<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pupil experience: A hands-on approach to micro-teaching</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>R. V. Skuja</td>
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R. V. Skuja

ABSTRACT

In the conventional approach to micro-teaching, student teachers practise their teaching techniques before a group of their peers. This teaching environment is manifestly artificial and provides few of the challenges of the real-world classroom.

As an alternative to micro-teaching, a Pupil Experience approach was conceived in which students would visit schools weekly to tutor small groups of remedial English language pupils. It was envisioned that such direct pupil contact would provide ‘hands-on’ experience with the realities of the classroom, while not burdening the students with the challenges of full class management.

As currently implemented, CS01 students participate in Pupil Experience during the first term of coursework. Students go out to three schools on Saturday mornings and work in fours

Keywords: Teacher education, pre-service, microteaching.

In teacher training there has always been a painful gap between the theory of coursework and the subsequent practice of the classroom. In no subject area has this dichotomy been more evident than in English language teaching, which tends to be focussed around cognitive processes and strategies rather than content information. English language teaching therefore requires a special degree of awareness of pupil learning needs as well as highly developed presentation skills. Such teaching competence, while informed by theory, can only be developed through the trial-and-error of extended classroom experience.

Ideally, coursework would be paralleled by equal time in the school classroom, during which time the student could offset the theoretical concepts that he is learning against the practical realities that he is encountering with pupils. This is unfortunately not feasible for a number of reasons related to the size of the student intake, the limited number of staff available for supervision, and the reluctance of schools to accept large numbers of inexperienced student teachers.

As a way of helping students to relate theory to practice, a micro-teaching component has been included in the coursework. However, microteaching has had obvious shortcomings and has not proved very effective in preparing students for the challenges which they will subsequently encounter during Teaching Practice.

Shortcomings of Conventional Micro-Teaching

In micro-teaching, students practice giving segments of lessons to a group of their peers. This becomes, in effect, an exercise in play-acting, giving artificial lessons to an artificial audience. In response to an evaluation questionnaire, one student summed it up succinctly:

“Micro-teaching is unrealistic, contrived, uncomfortable, artificial, corny.”
A small group of peers presents few of the challenges which a student will subsequently encounter with real pupils. As intelligent adults, they can second-guess what the student teacher is trying to accomplish, and can interpret and allow for his mistakes. From the standpoint of the 'teacher', the focus tends to be on 'acting' in the form of teacher-talk rather than meaningful interaction with the 'pupils'. In any case, such interactive sessions would lack reality due to the unrealistically cooperative and intelligent response of the 'pupils', i.e., without the problems normally associated with pupil understanding or their reluctance to respond.

Since there is no need to cope with the limitations of real secondary level pupils, lesson planning for micro-teaching tends to be artificial and need incorporate few strategies for handling specific pupil or class learning needs. The net result is a bland environment that presents no real challenges - an environment which does not prepare students to cope with the unexpected in the classroom, does not train them to 'think on their feet', and provides little opportunity for reflection on the pros and cons of their teaching techniques.

The consequence of insufficient 'hands-on' experience during coursework comes to light later in the initial weeks of Teaching Practice, at which time student teachers go through a difficult transition period whilst coming to grips with the realities of the secondary school situation - large classes of varying levels of ability, attentiveness, and self-discipline. Particular concerns surface when dealing with pupils for whom English is still a real problem, and in tailoring and simplifying their own language to suit the communicative level of such pupils. In these situations, a not uncommon coping strategy is to ignore the pupil-centered approach taught in coursework and to instead revert to their previous impressions of the teacher’s role, i.e. teacher-talk, question-and-answer interaction, and behaviour control.

Considerable supervisory guidance is required to get them through this phase and back onto a pupil-centered approach. Until they have ‘walked through’ a unit themselves, they find great difficulty in understanding the concept of 'units of work' in language teaching, and either fall back on the textbook organization or become too focussed on the content of the unit theme rather than the communication aspects of language. As noted above, this is a special problem in language teaching, where cognitive processes and strategies are being taught rather than content; and where the four skill areas of language (listening, speaking, reading, writing) must be integrated rather than arranged in the discrete lessons still shown on far too many school timetables and schemes of work.

Given the problem of overcoming the artificial aspects of micro-teaching, and in order to optimise coursework learning for our student teachers, the concept of Pupil Experience presented itself as a possible solution.

The Pupil Experience Concept

Since all schools have small remedial classes, the possibility was envisioned of sending students out to such schools on a regular basis to teach these remedial groups. It was felt that such preliminary teaching practice would be beneficial to the schools and to the students, and would not interfere with the basic school schedule. The quality of the lessons was not seen as being of paramount importance; pupils would benefit from getting a lot of individual attention and student teachers would have close contact with real pupils. The experience would give students a degree of 'hands-on' experience against which to relate their coursework, as well as a 'preview of coming attractions' as regards the kinds of problems which they would later encounter during Teaching Practice. The need to plan lessons to meet real teaching situations would mean that during the presentation, inadequacies would become apparent and lead to more perceptive planning the next time. This is a fundamental component missing in 'practice planning' during coursework.

Apart from the 'hands-on' practice aspect, there is another advantage in dealing with small groups. When students have to cope with full classes they do not have the time to properly gauge the learning problems and attitudes of pupils in difficulty. Close observation of such pupils was considered one of the main strengths of PE for it meant that students would have some prior experience and knowledge to draw upon during TP.

In summary, the various specific aims of Pupil Experience were seen to be:

- to develop students’ personal communication skills
to develop an awareness of pupil interests and language needs
- to develop an awareness of the realities and pitfalls in planning and presenting lessons and units of work
- to gain experience in utilizing common teaching techniques within lessons, in sequencing lesson tasks, in maintaining lesson focus throughout, and in managing time within the constraints of pupil attention spans
- to introduce students to reflective techniques, including structured observation and data collection accompanied by analysis, and frequent discussion of perceptions and problems

It was felt that all of the foregoing could be usefully related to the theory taught in coursework, and would lay a practical initial foundation for facing the subsequent challenges of Teaching Practice.

Implementation

In Pupil Experience, which lasts for a period of eight weeks during the first term of coursework, students go out to three schools on Saturday mornings and work in fours with groups of 6 - 8 remedial pupils. They are accompanied by an IE supervisor (one per school) who stays with them throughout the teaching sessions and participates in post-conference discussions.

The first session is dedicated to diagnosing pupil language needs, after which the students return to IE, choose a theme, and begin planning the unit they will teach over the subsequent 7 weeks. The groups of four are divided into two pairs. A pair plans and teaches one week, and in the alternate week observes the other pair. This cycle of pre-planning, teaching, observing, and post-conferencing continues throughout the term. Students are asked to keep notes on one particular student, which they will later write up into a case study. On a weekly basis, students reflect upon the lesson which was given and write up their observations into a Journal, which is given to the supervisor to review and respond to.

One of the more important features of Pupil Experience is that it provides an initial exposure to the practice of reflection, in which a student teacher assesses the effectiveness of his teaching technique in terms of pupil attentiveness and the degree of learning carried out, and devises improvements or adaptations to these techniques to suit changing classroom environments. Reflection is enhanced by the continuing feedback received from the other members of the teaching group, as well as post-conferencing with the supervisor. Once successfully introduced in Pupil Experience and reinforced during the subsequent Teaching Practice, the practice of reflection will provide a basis for continued personal growth throughout the teacher's professional career.

At the end of Pupil Experience, a seminar is held in which all students share their experiences with each other and with other language students who did not participate in PE. The observations made during the seminar provide insights useful later for TP.

A guiding principle in the development of Pupil Experience has been the concept of action research which has been recognized as a desirable form of self-improvement for (experienced) teachers. Such research involves the observation and collection of data and, arising out of the analysis of such data, the development of alternative teaching strategies to effect improvement in lesson effectiveness. Since the student teachers were insufficiently experienced to carry out such action research on their own, a Workbook was provided to scaffold and structure their learning experience. Elements of reflection and discussion were built into the Workbook to consolidate the lessons learned from PE; and these elements were structured in such a manner as to concentrate the focus of learning on the most important areas. These points of focus (see following page) were identified from common past problems in Teaching Practice, and from misconceptions related either to pupil learning needs or to difficulties encountered in the use of various techniques or classroom activities. The Workbook consisted of eight lessons, each one containing instructions for how the pair should carry out a particular session. Also included was a lesson form to be completed by the teaching pair before each lesson, one or two worksheets for the observing pair to fill in, and a journal with focused questions for each week.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>LESSON</th>
<th>PUPILS</th>
<th>TEACHING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>DIAGNOSIS</td>
<td>Learning attitudes, preferences, problems in listening, speaking, reading and writing.</td>
<td>Diagnostic techniques and ways to use them successfully with pupils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>LISTENING</td>
<td>Attitude to real world listening. Some reasons for miscomprehension. Pupil evaluation of two common approaches.</td>
<td>Troublespots: contextualisation for listening, and giving instructions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>READING</td>
<td>Reasons for wrong answers to questions. What pupils find easy and difficult in reading.</td>
<td>Implementing a pre-reading activity. Ways of encouraging and organising sharing of ideas during post-reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SPEAKING</td>
<td>Establishing rapport with pupils and encouraging pupils to talk. How pairs work together on a task.</td>
<td>How to organise and plan for effective group presentations. Effective teacher facilitation of pupil oral interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>WRITING</td>
<td>What pupils find easy and difficult in writing. Pupil ideas and strategies for pre-writing.</td>
<td>Contextualising writing tasks and techniques to use in brainstorming and first draft preparation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>VOCABULARY</td>
<td>Pupil problems with words. Pupil views on useful and not-so-useful teaching and learning techniques.</td>
<td>Trial ing four approaches to vocabulary teaching. Troublespots: transitions between activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>GRAMMAR</td>
<td>Slips versus mistakes in pupil work. Which grammatical errors are pupils able to recognise and correct?</td>
<td>Contextualising and eliciting grammatical items naturally. Techniques for editing the first draft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>SUMMING UP</td>
<td>Pupil feedback and perceptions of the past 7 weeks. Case Study preparation.</td>
<td>Evaluation of the unit. Summary of how different techniques and approaches worked in lessons.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Evolution of Pupil Experience**

Pupil Experience was first implemented in 1988 for all language methodology students. All of them were asked to go out in pairs and make contact with a Principal of their choice in order to locate a small group of approximately four remedial students to work with once a week during coursework. PE was scheduled to take place on Wednesday afternoons during both Term 1 and 2, and a workbook similar in focus and tasks to the diagram above was provided for all students. Students were required to complete a journal entry for every week of PE, and write up a case study on two of the four pupils that they had been working with.

Subsequent to this first round of Pupil Experience, feedback on student attitudes towards PE was elicited via discussions with class representatives and a questionnaire, which was completed by 135 out of the 136 students involved in PE.

The vast majority of the students (110 out of 135), whilst making suggestions for ways of improving PE, were positive in their reactions to the concept. Of those in favour, the comments of 42 were general in nature: 15 found PE "useful"; 10 found it "helpful"; 7 found it an "enjoyable" experience; 5 felt that they had "learnt a lot"; and 5 found PE to be a generally "good idea". The remaining 68 had something specific to say about the benefits of PE: 29 appreciated the training and experience gained and the general exposure to teaching and learning problems; 17 felt they had gained improved insights into pupil learning needs; 10 found PE to be "more realistic" than micro-teaching; 6 stressed that they had learned
more about teaching techniques; and 6 felt that PE had helped to build up their confidence.

Some problems raised in connection with PE included the following:

- Term 2 was found to be relatively unsuitable for remedial classes since some schools began pre-exam testing during this period.
- For Secondary 4 students, examination considerations were an overriding concern, and student teachers found it difficult to resist their demands for intensive examination tutoring.
- A high percentage of schools lacked space for students to work in with remedial pupils, and many were forced to find corners in the canteen or even in corridors to conduct their sessions.
- Wednesday afternoons, which were used for PE, conflicted to some extent with IE meetings and other activities.
- There was a degree of pupil absenteeism in some schools, and student teachers were at a loss as to how to deal with this problem.
- The observing partner, without supervisory guidance, was not always able to provide meaningful feedback to his partner on the lesson observed.

Various changes were made to PE for 1989 to ameliorate these problems. The time slot was shifted to Saturday mornings to resolve the space problem in schools (each group now has a free classroom to work in) as well as the conflicts with IE activities. Sessions were cut back to Term 1 only so as not to interfere with school testing, and at the same time to lighten the relatively heavy load of Term 2 when first assignments were due for coursework. All PE activities were focussed on three schools who had expressed specific interest in getting help with remedial pupils: the schools either chose or asked for volunteer pupils to come to the remedial session each Saturday. In order to improve post-conferencing as well as monitor unexpected events or absenteeism of pupils, an IE lecturer went out every Saturday to each school. The lecturers sat in on lessons and were thus able to provide more specific feedback to student teachers during the post-conferencing session.

**Evaluation of Pupil Experience**

After two years of experience with Pupil Experience, we have become fairly clear in our understanding of its effectiveness, from the standpoint of the schools and pupils involved, the students, and the IE staff.

The three schools utilized for this purpose were very positive in their views of PE, since they have pupils with language problems and are pleased to have IE students provide a helping hand in this area. The students and IE supervisors have been regular in their attendance every Saturday, giving the schools confidence that something useful was being accomplished, i.e. there was an obvious element of quality control associated with the activity. The schools have all welcomed us back for another year, which speaks well for PE.

After some period of initial doubts, the pupils involved started giving positive feedback to their teachers and Principal as regards the enjoyable experience they were having with PE.

Initially, some students expressed concern that they did not feel they could be expected to make a difference in their pupils' language capabilities in just eight single lessons spread over a whole term. Another concern was the fact that teaching in such small groups would do little to promote the learning of class management skills. Some students could not initially see the point of observation exercises and the analysis of pupil learning styles.

By the end of PE, however, the students felt a sense of achievement over the fact that they had undeniably provided their pupils with a unique learning experience. After coming from large (demotivated) classes, these pupils for eight individualized sessions had the complete attention of four adults in a small-group situation. The growing sense of rapport with the pupils made our students aware of the importance of this aspect of teaching, i.e. establishing rapport - an experience which would later stand them in good stead in Teaching Practice.

Of the 69 students who participated in PE in 1989, 58 or 84% completed a Pupil Experience Feedback questionnaire. All of these students were unanimous in that they preferred Pupil Experience to micro-teaching.

With regard to the students' reasons for preferring Pupil Experience over micro-teaching, a
total of 111 keywords and phrases were extracted from the questionnaire. These fell into the broad categories noted below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PE is more realistic than microteaching</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE permits closer interaction with real pupils</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE improves teaching skills</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE provides preparation for Teaching Practice</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE develops skills in classroom management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other miscellaneous comments/ reasons</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More details of the gist of these keywords and phrases are as outlined below:

**PE is more realistic than micro-teaching**

Essentially all of the students had something to say about the fact that PE is more realistic than micro-teaching. Some of the 57 comments made were as follows:

"It’s more realistic picture of classroom teaching and there is more motivation to prepare lessons properly."

"PE creates an environment which makes the novice teacher feel that she is really teaching a class of students."

"You get to teach to a group of students who have real problems with their language skills."

"PE ... is a little piece of the reality ‘out there’. It also tells a lot about theory and practice and illusions about self."

"The situation seems more real than micro-teaching. Theory and practice are two different things."

"I have tried both and I learnt a great deal more from PE - more importantly, theory went into practice and I was able to identify my teaching faults and mistakes as well as the pluses that work. PE is invaluable!"

"It provided a ‘real-life’ situation for us - real people, with real problems and real successes at the end of the unit."

"Gives us a better idea of what REAL school situations will be like."

"It gives real exposure to teaching experience, to real-life problems actually faced by teachers."

"I feel that micro-teaching is very artificial and we don’t really learn very much. In PE, however, we actually get first-hand knowledge about the students, the teachers and the schools."

**PE permits closer interaction with real pupils**

As to the more specific benefits of PE when compared to micro-teaching, the preponderance of comments related to attaining a better understanding of the problems of pupils. A few of the 24 observations made were as follows:

"You deal with real pupils with real problems, i.e., motivation, learning problems, discipline."

"It was good exposure to kids with poor language ability because we can then know what likely problems they have with English."

"It was somewhat real - we had to deal with uncomfortable silences, stutterings and stammerings, way-out answers."

"During planning, we had to tailor our materials to the needs of real students - not a ‘supposed’ level."

**PE improves teaching skills**

After interaction with pupils, the second principal benefit to be derived from PE was related to improvement of teaching skills in a realistic environment. Three of the 10 comments made were as follows:

"We actually had an opportunity to plan authentic lessons, carry them out, and find if they’d be successful or not."

"She (the teacher) is also able to elicit answers from students which can be used to know them as well as the need to modify new teaching to suit the level of the students."

"We also get to know real students’ response to the methods of teaching that we use and we are made more aware of which of the methods used are effective and which are not."

As noted, a total of 6 comments related to the fact that PE provided good preparation for
Teaching Practice, and 3 comments related to the fact that PE helps to develop skills in classroom management. A total of 11 other miscellaneous observations included the following views on PE:

- interesting, motivating, rewarding, and/or relevant 6
- useful for sharing ideas and techniques 2
- helps to develop time management skills 1
- promotes familiarity with school environment 1
- post-conferencing promotes reflection 1

Total: 11

Suggestions for improving PE

With regard to students' suggestions for improving Pupil Experience, a total of 76 keywords and phrases were extracted from the questionnaire. These fell into the broad categories noted below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestion</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase the size of the classes being taught</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the introduction to PE</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allot more time for preparing for PE</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut back on the amount of work required in connection with the Workbook</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more flexibility in the choice of topics and/or teaching techniques</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other miscellaneous comments/suggestions</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 76 100.0

The 21 miscellaneous suggestions included the following:

- Provide longer sessions for PE 4
- Teach in pairs instead of in fours 2
- Allot more time for journal writing 2
- Provide for followup on progress of pupils 2
- Choose more centralized schools 2
- Exchange lesson plans and discuss problems with other teaching groups 2
- Use last PE session as a 'feedback' session 2
- Integrate PE with school scheme-of-work 1

Send less time on planning lessons 1
Improve scheduling of PE sessions 1
Teach to mixture of pupils from all levels 1
Provide better teaching materials 1

Total: 21

Some of the above concerns appear to have arisen out of misconceptions as to the basic goals of PE. As regards increased class size, Pupil Experience does not purport to teach class management. Rather, one of its principal objectives is to help students come to understand individual pupil learning problems, which objective is best attained through working with small groups. (This is also the rationale for requiring student teachers to write a case study as an assignment.) Based on our growing understanding of student misconceptions regarding the objectives of PE, we are now better able to clear up these misunderstandings during future introductions to Pupil Experience. Beginning in July 1990, the course hours have been increased from 90 to 120; this will permit some degree of additional preparation during PE workshops at the Institute. As regards the workbook, it is felt that the tasks are relevant and necessary to optimise student teacher learning; however, there appears to be a need for improved communication between tutors and students as to the rationale for these tasks. Although a few students may feel constrained by the structured nature of the workbook teaching and observing tasks, the majority find this scaffolding essential to help them cope with their new role as teachers.

From the perspective of IE staff, it has been evident that the 'hands-on' experience during PE has enabled student teachers to be more perceptive and to raise more relevant questions during their coursework. The effects of this experiential learning have been particularly evident during the PE seminar, at which time students discussed pupil learning problems and relative merits of various teaching techniques at a level which normally would not be attained until well into Teaching Practice.

In conclusion, we have come to feel that Pupil Experience is a worthwhile and rewarding alternative to micro-teaching. It introduces early exposure to the pupil-related problems, permits students to connect the theory of their coursework with the practical realities of the classroom, pro-
vides an initial start in the practice of reflection, and lays a foundation for handling of full classes during subsequent Teaching Practice.

REFERENCES


