

Otmar Gassner

Teaching Practice and Mentoring in the new Universities of Education in Austria

On October 1, 2007, the former Colleges of Teacher Education have been replaced by the new “Pädagogische Hochschulen”/Universities of Education (Bundesgesetz, 2005). This means that the study programmes, which are based on the concurrent model, have been modularized and upgraded, that the time spent in face-to-face meetings has been reduced by about 15 percent, and that a Bachelor degree (BEd) will be awarded after successful completion of the three-year course comprising 180 ECTS. It also means that initial teacher education and continuous professional development have been – at least on paper – moved together into the same institution.

Compliance with the Bologna first cycle can be seen in the duration of the course and in the fact that this new BEd degree implies qualified teacher status and the right to teach in primary or lower secondary schools depending on their study programme. On the other hand, in the European context and contrary to the recommendations of the *Common European Principles* (2004, 4) or the more recent Communication from the Commission *Improving the Quality of Teacher Education* (European Commission 2007, 12f), teacher education in Austria is still grounded in the first cycle and the recommended qualification of a master’s degree has not been met. Another problem is closely connected to this, but systemic: The new Universities of Education can design their own Master programmes as options for those teachers who want to further qualify themselves. Contrary to existing recommendations, however, Ph.D. programmes will not be available in these initial teacher education institutions.

Within this general framework, teaching practice plays a prominent part and is considered a key dimension in the education of new teachers. The framework given by law is clear, stipulating that 36 ECTS need to be allocated to this area of study. The implementation and the actual design of this part of the programme are left to the individual Universities of Teacher Education, which allows for a fair amount of variation. Whereas there is general agreement that student teachers should see real schools and do some teaching in all semesters except the first, the actual design will vary from one institution to another. Basically, there are two models. In the first, the student teachers teach or observe one lesson per week per subject (in lower secondary) and one morning in primary respectively. In the second model, they teach all classes of a practice teacher for two weeks. Usually, there is a mix of the two models over the three-year study programme. For the purpose of this brief paper, it makes sense to describe the situation at one of the fourteen institutions in Austria, the University of Education in Vorarlberg.

The framework and nature of mentoring

At the Vorarlberg University of Education teaching practice starts in the first semester with workshops on theory and subject didactics as well as observation and analysis of lessons. In the following two semesters, two students alternate giving and observing one lesson per week under regular supervision of the class teacher as well as a mentor. One student teaches the lesson on the basis of the information prepared by the class teacher, the other observes the lesson. After the lesson, it is analysed and discussed in some detail by the students, the class teacher, and the mentor. In the last three semesters the

students teach full time for periods of two weeks under the supervision of an experienced class teacher and in liaison with a mentor from the University of Education.

	Steps	Mentor (M)	Student	Class teacher at secondary school(CT)
1	Preparation of lesson			Give aims and content of lesson given to student one week before practice lesson
2			Prepare and write lesson plan	
3	Practice lesson	Observe lesson	Give and observe lesson respectively	Observe lesson
4	Analysis and discussion	Joint analysis and discussion of practice lesson	Joint analysis and discussion of practice lesson	Joint analysis and discussion of practice lesson

Table 1: Procedures for mainstream teaching practice (mainstream). (Cf. Gassner/Mallaun 2004, 4948)

Mentoring involves talking about lesson plans and discussing ideas before the actual teaching, observation of lessons, reflection on taught sequences, analysis and discussion, awareness raising, scaffolding, goal setting, and emotional support. The main objective is to make students think about their own teaching and that of their colleagues, to offer various approaches for this and to generally support the students in their effort to become independent, autonomous “reflective practitioners”.

In a project (Gassner/Mallaun 2004) the joint analysis and discussion of the lesson was abandoned for individual reflection. The main idea here was to initiate a reflective process in all team members that is not influenced by the statements of others. Thus the ground is prepared for an independent process of reflection and a genuine exchange of authentic ideas.

All these statements and lesson plans are available in writing and become part of every student’s digital portfolio on an e-learning platform. Thus the documentation of the learning history of a student in teaching practice is performed automatically, and it is to be expected that students who go through these steps every week will be more aware of various processes in class and of their own teacher behaviour than students who do not take part in this kind of intensive training and documentation.

	Steps	Mentor (M)	Student	Class teacher at secondary school(CT)	
1	Preparation of lesson in electronic form			Send aims and content of lesson electronically to student and M	
2			Send lesson plan as WORD-file or HTML to M		
3		Convert of student file to HTML and transfer it onto platform			
4		Add notes to the lesson plan	Add notes to the lesson plan	Add notes to the lesson plan	Add notes to the lesson plan
5		Suggest changes and/or give OK			Suggest changes and/or give OK

6			React to notes and, possibly, carry out changes	
7	Practice lesson	Observe lesson	Give and observe lesson respectively	Observe lesson
8	Reflecting the lesson	Write a reflective statement on the lesson	Write a reflective statement on the lesson and send it as a WORD-file to M	Write a reflective statement on the lesson and send it as a WORD-file to M
9		Transfer the reflective statements into the discussion forum of the platform		
10		Read and comment on the other contributions	Read and comment on the other contributions	Read and comment on the other contributions

Table 2: Procedures for teaching practice on e-platform (project)

Teaching practice on an e-platform is based on constructivist principles as “learning is achieved by the active construction of knowledge supported by various perspectives within meaningful contexts.” (Oliver 2001, 4) Social interaction in the classroom is followed by a systematic attempt at making sense of the various processes in class through structured and scaffolded reflection and discussion.

“The analysis of the documents contained in the digital portfolios confirmed the central hypothesis of the project: Reflection was intensified in scope and depth through the project setting, and the individual data contained valuable material for analysis, which contributed to the understanding of the complex processes at work in the training situation at practice schools. Moreover, the data has shown high diagnostic potential for student teacher and mentor behaviour. The digital portfolios can tell us a lot about the reflective skills of student teachers and about behaviour patterns in critical situations. As such these documents are important elements in the personal learning histories of the student teachers that can show development and point the way forward. While the project focus was on the student teachers, the documents also allowed us to analyse and describe different approaches and attitudes of mentors. This made it possible to give feedback to the mentors concerned as well as to discuss the mentoring culture of the institution. The diagnosis is relevant to the individuals concerned, but also to the institution as a whole and could serve as a baseline study for a close analysis of all mentors” (Gassner 2006, 2212). Studies have led the way, and the informed policy maker is aware of a number of options to improve the practical strand of teacher education, but it takes time for policy decisions to be taken on the basis of research data and on what is known as good practice.

If teaching practice is organised in two-week blocks per semester, mentoring is less dense, and the main responsibility lies with the practice teacher, who is in close daily contact with the student teacher. The mentor from the University of Education provides the background information, visits one lesson per student and conducts the final self- and group assessment phase. Direct interference with individual lesson plans or taught lessons is much more limited in this model.

Partnership agreements between teacher education institutions and schools

The organisation and administration of teaching practice is the responsibility of the Universities of Education. So it is usually the teacher education institution that invites a school in the same region to cooperate in the practical training of the student teachers. Schools that want to be practice schools need to have dedicated staff that is prepared to

take on extra work and, in addition, to go through a training phase. Once this principal agreement has been reached, the University of Education allocates students to these schools. Each pair of students is linked up with a class teacher, who is responsible for the task setting a week before the lesson and all things related to the actual teaching of that lesson in his/her class, plus an after-class discussion of student performance. The direct link to the University of Education is established through the mentor, who joins these school teams every second or third week.

In the blocked form of teaching practice the direct involvement of the mentor from the University of Education in the lessons taught and the after-class discussions is less dense, and after-lesson analysis and reflection are mainly carried out by the class teacher of the regional practice school.

These partnership agreements are rather informal and can easily be changed as there are no legally binding long-term contracts. This flexibility allows for varying numbers of student intake and practice places needed. On the other hand, established partnerships have a tendency to persevere and seem difficult to be terminated even when factors of quality are involved. The practice teachers are paid a fairly small amount of money for this extra work.

Mentor profile

In Austria we distinguish between class teachers and mentors. The class teachers in this teaching practice setting take students into their class where they teach one of three units per week in one subject or a whole morning in primary school. They are experienced teachers identified for this kind of work by headmasters or the inspectorate and trained for the job by the University of Education that sends the students there.

The mentors are staff members of the University of Education and are in charge of these practice teams. As a rule, they are appointed to the job once they have a teaching position in the University of Education. No formal qualification geared to the special requirements of a mentoring activity (in contrast to general teaching) is needed. Mostly, however, these people have acquired the competences needed through self-study and their own professional development.

Procedures for quality assurance would certainly have to be introduced to guarantee certain standards in this phase of the education of students.

Teacher education institutions and teacher professional development

In Austria, the newly formed Universities of Education (launched on October 1, 2007) combine initial education and professional development under one roof. There is a minimum requirement of 15 hours of professional development per year for teachers in primary and secondary schools. However, this is not based on any needs analysis and resulting individual development plans, but left to the discretion of the teacher. So it is clearly in no way systematic, but rather follows the patchwork principle. Attendance at certain courses can be requested by school heads or the regional or national boards of education, but acquisition of competences is not checked. So, ultimately, professional development is left to the individual teacher and remains an issue of professional ethics. Incentives of regulatory procedures are not in place.

Organisational development of schools often arises from a need to change or adapt the school profile. Schools get professional support from outside or from the University of Education. As some school sectors have become rather competitive in their attempts to attract pupils, the need to develop school profiles and to offer education with a special focus (IT, sports, languages, arts) has increased sharply.

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