

**Student teachers' perceptions of seminar  
learning contexts in ITE (initial teacher  
education)**

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**Abstract**

This paper outlines how examining student teachers' perceptions of the use of seminars in HE led to reflections about the role and significance of seminars in initial teacher education (ITE). Whilst the generic literature on student learning provides useful insights about how they approach their learning and tutors' teaching strategies, we know little about students, and in particular student teachers'<sup>1</sup> perceptions of seminars (a learning context that can nurture important HE attributes such as reflection, reasoning and judgement). The study focuses on student teachers and reports on the findings from a series of in-depth interviews with five second year undergraduate primary teacher education student teachers in a post-1992 English university. Their accounts present seminars as rich and multi-layered learning contexts that draw on their peers', tutors' and families' practices, and characterised by instrumentalist judgements about the extent to which seminars 'enabled' or 'disabled' participation and teacher preparation. This paper's contribution is in problematising seminars, a common learning context for student teachers, and highlighting the ways in which the study led to pedagogical reflections about the purpose, value and potential of university-based seminars for teacher preparation.

**Keywords**

Seminars; perceptions; student teachers; context; reflection; theory/practice.

**Introduction**

This paper is an account of how the renewed emphasis on student teachers' reflection in initial teacher education (ITE) (DELNI, 2014; DfE, 2015; Khortagen et al., 2001) led to pedagogical reflections about seminars' role in promoting student teachers' reflections. The emerging international consensus that teacher quality has the biggest impact on children's educational outcomes has led to new initiatives for student teachers' training and education (Hulme et al, 2013). A significant change is the 'practicum turn' (Burns & Mutton, 2010); a policy shift to devolve much of teacher education into schools as evidenced in England's School Direct programme (DfE, 2011; McLean Davies et al., 2013). Behind this shift is policy makers' view that students make little use of what they learn at university (Hodson, 2003 in Smith & Hodson, 2010) and that teacher education has failed to prepare them for classroom realities (Burns & Mutton, 2013; McLean Davies et al., 2013; Kessels & Korthagen 1999). It is also due to the increasing recognition of classroom teachers' practice knowledge and the desire to give student teachers access to teachers' tacit knowledge (Khortagen et al., 2001).

The 'practicum turn' and its implications for student teachers, schools and teacher educators is nonetheless, widely debated. Some have prioritised an 'apprentice' perspective (a view that

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'student teacher' is used to refer to those undertaking a teaching degree although 'student' is sometimes used for stylistic purposes. All other references to 'students' refer to those on non-teaching degrees.

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prioritises learning from observing more experienced professionals) of teacher education, at the expense of university-based teaching (DfE, 2011). Yet, in more recent policy initiatives, there are calls for a greater role for theoretical and research knowledge that are traditionally associated with university-based learning. In England for example, a recent review of teacher education has re-emphasised the need to address curriculum subject knowledge and child development, but also argued for a renewed focus on research and theoretical knowledge (DELNI, 2014; DfE, 2015). For teacher educators, it means a curriculum that '...helps students understand and explore the interconnectedness...' between theory and practice, so they can use this insight to 'challenge, to question and reflect on, and to improve their teaching' (DELNI, 2014:7).

In many ways, this emphasis on theory and practice echoes recent calls in teacher education to lessen the theory/practice divide (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lyons, 2010; Calderhead, 1989; Donnell & Harper, 2005). What seems different in the current policy discourse, however, is a heightened focus on student teachers' practice/concrete experiences (DfE, 2015; DELNI, 2014; Kessels & Korthagen 1999) and how they use research knowledge to interrogate and improve their practice. This is evident in the way educators are increasingly using terms such as 'clinical reasoning' and 'clinical judgement' in an attempt to *re-conceptualise* professional learning in teacher education (Kriewaldt, J. & Turnidge, D., 2013). In the medical field, professionals exercise clinical judgement when they use evidence (practice and research/theory related) in specific practice contexts (the clinic) to make '...best judged ethical response in a specific practice-based context' (Kriewaldt and Turnidge, in Burn & Mutton, 2013:3). For student teachers, the 'clinic' is the classroom and the evidence is pupil data and research knowledge on which they draw on to interrogate and improve their practice.

However, whilst the view that teachers, much like doctors and nurses, can improve their practice by evaluating research evidence is becoming well-established (Burns & Mutton, 2013), what has been less prominent is where and how student teachers can best develop the necessary skills and dispositions for reflection and judgement (such as open-mindedness, sound reasoning and enquiry). It seems that the 'seminar' is one learning context that can provide one such opportunity (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Gunn, 2007; Fry et al. 2009). In what follows I begin by critically discussing the role of seminars as a suitable context for nurturing 'clinical judgements' and consider their problematic nature. Next I outline the teacher education context and the study's methodology. Using the 'enabling' 'disabling' distinction (categories that arose out of the data), I use two contrasting student teachers accounts as illustrative of how seminar perceptions and expectations, if representative of the wider student teacher body, can undermine the potential benefits of seminars as spaces for developing reflection, reasoning and judgements about theory and practice.

### **Seminars in HE**

For many students, including student teachers, small group learning contexts such as seminars are a common feature of their learning experiences at university. Seminars are widely defined as interactive small group learning spaces of up to 30, where students, as part of their formal timetabled course of study, meet regularly over a fixed period of time (Fry et al., 2009). Seminars are seen as an important dimension of students' learning experiences (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005), because they have the potential to promote what Barnett calls a '...genuine higher learning experience...' (1990:55). Taking part in discussions and exploring thinking with others can facilitate a range of attributes such as: tolerance for ambiguity, open-mindedness, willingness to negotiate meanings (Brookfield & Preskill 2005; Jacques 2000) and skills such as critical thinking, self-expression and listening skills (Gunn, 2007; Fry et al., 2009).

However, despite their potential benefits, seminars are challenging learning contexts that require a complex set of cognitive, social and emotional competencies (Gunn, 2007). For example, students

need to be motivated and interested in the seminar topics and/or have sufficient confidence in how to 'play the game'. That is, they need to know how to be and how to engage in seminars (Fejes et al., 2005) and unafraid to say the 'wrong' thing and to manage the challenges of group dynamics (Jacques, 2000). In addition, effective engagement in most cases requires a constructivist conception of knowledge as well as a questioning disposition and readiness to change one's opinion (Moon, 2008; Britzman, 2003). Yet, the limited research on students' views about seminars-type contexts suggests that many struggle to acquire and deploy these competences (Jacques, 2000; Dawson & Evans 2003; Knights 1995)

Student teachers' seminar contexts can be even more complex. This is partly due to the superficial similarities between seminars and their own schooling experiences as well as their own teaching contexts. Indeed, based on her extensive work with student teachers, Britzman found that student teachers' own school experiences had a powerful influence on their roles and identities. When reflecting on their classroom practices, they struggled to disregard their own '...history of learning...' that seemed to '...telegraph relevancy to their own work' (2003:1). In other words, their own school experiences continued to influence how they conceptualised their own learning at university (Kessels & Korthagen 1999).

There is, nevertheless, a dearth of research literature on students' or student teachers' perceptions of this important learning context. Instead, much of the literature has mainly prioritised their approaches to learning and their perceptions of assessment strategies and teaching 'quality' (Biggs, 2003). Yet, research has suggested that contextual factors such as students' subject areas, their readiness to inquire and critique and group dynamics can militate against teaching strategies, such as PBL (problem based learning), that are designed to promote classroom discussion (Deignan, 2009; Savin-Baden, 2000).

Thus, this paper's starting point is that learning contexts are important for understanding learning. Thus it draws on five student teachers' perspectives on seminars to explore the implications for pedagogical practice. In the following section, I present the broader context in which this study took place and report the findings using two students' accounts as illustrative cases.

### **The context**

I carried out the research in a post-1992 teacher education department based in the North of England. The university-based teaching period lasted from September to March and school placements took place in May/June. The participants (who were all undergraduate student teachers) spent roughly 60 hours of their time in school settings and approximately 200 hours at university. They took 6 modules in a year and were mainly taught in seminar groups of up to 30. In a typical week they had two one hour lectures, eight hours of practical workshops (e.g. Music/Physical Education), six hours of curriculum based seminars (English, Maths Science), two hours on Professional Studies seminars, and a one day school placement.

The nature and content of seminars varied between modules, and between tutors within the same module. For example, Maths and Science seminars combined practical tasks and discussions on educational policies and teaching/learning approaches. On the other hand, non-curriculum based modules such as Child Development and Professional Studies mainly involved small and whole group discussions. All the seminars were tutor-led, that is, the tutor chose the learning outcomes, organised the learning material and led the session. On average, they spent 14-20 hours in seminars per week.

### **The study**

Five student teachers responded to an email invitation (sent to all 2<sup>nd</sup> year BA primary and early years QTS students) to take part in an in-depth study into their seminar experiences. They were all in the second year of a three year undergraduate teacher education course. The participants, Daisy, Natalie, Lilly and Jess and Ellie (pseudonyms) were all white Caucasian. Linzi was 25 years old and had a young family, the rest were aged 19 and had come to their course immediately after A levels (examinations taken at 17-18 years in the final year of schooling in England). All the participants studied the same modules but were in different seminar groups. Thus, Daisy, for example, attended the respective seminars for each module with the same group of students. All the participants completed a consent form and the study was approved by the University Ethics Committee.

I adopted a qualitative/interpretive approach that recognised data as constructed and contextual (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, I kept reflective notes on my ongoing analysis to notice and record the emerging themes, and if and how my positionality influenced my interpretations. The individual semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and took place at three specific points: at the beginning (September/October), middle (January/February) and finally at the end of the year (June). To introduce the participants to the research focus and to gain initial insights into the research questions, I focussed the first interview on their perceptions of their learning experiences prior to and at university, and in particular in seminars. To ensure anonymity and to focus on their most significant experiences, I did not stipulate that they focussed on a particular module or tutors' teaching styles. At the end of the first interview, I invited the participants to keep a diary of any significant/interesting seminars. Thus, the themes from the first interview and the diary entries informed the subsequent interviews.

My analytical approach was iterative and guided by the research questions as well as the emerging data (Gibbs, 2007). To develop the analytical categories, I undertook further intensive reading of the data to identify potentially significant extracts that included 'red flag' words such as 'never' and 'always', story features (Gibbs, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and extracts that seemed particularly pertinent to the research questions. During the third and final interview, I invited the participants to assess the significance of the extracts I selected and to elaborate on them. Analysis of these extracts identified a further analytical category relating to views of seminars as 'enabling' and 'disabling' contexts (see Table 1). In what follows, I consider two ways in which I examined the participants' lived experiences: seminars as enabling (*facilitating*) or disabling (*limiting or hindering*) seminar participation and, seminars as enabling (*facilitating*) or disabling (*limiting or hindering*) teacher preparation. The findings are broadly representative of the five participants who took part in the study, but the data will draw on Natalie's (oldest) and Daisy's (youngest) accounts as illustrative of the key themes that emerged from the study and to give an in-depth insight into the lived experiences of two contrasting participants.

### **Perspectives on the experience of learning in seminars**

Both lived at home and were first in their families to go to university. Natalie was a mature student with a young family, who described herself as working class and had previously worked as a teaching assistant before starting the course. She saw herself as a conscientious student and had a small close-knit group of friends that she would often sit with in seminars. Daisy was 19 years old and worked part time in a pub at the weekends. A key theme to emerge from the initial analysis was the significance of tutors, peers, and families' practices in how Daisy and Natalie (and the other participants) experienced seminars. Another was their perception of seminars as 'enabling' or 'disabling' contexts that appeared to influence their seminar participation and their views about the relevance of seminars for teacher preparation (see table 1.).

**Table 1.** A summary of biographical details and perspectives on seminars.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Home location</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Personal circumstances</i>	<i>Sample – enabling participation and teacher preparation</i>	<i>Sample – disabling participation and teacher preparation</i>
Natalie	24	within 10 miles from university	none	lives with husband 2 children under 10	practical ideas/tips for class teaching, sense of humour	tutors checking up on group work, being judged
Daisy	19	within 10 miles from university	part-time work in a pub	lives at home with family	Tutors giving teaching ideas, enabling sharing of ideas, giving new knowledge ,	uncontrolled discussion, too many viewpoints, lack of answer, irrelevance,

### **Seminars as enabling/disabling participation in seminars –a relational dimension**

#### **Tutors**

Tutors' practices were an important factor in how they talked about their seminar participation. Referring to a tutor's delivery style, for example, Daisy reported feeling disengaged when tutors failed to act in a 'teacherly' way, i.e. when they did not actively direct and influence the seminar discussion and/or failed to give a 'final/right answer' about the topic of discussion. In Natalie's case, it was her perception of tutor's authority and status that seemed to affect her participation. Citing one such example, she explained how tutors presence during small group discussion in seminars seemed to lead to a kind of fear' so that 'we all seemed to go quiet' or got highly 'conscious of what we are saying'. This 'fear' seemed deeply ingrained despite one tutor's encouragement to challenge and question tutors. As she explained, '...yeah, it is difficult sort of to take on board, I think...I don't know why... because it was sort of more formal, you are in university, you have come here to learn.'

#### **Peers and families**

Peers also played a lesser, but potentially significant roles in the way that the participants saw them as disrupting rather than facilitating learning. Daisy typically referred to her peers' disruptive behaviours e.g. in using mobile phones in seminars, or her peers' roles in discussions that '...always ends in uproar'. Natalie's accounts mainly related to the tensions created by her willingness to participate in seminars and her peers' lack of seminar participation '...I sometimes feel that me and a few others are the only ones who say anything...', hinting at some disappointment about the responsibility this entailed to be seen as the reliable spokesperson for her seminar group. It is possible that some of this antipathy reflects particular group dynamics. Both Daisy and Natalie reported their close attachment to a small group of peers: Daisy only ever associated with one other student (to the extent that she sometimes did not attend seminars if her friend was absent), and Natalie also rarely sat with peers who were not part of her small group of a close-knit friends.

Whilst the significance of peers and tutors was perhaps unsurprising, the role of family life was unexpected. For Daisy, her family clearly played an important role in her seminar experiences. Interesting and engaging seminar experiences (mainly involving practical investigations) were often

shared with family members. In Natalie's case, her account of her contrasting persona at home (showing a capacity and thirst for argument and debate that was missing in seminars), helps to illustrate her contrasting identities

'Me and my husband, we disagree on everything...we are always debating stuff, and I am throwing ideas, and he is throwing ideas... and the kids are always there when it is happening. And we value their opinion, and if they think something else, we ask them why and things like that...'

Natalie's and Daisy's accounts help to illustrate the ways in which the participants drew on a range of factors (families, peers and tutors) to construct their perceptions of seminars and their own readiness and willingness to participate in seminars. In the next section, I examine another dimension to their seminar perspectives by outlining the value judgments they seemed to make about seminars' usefulness/relevance for classroom practice.

### **Seminars as enabling/disabling contexts for teacher preparation**

Natalie's and Daisy's reflections on the value/worth of seminars for teacher preparation mainly related to the content of the seminars. Initially, both Natalie and Daisy seemed generally positive about their seminar experiences. Daisy valued the chance seminars provided for deeper exploration of ideas, and Natalie talked about her interest in debating and discussing ideas and the chance to learn new things. Over the course of the interviews, however, both seemed to be more questioning and critical of their seminar experiences. Overwhelmingly, they (including the other 3 participants) began to express a need for seminars that had a more direct relevance to the classroom. For example, Natalie, whilst acknowledging the merits of seminars in which tutors focussed on subject knowledge (e.g. grammar), nonetheless wished there were more ideas on 'how to teach it'.

However, as the school placement loomed, it was Daisy who became more critical about the generally 'disabling' nature of seminars. Asked about whether she still enjoyed seminar discussions, she reluctantly replied, '... in a way I do..., but there is so many different opinions and it's not a bad thing...' but she went on to argue '... but at the same time you sit and think...what were the answer, what is right?'. Instead, the most important aspect was practical relevance in terms of 'teaching ideas' and 'ways we can assess, so we can think... I learnt this in this seminar... in my block placement I am going to use this...'

Following on from the above, Daisy's response to whether teaching ideas can be generalised to classroom context further illustrates her views about seminars:

Interviewer: 'do you think they will work... why do people think it is important?'

Daisy: 'because that is the realistic, that's realistic, that's why we are here...we are learning...all right...there is the background of it and all that... but...when you are in that block placement, in that classroom ... it is no good if you have not got any teaching ideas or... any ways of putting things across... or activities...'

Daisy seemed to judge the value seminars in terms of their practical relevance in the classroom - a 'self-evident truth' that she was not willing to question - and highlights important questions about the purposes and uses of seminars in teacher education. Her account of one curriculum-based module, focussing on the tutor's teaching approach in particular, provides useful insights into what an enabling seminar context might look like:

'Oh I do make sense, this links to everything I said. I put it was highly interactive... and we actually got to do the investigation and write them, so we can remember them and then I put

that we were given thinking time and it created a bit of suspense... (*the tutor*) is so good at it... 'What do you think is going to happen? And everyone was like 'oh' and then it is like 'wow' and, we got to work in a group and, and oh my God ... we know how to adapt it to suit the classroom... and that's what I mean, it is good to be able to apply it and then again I said that (*the tutor*) used ICT...got so many ideas and the assignment for that is actually creating a subject file, which is going to be full of facts and ideas. It's all in a topic, so if you are doing a topic, you go back to the topic and you are going to use it.'

This seminar was active and 'hands-on', engaging, and effectively modelled good teaching. They were taught 'how to adapt it to suit the classroom' and had a concrete and accessible 'file' outcome that was going to be full of 'facts and ideas'. The generally animated way Daisy talked and the phrases 'it's brilliant' and 'oh my God' suggested that she wished for more seminars like this one. It is possible that the tutor's teaching approach or the topic may have influenced her enthusiasm and engagement. But it also resonates with her general expectations of what 'realistic' seminars should be like when seen through the prism of classroom relevance.

### **What have I learnt from listening to my student teachers' views about seminars?**

It was surprising to find that student can be fearful of tutors or that they may see their peers as deterring rather than encouraging participation, as argued by Jacques in his work on small group dynamics (Jacques, 2000). Similarly, Daisy's disappointment with tutors who encouraged debate and discussions also made me reflect on whether the challenges I had in encouraging students to participate in seminars may be related to my students' expectations of seminars. The potential complexity of the small group learning context is consistent with D'Andrea & Gosling (2005) and Haggis (2004), for example, who argued that educators ignore context at a cost. This is because contexts influence learning and their complexity can affect what and how students learn (Jacque, 2000; Fejes et al., 2005, Peim and Hodkinson, 2007).

Further evidence of seminars' complexity can be found in their apparent preference for transmissionist rather than reflective/dialogue based seminars. That is, they mainly saw seminars that prioritised dialogue and discussion as 'disabling' and those that prioritised 'teaching ideas' as 'enabling' contexts. Daisy's recurrent concern was that such seminars were ineffective because they lacked a 'final/right answer'; a view that is also echoed in Casey et al.'s (2002) research with Sociology students that highlighted students' uncertainties about their own roles in seminars and their preference for tutor-directed seminars that they perceived led to more tangible outcomes.

Finally, the implicit influence of popular discourses also seems to be a factor that adds to seminars' complexity. For Daisy, discussing ideas was irrelevant 'if you have no teaching ideas', implying that ideal lessons could be reproduced unproblematically (Kessel & Khortagen, 1999; Alexander, 2002). This view is perhaps unsurprising, as in Daisy's case, the teaching file may provide a type of insurance against potential failure. As Standish argues, in a culture where failure has a high price (Hulme et al, 2013), '... the promise of new techniques ...may lure not only policy makers... but also teachers and students themselves...' (Standish, in Cigman & Davies, 2009: x). Whilst we do not know what Daisy will do with the teaching ideas she acquires at university, the literature suggests that student teachers are often reluctant to question and analyse practice in a context (seminars) that is designed to facilitate their reflections (Fry et al., 2009). This suggests that despite the emerging consensus that theory and practice are inter-dependent (Kessels & Korthagen 1999), views about theory and practice remain polarised.

### **Limitations**

This was a small scale study that was based on a snap shot of their experiences over a period of one year. In addition, because of its exploratory nature, it did not examine potential differences

between different kinds of modules (e.g. curriculum-based, such as Maths/Science and Professional Studies modules, such as Child Development), content and tutors' style of delivery. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the findings add to the existing research about the significance of context (Haggis, 2004; Jary & Shah, 2009), but in this case, about an important learning context that has received relatively limited attention (Malcolm & Zukas, 2001). Consequently, it has made me aware of the complexities of my teaching context (which is primarily seminar based) and how I can make effective use of this context to promote my students' capacities for reflection on practice.

### **Implications for practice**

The importance of developing student teachers' reflective capacities has become a priority in national and international reviews into teacher education (DELNI, 2015; DfE, 2015). However, whilst the learning opportunities in seminars provide a way of nurturing the necessary skills and dispositions for reflection, the findings from this study have highlighted some of the potential barriers that can arise from their expectations of seminars as an opportunity to acquire knowledge rather than as a space for interrogating and evaluating practice.

The insights from this study have led me to reflect on my own pedagogical approaches, because despite the small scale nature of the study, their findings resonate with mine and colleagues' anecdotal experiences of students in seminars. It is possible that my students have little or no awareness about the pedagogy of seminars and how the approaches used by their tutors could benefit their professional learning. As Van Der Meer (2012) and others have shown students find it difficult to distinguish between different types of small group learning contexts. This was partly shown in Daisy and Natalie making reference to a range of contexts as seminars, including workshops, demonstrations and discussion groups. The uncertainties about their roles in these different seminar contexts could potentially affect their levels of engagement. For example, they may be more inclined to participate more, if in discussion based seminars (e.g. a module on Child Development), they are encouraged to construct knowledge through discussion and dialogue and recognise that the tutor does not have all the answer.

My own practice could further consolidate their appreciation of learning in seminars. For example, through outlining and explaining my pedagogical approaches, showing the link between seminar discussions/reflection and classroom practice (DNLEI, 2014), and sharing research finding about what makes a high quality teacher. In addition, given that the seminar learning context can be a challenging learning space in itself, I may need to evaluate the extent to which my practice provides the physical, emotional and social spaces that can provide genuine contexts for inquiry and dialogue (Gunn, 2007; Mezirow, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to outline how a study into student teachers' perceptions of the use of seminars in HE resulted in reflections about my seminar pedagogy. The findings imply that seminars are complex and multi-dimensional spaces where student teachers' perceptions of seminars could derail some of the potential benefits that seminars can offer. This has led me to reflect on the kinds of pedagogical approaches I can use to communicate the value of seminars and their role in developing the skills and dispositions for professional judgement. It has also led me to question the extent to which my practice takes into account the cognitive, emotional and physical dimensions of seminars. As the proposed implications are based on a small scale study, more in-depth studies are needed to better understand the extent to which tutors' styles and/or content inform their seminar experience. More broadly, there are unanswered questions about what and how student teachers learn in universities in the context of the 'practicum turn' and how far seminar participation and their perception of seminar roles for teacher preparation are connected. Thus, further studies could examine the influence of the wider context (schools, personal biographies) to



explore if and how these aspects can strengthen or counteract educators' efforts to encourage students' critical engagement with practice. This paper's contribution is in signalling the complexities of student teachers' seminar experiences and outlining the questions it raised for one tutor's seminar pedagogies.

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