

**“I seem to remember going with quite a thick pile of paper home, and I had no idea what I was doing’: assessment, and the literacy practices of trainee PCET teachers**

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## **Introduction**

For many teachers within the post-compulsory education and training (PCET) sector, teacher training provides a first experience of higher education. For lecturers who are already graduates, teacher training provides an experience of work and study within a genre or academic discipline that can be more or less different to one that has been previously studied. Such teacher training tends to be delivered by the HE sector according to one of two models. The first model, pre-service, is the less wide-spread model of delivery, involving a year of full-time study punctuated by work placement, typically at a further education college. The second model, in-service, is larger, and involves studying part-time towards a teaching qualification whilst in paid employment, normally taking up to two years to complete. In-service programmes are delivered in universities, and in further education colleges on a franchise basis. Almost four-fifths of PCET teacher training provision follows this model.

My research is focussed on a PGCE/CertEd programme that is franchised from a university on the North of England, and delivered to a network of FE colleges in the North of England. The research that this paper rests on was carried out amongst a year one part-time student group at one FE college.

## **Theoretical framework**

This paper rests on two theoretical strands. The first is the concept of learning as *socially situated within communities of practice*: learning and knowing are aspects of broader social relations amongst people in the world and learning, through the shared negotiation of meaning, is located within membership of communities of practice, of people involved in any kind of shared enterprise (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Avis et al 2002; Barton and Tusting 2005). Within a community of practice, the role of

discourse is of paramount importance. Different communities have different ways of talking, different modes of expression, and different shortcuts and jargon. These ways of talking can be found not only in conversation but also written down, in artefacts that embody the community's work. And it is important to consider where these artefacts actually come from: "any community of practice produces abstractions, tools...stories, terms and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form" (Wenger 1998: 59).

Two of the key themes that I am working with in this paper are conspicuous by their absence in a community of practice as originally conceptualised by Lave and Wenger (1991): pedagogy, and assessment, although ways of exploring assessment through communities of practice have been posited (Rømer 2002; Price 2005). In this paper I shall go on to offer some ways of thinking about assessment and pedagogy within communities of practice.

An academic literacies approach to student writing in higher education (Lea and Street 2000; Lillis 2001) can be seen as situated within the broader conceptual framework of *literacy as social practice*, the second key theoretical strand for this paper. Theories of literacy as social practice view literacy events, mediated by texts, and which occur in different domains of life, as forming a venue for purposeful literacy practices which are historically situated and changeable (Barton 1994; Barton and Hamilton 1998). Such literacy events are shaped not only by social institutions but also by power relationships within those institutions. Social approaches to literacy are sometimes grouped together under the umbrella term of the *New Literacy Studies*.

This paper seeks to explore some of the literacy practices that are required and acquired by PGCE/CertEd students within a community of practice of teacher training, specifically relating to assessment. A *skills based approach* to student reading and writing, the kind of approach that views study skills as discrete, transferable and generic, would suggest that students would not have any meaningful difficulty in reading and understanding their assignment brief, and then completing their assignment (Burns and Sinfield 2003; Cottrell 2003; Greetham 2001): prior experience as students or as teachers should equip them with the toolkit of transferable skills and strategies necessary for successful completion of their PGCE/CertEd assignments. The *social practice approach* that is taken here suggests that the ways in which students come to understand what is required by the assessment process is far from straightforward, and provides ways of exploring the process that a skills approach would not consider.

## **The PGCE/CertEd Close-Up: Communities of Practice**

Students are conceptualised as belonging to a number of communities of practice, of which the PGCE/CertEd is just one. These communities include, but are not restricted to, past and present workplace communities (such as current places of work – colleges and HEIs – and former places of work in craft or industrial settings); and past and present communities where participation as a student would have been their main experience of membership (current teacher training programmes, prior academic, vocational or technical programmes of study). The key characteristics of a community of practice can clearly be seen at work inside the PGCE/CertEd (Wenger 1998: 73-85): *mutual engagement* in the work of the teacher training programme, in classrooms, libraries, workplaces; *joint enterprise* in the students' understanding of all being members of the same course irrespective of the fact that they teach in a range of settings; *shared repertoire* in the use of documents, course handbooks, textbooks, ways of talking and other artefacts that are identifiably part of the PGCE/CertEd course.

The PGCE/CertEd is found within a constellation of communities of practice (Wenger 1998: 127) that I characterise as a constellation of communities of teacher training in post compulsory education. This constellation links a number of communities, some of which are *institutional*, located within official and powerful organisations: the PGCE/CertEd course; the university department; the FE college that franchises the course. Other communities are *informal*, located in the activity of their members: student study groups; networks of students who meet and talk about their studies outside of class.

If the PGCE/CertEd is conceptualised as a community of practice, then the participation of the students is, in one sense, problematic: they are indeed participating in this community, but not so that they can become full members of a community of practice of teacher training. In fact, their deliberately peripheral participation within this community is a necessary process in order that they will be allowed fuller access to other communities of practice: those communities that are found in their places of work (colleges, adult education centres, workplace training providers). That is to say, it is necessary for them to engage in the practice of one community in order to continue participation in another (Lemke 1997: 42-3).

## **Assessment and Communities of Practice**

How to make sense of assessment as an activity located within a community of practice of teacher training, which is itself within a broader constellation of communities of

practice in HE where assessment can be found? Assessment, as a form of pedagogic activity, fundamentally opposes one of the paradigms on which communities of practice rest: that there is no pedagogy, no discourse of instruction within a community (Lave and Wenger 1991). In contrast to this, assessment can be seen as an aspect of the paradigmatic trajectory of the peripheral participant as s/he negotiates meaning within the community (Wenger 1998; Rømer 2002): that is to say, 'doing' assessment enables the student to move towards the completion of their work within the teacher training community which in turn impacts on their fuller participation within another community of practice, one of teaching and learning in PCET. The process of assessment becomes a part of the repertoire of the community of practice of teacher training, reified in textbooks, journals, course handbooks and assignment briefs, as well as located within the discourse of the community, perhaps as a discrete Assessment Discourse.

At the same time, there is a 'gate-keeping' aspect to assessment (Lillis 2001) that does not sit comfortably with the rather benign notion of the community of practice as set out by Lave and Wenger: notions of the impact of the (mis)use of power within communities of practice can be found in other places, both in terms of power employed by newcomers (Lea 2005) and in terms of newcomers being denied access to aspects of a community's work (Avis et al 2002). One further conceptual dissonance needs to be addressed: there is, as Lave and Wenger point out, a contrast between learning to know, and learning to display knowledge for evaluation (1991:112). If assessment practice constitutes a reified form of activity within the community, then it can be seen as embodying the "double edge of reification" (Wenger 1998:62): this explains that approach to assessment, of and by students, as part of the course (part of the repertoire of the community) that is described in the "how to" literature as instrumental and mechanistic: the focus on the product of assessment at the expense of the learning process that accompanies it. Or, to put it another way, the moment when one of my students says to me, "do I need this bit for my assignment?"

### **Literacy artefacts for assessment: the assignment brief**

It is an example of the *shared repertoire of artefacts* that are referred to above that forms the close focus of this paper: specifically, those artefacts that are employed as a consequence of the process of assessment within the community: the *assignment briefs*. I am not at the present time going to talk in detail about where those artefacts come from, exactly, or why they are the shape that they are or written the way that they are. What I will focus on is the variety of literacy practices and literacy events that are encountered by students, and why this complexity of activities shows a skills based approach to student writing to be insufficient if we want to understand fully this aspect of

the learning process. I will explore these practices through an in depth exploration of one assignment brief.

Students take four modules during the first year of the course. A full description of each module is given to students in the *course handbook*, and this includes detailed assignment briefs. A key literacy artefact of the course, this is an A4 document of nearly 120 pages, normally given out to students at the start of the academic year. As well as module specifications and *assignment briefs*, the pathway handbook also includes more general, instructional and pedagogical material relating to the course (a section on reflection, a section on plagiarism, a section on Harvard referencing with several examples) and regulatory and administrative information (for example, attendance requirements, a calendar of dates, notes relating to e-resources). In addition, students receive a *module pack* for each module. This is a shorter document, replicating the module specifications and assignment briefs of the course handbook. Different module packs include varying quantities of forms that student have to fill in, ranging from a single A4 cover sheet that is attached to the front of an assignment submission, to an Individual Learning Plan which is completed during the course of the academic year.

For all of the modules in year one of the course, a few common themes can be highlighted concerning the assignment briefs: they are divided into clear sections. A number of typeface styles, including italics, bold type and underlining, are used to highlight key points. Bullet points are used to indicate the discrete sections of the assignment as a whole. A small number of what might be called specialist terms or examples of jargon, are used: "inclusive practice", "differentiation".

Across year one of the course, a quite diverse range of genres of writing (Swales 1990) are required of the students as shown in figure one, below (*pace Stierer 2000:183-186*). This variety of assessment practice is typical of professional HE courses more generally: it blends the theoretical and the practical, valuing both academic work and experience gained from the workplace; and the variety of assessment methods used (essays, portfolios, reflective writings) can be seen as ensuring the validity, reliability, sufficiency and authenticity of the assessment experience as a whole (Klenowski et al 2006; Brown 1999; Young 1999; Taylor 1997; Atkins 1995). These different assessment practices demand in turn the use of a range of other, different literacy artefacts that may include textbooks; academic journals (print and on-line); teaching and learning materials, and other administrative materials, used and/or created by the students, as teachers, in the workplace.

## Figure One: Assessment practice

### Year One Modules

Kinds of writing	Module			
	Module One	Module Two	Three	Module Four
"Critical account"	X			
"Critical review"	X	x		
"Critical report"			x	
Reflections on learning	X	x		x
Reflections on teaching		x		
Teaching/learning materials	X	x		x
"Portfolio of evidence"			x	x
"Seminar paper"				x
"Developmental commentary"				x
ILP		x		

### An assignment brief in detail

To provide an example of an assignment brief as a literacy artefact, I shall provide a brief description of the brief for module one. First and foremost in the assignment brief comes academic writing, which is essentially essayist in form (Lillis 2001). The assignment asks for two essays, each of 1500-2000 words in length, titled "understanding the learning process", and "managing the learning process". The word "essay" is not used, however: the first is described as a "critical account"; the second is described as a "critical review". The requirements for the two essays are set out in considerable detail: the instructions consist of 176 words distributed over nine bullet points which set out what effectively become the different sections of the essays.

It is common practice in the FE sector particularly, and to a lesser extent in other PCET areas, for teaching and training staff to design schemes of work and lesson plans following an institutional template culture, a pattern of work that can be seen as being driven by the increasingly managerialist nature of the PCET workplace, including (amongst other factors) audit and inspection. Put simply, the standardisation of lesson plans and schemes of work has become part of the repertoire of quality assurance within the PCET sector. As part of the assignment, students are asked to design a scheme of work, covering a minimum of five sessions, and two lesson plans. "Appropriate learning materials" for these two sessions should also be designed and produced. All these may in fact come into being in two ways: either they will be created by the student purely for the purposes of the assignment and then used in teaching practice; or they may be

transferred, with or without alterations of some kind, from existing teaching materials currently used in the workplace. Students will be more or less familiar with such planning processes depending on workplace experience and context (for example, an FE college lecturer is likely to have experience in such planning, and for such planning to be evaluated by line managers or inspectors; evening class tutors often work with a lack of such close supervision and with less demands for such documents).

Students are also asked to complete a piece of reflective writing, although no indicative word count is given. Reflective practice is a key component of the PGCE/Cert Ed curriculum. Again, depending on prior educational experience, students will be more or less familiar with this concept. Students with a background in social work or nurse education are likely to have encountered reflective writing before.

For this first module, therefore, students are asked to submit an assignment that draws on a variety of literacy practices: different genres of academic writing (essays, and reflective writing); the creation and/or collation of different literacy artefacts from the workplace (lesson plans, schemes of work, teaching and learning materials).

### **Making sense of the assignment: student meaning making**

Before students use all these literacy artefacts as part of the process of assessment, the requirements of the actual process need to be understood. The assignment briefs are written in fairly straightforward English, using a few – but not too many – examples of jargon, and are written for a student body who are also teachers and trainers, and who themselves, one can assume, have to deliver assessment advice and guidance to their own students. A *skills based approach* might lead us to assume that what the students know, as teachers, can be straightforwardly transferred to their role of being students, thereby allowing the students to help themselves. On closer examination, this does not always turn out to be the case. In what follows, student interviewees are talking specifically about the assignment brief for module one.

Melissa, a year one PGCE student, has previously studied at degree level quite recently, and now works as a lecturer in law:

*It would have been helpful I think for somebody to sit down and say because we were given these sort of module packs, for somebody to actually sit down and maybe this is what I know my students expect from me and I say no we don't teach like that, you take responsibility, but actually ideally having someone sitting and saying to me, right, okay, [first module], what you need to do is this, this, this and this and I'm going to talk you through the pack but I appreciate that actually*

*you know, that's not the best way of learning and you know my students expect me to do that and I don't do it*

Almost despite herself, or despite her own preconceptions of what constitutes the “best way of learning”, Melissa acknowledges the need for formal, pedagogic activity to tell her what to do with the assignment: she needs to be told what to do. Her experiences as a teacher are conflicting with her student role.

Her PGCE/CertEd tutor, Kim, agrees the need for instruction:

*I feel that most years I take on the role of interpreter... I feel that its my responsibility to some point to try to act as that sort of bridge between what they do know, what they need to know to be successful in completing the assignment. So really what I will do is flesh out some of the basic points which I think are quite straightforward and provide quite a good structure for them to work to, but that they don't actually quite understand what it is asking of them.*

Anne is also a student on the course who is new to HE study. She has a background in corporate and personnel training, and now works in the FE sector. For her, the process is much less problematic.

*[the assignment brief] didn't seem too bad, and I think just the way it was laid out in clear sections as well, that was, you know, it seemed a logical order.*

To take her students (including Anne and Melissa) through the assignment requirements, Kim designed a class-based exercise, written up on a handout, which included, amongst other activities, a close reading of the brief: to start, students were asked to use a highlighter pen to indicate those parts of the brief that they thought were of particular significance; and to indicate those parts that they thought might be difficult. Following this, they discussed what they had highlighted in pairs, before feeding back their discussions to the plenary. From her teacher perspective, talking about this exercise, Anne is quite clear as to why she thinks the assignment brief is suitable for the PCGE/CertEd students:

*Jonathan: ...you've highlighted almost all of it with the exception of... things like 'introduces', 'and the'. Almost, almost the whole thing.*

*Anne: It is, but then, with that, that's got to be very, erm, obviously you don't want loads of words, it's got to be very concise and detailed.*



*Jonathan: Why does this need to be so concise?*

*Anne: ...because if there was loads of words there you might turn people off before they've even started.*

Elizabeth, a student with prior HE experience in the sciences, and now working as a trainer in first aid, also found the exercise helpful:

*I did find it [the class exercise] a useful process, because if I'd sat down and read that myself I thought I wouldn't have a clue what was going on...whereas now I can at least pick that now back up and think "well at least I know what they're talking about".*

And, like Anne and Melissa, she has her own conceptions of what the process of assessment should involve:

*I don't, I don't think, there shouldn't be so much put in bullet points, why [not] just put in an overview? Because they're more or less saying this is how you're going to do it, and this is how we want to do it, to see it done, to see in it. Aren't we supposed to be being a bit more ... sort of individuality here, and actually looking at what the individual's going to say about things?*

How to begin an explanation of the ways in which these three PGCE/CertEd students, who are also teachers, approach the assignment brief? A *study skills* approach would assume that Melissa and Elizabeth would find the process quite uncomplicated. In fact, Melissa, despite being only too aware of what constitutes good practice in teaching and learning, still wants her own tutor to tell her what to do, despite hoping that her own students would take more responsibility for the process. Elizabeth similarly valued Kim's formal input: at the same time, she is questioning the assignment process, and sees her responses to it as being shaped or guided in ways that she wasn't expecting ("I mean, it's almost telling you what to do"). Meanwhile, Anne, new to HE, understood and valued the way that the brief was presented, and expressed no concerns relating to her understanding of the task.

### **Making sense of the assignment: pedagogic activity**

Apparently, the students' backgrounds do make some sort of difference, then. Paul is the course leader for the PGCE/CertEd at the franchising university:

*Well, I think that right at the beginning you've got to face the fact that for the vast majority of students they're entering a new discipline. They're actually entering undergraduate level study...in a completely new discipline...so it's inevitable that even the most able students are going to feel disorientated at the beginning of the course.*

And Kim again:

*I think they don't have the background knowledge, the underpinning knowledge to be able to make sense of what the assignment is asking of them.*

This lack of background knowledge is what leads Kim to take on her self-appointed role as an "interpreter" of the assignment brief. She shares Paul's perspective: that the assignment brief – indeed, the module pack as a whole – is almost bound to cause some confusion because by definition it will allude to issues, words and concepts that the students may not yet have studied and gained an understanding of. The students are positioned by both Kim and Paul as being in deficit, as lacking some sort of knowledge necessary for a full understanding of the brief. This deficit will be remedied through pedagogic activity.

Kim's response, as we have seen, is to use a teaching and learning activity to problematise the assignment brief, to work out its meaning through structured class activity. Paul shares this approach:

*Myself and many other people actually run the sessions within the Cert Ed where a group activity is to look at the module assignment or the module specification or now the module pack or quite likely all of those things... "Do you understand what's in the module, what anxieties do we have, how does it relate to our needs, is this the sort of thing we want to be learning...?"*

So the assignment brief is more than 'just' an assignment brief: it can be conceptualised as operating in two distinct modes that impact on its use and purpose:

- I. as a literacy artefact that reifies aspects of the practice of the PGCE/CertEd community. In this mode, the process of interpreting the assignment brief is an activity by which students participate in the work of the community. They learn both something about the practice of the PGCE/CertEd community and also something about some of the other communities within the constellation of which the PGCE/CertEd community is a member: that is to say, they learn about teaching in the PCET sector;

- II. as a literacy artefact that reifies a milestone along the community's paradigmatic trajectory, which has to be negotiated by the student (Wenger 1998: 156). In this mode, the assignment brief encapsulates a particular activity (assessment), the successful negotiation of which will demonstrate the student's fuller competence and experience in the practice of the community (Wenger 1998: 216): that is to say, they learn about what to do for the assignment, about how to "be students" for the purposes of accreditation.

The exercise that Kim used with her students to work through the requirements of the assignment brief has already been referred to. And they necessarily involve a range of literacy practices (Barton and Hamilton 1998):

- I. there is the group of activities that surrounds the assignment brief as it appears in the official module documentation. This includes, but is not necessarily restricted to, talk around the text in the form of tutor-led dialogue where exposition is employed as a teaching strategy by Kim, to explain the assignment brief to the students, followed by a question and answer session, and peer-led workshop activities designed to allow discussion about and around the assignment. In addition, many students will talk about and around the text with Kim during one-to-one tutorials.
- II. there are those literacy activities where the text around which talk takes place is different. Rather than talking around the assignment brief, talk takes place around a newly-reified artefact: the handout designed by Kim in order to explain or perhaps clarify the framework for the assignment.
- III. related to both of these is a third distinct literacy practice where students do one or perhaps both of the following: firstly, they create texts in order to help them in their meaning making processes (that is to say, by making notes during any one or all of the talking-around-the-text events already described); secondly, they annotate texts as an aid to meaning making, typically, by writing in the margins of the pathway handbook, or by highlighting key words or circling key words or writing marginal notes and drawing arrows or lines to key words or phrases.

Such pedagogic strategies are widespread: a session or two spent "going through the assignment" is a common feature of HE programmes. And they are invariably seen as an aspect of best practice, offering advice and guidance to students as they prepare for assessment. Seen through the two theoretical strands of *situated learning* and *literacy as social practice*, however, they become more problematic: such strategies rest on literacy artefacts and literacy practices. The way in which students make sense of the requirements of the assignment necessarily involves using literacy, and also involves the

creation of new literacy artefacts by both students and tutor. And this all happens before, or perhaps alongside, the actual process of assessment itself.

### **Artefacts within a community of practice**

Within the PGCE/CertEd, a great variety of artefacts will be found, and many of them will be literacy artefacts. Some of them are produced outside the PGCE/CertEd community, but co-opted for use within it: text books, for example. Others are created within the PGCE/CertEd community, by different members of that community, and used by different members in different ways: course handbooks; class handouts; Individual Learning Plans. The assignment brief, found within the course handbook and replicated within the module pack, is just one of these. At this stage, it is important to note that such artefacts may be more or less transparent. This transparency is not necessarily an intrinsic feature of the artefacts themselves: it is linked to the cultural processes that surround the artefacts. Transparency “refers to the way in which using artefacts and understanding their significance interact to become one learning process” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 102-3). The transparency (or opacity) of an artefact will impact directly on who can make use of it, and how.

There are some emerging issues relating to the way that the assignment brief, as literacy artefact, is written, therefore, specifically in terms of the way in which the reader is constructed (Barton 1994: 60), which impact on the transparency of the brief. The *student as reader* appears to have the possibility of occupying a number of positions:

- I. as a student reader who understands what the assignment brief is asking them to do even though they have not done the module yet (the assignment brief is not yet fully transparent but will become so as the student progresses with their studies and thereby engages more fully within the community of practice);
- II. as a student reader who does not understand what the assignment brief is asking them to do because it has been written in a discursive style that is unfamiliar and/or because they have not done the module yet (as above, the assignment brief is not yet fully transparent but will become so as the student progresses with their studies and thereby engages more fully within the community);
- III. as a student reader who does not understand what the assignment brief is asking them to do because it has been written as an artefact that requires a pedagogic accompaniment as part of a process of meaning making (the assignment brief is not intended to be transparent and the student will have to rely on interpretation, through the pedagogic activity of the tutor, for the transparency that will allow meaning making).

These three positions have important consequences for how the community of practice is conceptualised. Positions I and II rest on an uncritical acceptance of Wenger's (1998) model of a community of practice: in this context, by assuming an unproblematic link between increasing participation, the transparency of artefacts, and the use of those artefacts in the negotiation of meaning within the community. The unfamiliarity of the discursive style of the artefact can be negotiated by the student as they travel along a trajectory of fuller participation.

Position III is more difficult, and foregrounds two issues that Wenger's work leaves relatively untouched: pedagogy, and power. According to this position, the student's meaning making is reliant on some pedagogic activity that must be mediated by the tutor. To put it another way, there is an imbalance of power surrounding the literacy practices that enfold the assignment brief (Barton and Hamilton 2005); the only way that the student can make sense of the assignment brief is through successful participation in a some kind of pedagogic activity: some kind of instruction. And it is important to note that this power imbalance operates irrespective of whether or not such an imbalance was a conscious part of the design of the artefact at the time of its reification.

### **Conclusion: a complexity of literacy practices**

Giving students a detailed assignment brief may look like a straightforward and unproblematic activity. It is not. This exploration of the assignment brief for just one module from the PGCE/CertEd, through the theoretical perspectives of Communities of Practice and the New Literacy Studies, has revealed a complex assembly of literacy practices surrounding just the activity of interpreting the assignment brief: how many other literacy practices and artefacts will be needed to actually complete this one assignment, and what are the factors that complicate student use or access to these? Will these literacy practices help students with their future assignments, or will new ones be encountered during their studies?

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