

## **A Learning Group: A view from the inside**

Rich Harvey & Tom Tattersall

*Learners' voices are conspicuously absent from much of the educational literature I spend so much of my time reading. I always find this odd - and uncomfortably revealing.*

*I am therefore very grateful to Rich and Tom for sharing their experiences of being members of our teacher development group this year. Like them, I have found membership of this group to be enormously rewarding, both personally and professionally. (Ed.)*

### **Rich writes:**

There are so many ways in which the PGCert course has been a positive and effective learning experience; it isn't possible to explain every way in which this has been achieved within the space available here. It is also difficult not to get drawn into merely comparing the PGCert with past educational experiences which were inferior in comparison, as to make the case would again take too long. In absence of the space needed to make such comparisons, it seems reasonable to focus on the most important factor in making the PGCert a truly unique experience, which for me was the creation of a safe, reflective and analytical environment where shared experience opened doors to understanding ourselves, our peers, our students and the educational world as a whole.

The extent to which the group was guided into critically examining ourselves as practitioners in the subject at hand was unparalleled by any other course I have experienced, not just in terms of the speed at which we reached this point, but in the depth of understanding and development that was demonstrated by everyone in the group. This level of analysis and discourse got deeper with each session, and we achieved this as a result of the environment, in which the group shared their thoughts, feelings and experiences with genuine freedom and diversity.

Our actions, thoughts and reflections on everything from our perceptions of what teaching and learning was all about, through to theoretical concepts and our own teaching experience, were deconstructed using a variety of activities which challenged the group to make pedagogic models and research personally relevant to ourselves and our practice, and to be able to express this to the group. The aim of becoming good reflective practitioners guided the whole course, and this outcome remained visible throughout the year. The learning environment ensured we were given the time and freedom to explore the value of reflective processes, and find ways to utilise them which were personally meaningful and effective to us as individuals.

The course itself was the most clearly laid out, stimulating and deeply analytical educational process I have been a part of. It was both challenging and rewarding, and resulted in major conceptual changes, and great development in my understanding of teaching and learning. I can also say unequivocally that this is the case for every other student in the class, and the fact that I can make such a claim is perhaps the greatest example of how the learning environment has fostered such deep understandings. I know that my peers have experienced these changes because I have heard them say so themselves many times, in respect to different theories, concepts and experiences. I have had many conversations confirming this, and have read many pieces of written work which do the same. Although I started this particular reflection looking to avoid comparisons with other courses, I have never been so aware of the learning that has occurred within a group I have been a part of, in so much detail, as I now am of both myself and my peers from the PGCert.

**Tom writes:**

When I signed up to the PGCert in 2010 I expected to sit through loads of lectures about lesson plans, health and safety, legal procedure and other ‘interesting’ subjects. What I actually found on attending the first few sessions was that I was going to be learning in a way that I had never experienced before!

Admittedly, there actually was a mandatory session on health and safety that we had to get through (!), but beyond this I experienced a whole world of interesting topics that had never penetrated my idea of being a teacher until then.

One in particular that stuck with me was the spiral curriculum theory, which centres around the principle of revisiting topics at regular intervals and, each time, getting deeper into the subject. It strikes me that almost everywhere we look in education you can see this theory in action. This in itself is nothing amazing, but where the PGCert really comes into its own is that it makes you recognise things that are already happening in the world around you, and once these things have been isolated they are yours to shape into your own and improve upon.

I think the PGCert has improved my teaching (among many other aspects of myself) not just because of the subjects that were covered but because of the people I met. Our course leader is by far the best teacher I have ever had (fitting as he is teaching how to teach!) and the dynamic between myself and my peers was also second to none I had experienced before. There is a concept in teaching which explores being a 'facilitator' as opposed to an 'instructor' or vice versa. The model for most of our PGCert lessons was to have some information on the subject we were covering imparted to us and then to, in the form of a class discussion, unpack that information. You could think of these two different sections as being 'instructor focused' then 'facilitator focused' with regards to the session leader. I can't talk for the rest of my classmates but for me one of the biggest things I've taken from the PGCert is the impact of being a 'facilitator' and more than that, the fact that, actually, it's OK for us as teachers to stand back and let the class figure things out for themselves via discussion. When I plan lessons now, I always try to fit in time to let the student figure things out for themselves... and it's made my lessons all the better for it!

Basically, I signed up for the PGCert to get a piece of paper to say that I could teach but what I got was not only a great experience but also the knowledge and skills to become a great teacher.

**Rich and Tom** are both musicians and teachers, based in London and on the South Coast.

Rich is also co-founder of EPP Education, offering training and support to students making the transition from school to university, and from university to employment.