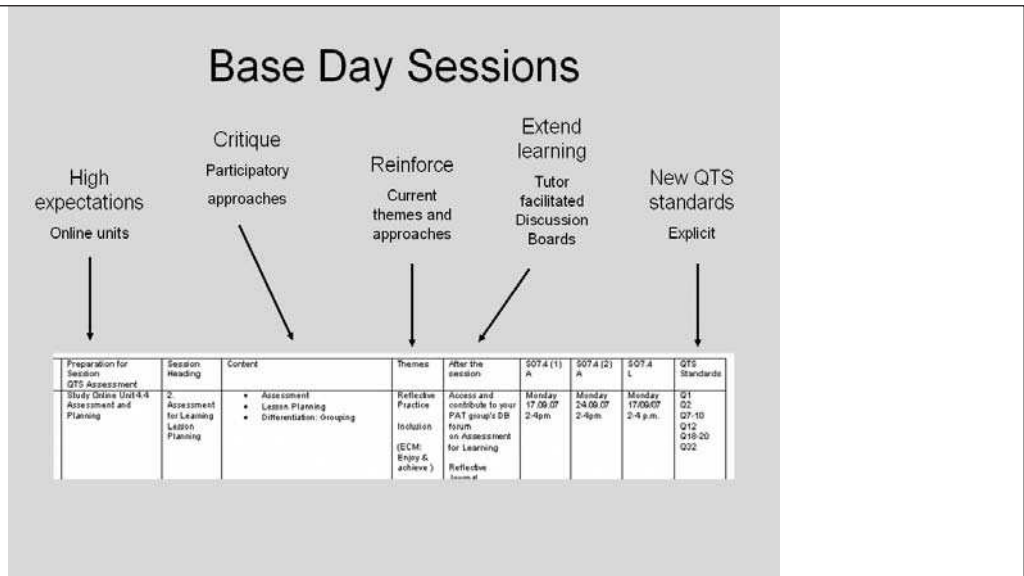


Figure 2

## How is the course integrated?

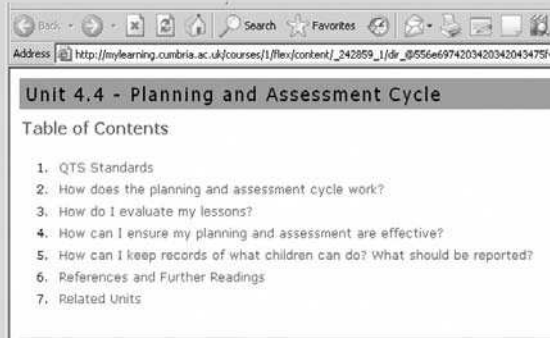


Figure 3

## School Placements

### Application of learning

Questions for weekly tutorials with AT.	To support your preparation for this tutorial you may find it useful to refer to:	Professional Standards for QTS
2. How are you demonstrating inclusive practice through your classroom and school practice?	<b>BB&gt; New Education Studies 2007 Online Units:</b> National Policies and Strategies for Schools 2.1 Inclusion 3.2 Inclusive Practice 4.3 Differentiation 4.5  <b>PGCE assignment PFM 301 (if applicable)</b>	Q1-Q2 Q7-9 Q18-21 Q22 Q25 c and d Q26-28 Q29 Q30-31
3. How have your assessments of children's learning and your lesson evaluations affected your planning and teaching? Pay particular attention to your involvement with Foundation Subjects	<b>BB&gt; New Education Studies 2007 Online Units:</b> Reflective Practice 4.2 Assessment and Planning 4.4 Relevant Core Subject Units  <b>BB&gt; Reflective Practitioner Online Module</b>	Q7-9 Q11-15 Q22-24 Q26-29

Contextualise learning

Integrated Approach

QTS Standards



on, guided by their reflections on their own understanding. Subsequently we have questioned our assumptions about the effectiveness of this question-led, arguably personalised approach (Read and Hurford, 2008).

The placement handbook was designed to again reflect and facilitate this integrated approach. Suggested questions for school-based tutorials offer opportunities to further explore online and taught session content within the school context. Students are directed to online units to prepare for tutorial discussion: this mirrors the online preparation-taught course model described above, and reinforces the links between the course, independent learning and placement. Related QTS standards are also identified (see Fig.3).

Assessment of the course is through collaborative online discussion and individual written submission on a devised case study, consisting of a fictitious student teacher's lesson plan and lesson evaluation sheet, and a fictitious mentor's evaluation of the same lesson (see Fig.4).

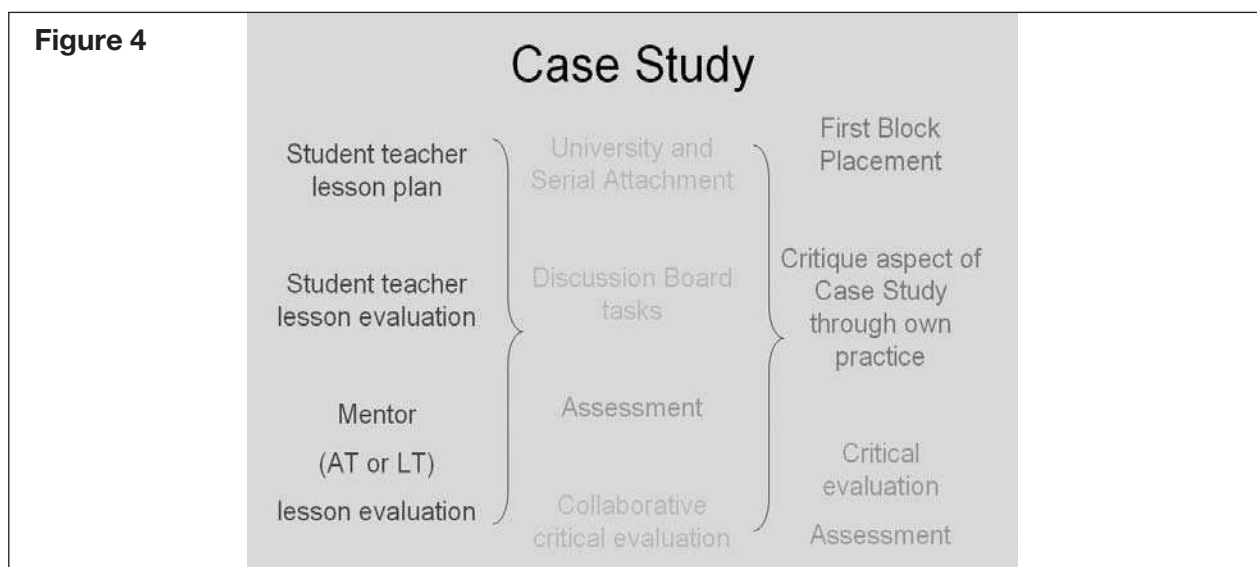
Students are required to draw on their own experience in school in both the collaborative and individual elements, identifying and

discussing parallels and conflicts between the various elements of the case study and their own classroom practice. The case study itself is introduced within a taught session, allowing students to identify key issues in a supportive and, where appropriate, facilitative environment, before developing their thinking through the online discussions. Generic feedback on the students' contributions to these online discussions is provided at the base day following the closing of the discussion forums. This allows students to familiarise themselves with tutor expectations and the language of assessment feedback, and provides opportunities to challenge students to engage with reflective thinking at a higher level by identifying generic examples of unreflective writing (see Fig.5).

This more critical approach to evaluative thinking also links to the QTS standards related to personal professional development (Q7-9), emphasising the integration of face-to-face sessions, independent study, and teaching practice that underpins the new course.

**The role of success criteria**

A mid-course evaluation had indicated that not all of the students were comfortable with the course's expectations for independent



'Tell me what to do?'

Figure 5

### Feedback: Discussion Board tasks

without clarification of reasoning (e.g. "The teacher's use of \_\_\_\_\_ was inclusive... The use of \_\_\_\_\_ helps inclusion... The teacher demonstrates a lack of understanding of this group's needs.")

accept the strategies employed by the teacher as effective; describe what the teacher does without evidence of reflective thinking

learning. Despite having planned and implemented a course that was designed to focus on enabling students to develop as independent learners it was apparent that some students found this approach challenging and potentially de-motivating. Student feedback revealed how some found the online modules overwhelming: '(I) need to know how to prioritise, (it) seems quite daunting at the moment, (it's) difficult to break down' (student feedback, 2007). Comments on the lack of course direction on how to engage with the online modules were re-iterated 'I don't know where to start, what to prioritise' (student feedback, 2007). These comments suggested the students were unfamiliar with having to identify their own learning needs and choose appropriate sources from a selection of online materials. However, it could be argued that the problem arose because they were very unfamiliar with the subject matter and therefore lacked sufficient background knowledge to effectively scaffold their own learning. If this was the case it would suggest that the course had been designed with the unrealistic expectation that students would know how to identify their learning needs, even when studying an unfamiliar subject area.

This would be an example of an unrealistic expectation, one that warranted more careful scaffolding if all learners were to be included, whilst not perpetuating a state of dependency (Light and Cox, 2001:141).

Some students indicated a preference for the guidance and re-assurance offered by deadlines and assessment tasks '(I would) Prefer more direction on where to start, like other subjects with unit assessment deadlines' (student feedback, 2007). Noting this evidence of some students' dependence on external assessment to structure and possibly motivate their learning the tutor team looked for alternative scaffolds. The Bridge Model 'a tool for visioning and planning, helping people to identify where they are, where they want to be, and how to bridge the gap between the two' (VSO, 2005:70) was identified as a possible scaffold. During a Base Day session, focusing on using assignment feedback formatively, the students were presented with generic assignment feedback from their first PGCE Education Studies assignment. They were asked to identify what a student would need to do to move from writing a weaker assignment to a stronger assignment. Their ideas were recorded on a version of the Bridge Model, see Fig 6.



Figure 6

Weaker assignments tended to provide	How could you get from the weaker to the stronger? Identify some effective strategies.			Stronger assignments tended to provide
limited evaluation without clear reference to wider reading	Back up own viewpoints with relevant readings.	Read more critically – Is this viewpoint backed up with evidence?	Reflect on own experience; analyse in light of reading and other people’s experience.	evidence of analysis and reflection with clear reference to wider reading

What was apparent from the students’ engagement with the task was their identification of success criteria alongside the necessary strategies, e.g. ‘(I can) Read more critically’ (see Fig. 6). The students’ involvement with identifying success criteria mirrors one of the core principles of Assessment for Learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002:3) and led the tutor team to review how deepening understanding of success criteria could be integrated into the new course.

Sharing the development of the new Education Studies course with colleagues from other HE institutions through a Round Table activity, at the ESCalate conference in Carlisle, 2008, provided a further collaborative opportunity to share ideas about course development. Involving colleagues, who were unfamiliar with the course, in an activity similar to one being introduced to the students provided something of a test for the tutor team’s emerging thinking about enabling independent learning. Once colleagues had been introduced to the rationale for the changes to the course, the development of the new course’s philosophy and what it looked like in practice they were invited to consider: ‘What could be the success criteria

for student teachers who struggle with independent approaches to learning?’ Colleagues were asked to share their perceptions of students on their courses and how they demonstrated independent learning. Colleagues were asked to imagine ‘I can’ statements that students might share indicating their levels of knowledge, confidence and skills when they described themselves as learners, e.g. ‘I can reflect on my own strengths and weaknesses and apply this to my own practice’, see Fig. 7. Colleagues worked collaboratively on the task and developed eleven different ‘I can’ statements, see Fig. 7.

Once the statements had been developed colleagues were asked to sequence them to show progression from a statement that suggested a preference for dependent learning and limited reflection, see Fig.7, statement 1, to a statement at the other end of the continuum, showing a confident and reflective approach to independent learning, see Fig 7, statement 10. Statements 7a were 7b were ranked equally.

When the activity was discussed it was apparent that colleagues shared similar perceptions of how students demonstrate independent learning. Arranging the

**Figure 7**

10. I can use a new strategy and I can reflect on why I implemented it and how I can implement it in the future.
9. I understand the relevance of advice given and I am able to adapt this to my learning needs.
8. I can initiate discussion with my mentor on using a strategy that is new for me.
- 7a. I can identify the area of my practice that I need to change. (student supports this with critical reference to current practice)
- 7b. I can reflect on my own strengths and weaknesses and apply this to my own practice.
6. I appreciate the value of independence in learning. I can begin to take the initiative.
5. I can listen to advice and respond to the feedback.
4. I know what a critique is.
3. What could I do to make this better?
2. Something wasn't right about that lesson but I'm not sure what it was.
1. That was fine. A really inclusive lesson. I followed my plan.

**What could be the success criteria for student teachers who struggle with independent approaches to learning?**

**The student says**

statements in order provoked discussion but there was sufficient agreement amongst the participants to produce a shared outcome. Clearly this activity was completed through HE tutors' perceptions of students demonstrating independent learning. These perceptions were likely to have been influenced by their tacit understanding of independent learning and may not therefore be the same as students' understanding of the concept. Based on these findings and the students' engagement with the Bridge Model it was decided that a similar activity would be introduced to students to see if it offered them a framework to scaffold their own engagement with independent learning.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The learning illustrated in this paper indicates the importance of having opportunities to reflect and collaborate when developing innovative approaches for teaching and learning. It is probably unsurprising that the first edition of the new Education Studies course identified issues that had not been fully considered, such as the unrealistic expectation that all students would engage with independent learning. Putting Assessment for Learning (AfL) into practice presents challenges for both learners and teachers or tutors. The challenge for teachers is illustrated by James and Pollard's research for the Primary Review that notes how some teachers struggle to move from the 'letter of AfL' (James and Pollard, 2008:12) i.e. Writing the learning objective on the board to the 'spirit of AfL' (James and Pollard, 2008:12) i.e. Embedding the principles of AfL into the lessons. ITE courses need to implement and evaluate strategies that enable student teachers to engage with the challenge presented by AfL. If they are to become confident and informed practitioners of AfL in their own learning and as teachers they need to experience and recognize the value of AfL for all learners. Feedback from a student, engaged in identifying success criteria for a fictitious student wanting to develop their assignment writing skills, suggested that she valued this approach: 'I wish we had done this earlier in the course, this approach will be really helpful'. The challenge ahead is to ensure that this Education Studies course continues to provide student teachers with innovative approaches, designed to enable independent learning and deeper understanding of AfL, both for them as learners and as classroom practitioners.

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