The IT-INSET Approach to Teacher Training

By Tony Barnes

In England and Wales, for almost as long as anyone in education can remember, there has been widespread public unease about "standards" in education in general. Some of this anxiety has been based on straightforward comparative evidence. A recent report from the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR, 1993) notes that,

> In France and Germany two-thirds of young people obtain qualifications at 16 which require success in a wide range of core subjects (including maths, science, and the native language) at least equivalent to A-C grades in our GCSEs. In England in 1990/91 only 27 per cent of those in their final year of compulsory schooling achieved A-C grade passes in English, maths, and one science. In France more than 50 per cent of young people currently gain a baccalaureat (2A-level equivalent) in a general or vocational area. In England less than 30 per cent gain either two A-levels or a National Diploma.

Recently, the conscience of the nation has been much exercised by evidence of increasing juvenile deliquency. It appears that a moral decline has been added to the education decline. A two-year-old is kidnapped and murdered by two ten-year-olds; elderly ladies (and men) are mugged and sometimes kicked to death by teenagers; some housing areas are being plagued by the twin epidemics of burglary and car-theft followed by

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joy-riding contests which the police seem powerless to combat. Meanwhile, unemployment continues to rise inexorably, manufacturing industry seems to be collapsing, and the economy proves resistant to all forms of government stimulation. In these circumstances, the tendency of some sections of the media is, as Fred Inglis of Warwick University complains, to blame “teacher training...as responsible for Absolutely Bloody Everything that is wrong. ”

The argument is familiar enough. If everything is falling apart, that is because the schools are failing to turn out the required products. Children are leaving school unable to spell or perform simple computations, with not the faintest idea how to change the sparking plug on a car engine, and, worse still, no clear notion of the difference between right and wrong.

Who then is at fault? Obviously the teachers in the first place, but as they are being smartly licked into shape by the National Curriculum, the blame must shift to those who teach the teachers.

For at least 20 years, two separate strands of argument have persisted. The first is so out of date as to be almost laughable: that institutions “are staffed by Marxists who peddle an irrelevant, damaging, and outdated ideology of antielitism.” The separate strand has more validity. It has long been a criticism of institutions of higher education in many subject areas that they are “ivory towers” intellectually and practically, too far removed from the real activity for which their students are being prepared.

In 1983-84, the Department of Science and Education (DES) began to respond to this criticism and affirmed the view that universities, polytechnics, and institutes should cooperate more closely with schools in the preparation of teachers.

About the same time, a quasi-governmental body, the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE), was appointed as the mediating mechanism by which individual teacher education programmes were measured against a number of government criteria.

It was in the light of the two demands from the DES for a closer partnership with schools and “recent and relevant” school experience for tutors that the IT-INSET approach began to achieve wider currency.

What is IT-INSET?

IT-INSET is an approach to teacher education that combines school-based initial training for students with school-focused in-service training for teachers. It is a process through which class teachers, student teachers, and tutors can work together and use observation and analysis to raise the quality of children’s learning. It is a collaborative, professional approach to curriculum design and evaluation as conducted by a team consisting of eight to ten students, a tutor, and the class teacher. The team works together one day a week for about 15 weeks on a topic identified by the teacher and the school. This in turn offers opportunities for Initial Training

(IT) for the students and In-Service Education and Training (INSET) for teacher and tutor.

The Six Principles and Six Questions

Six principles underpin the IT-INSET approach:

(i) observing practice;
(ii) analysing practice;
(iii) evaluating the curriculum;
(iv) developing the curriculum;
(v) team work;
(vi) involving other teachers.

To assist in focusing on these principles, six deceptively simple questions have been formulated.

(i) What did the children actually do?
(ii) What were they learning?
(iii) How worthwhile was it?
(iv) What did we do?
(v) What did we learn?
(vi) What do we intend to do next?

The first question—What were the children actually doing?—seems to invite a straight factual response. However, it is important not to confuse the team's intentions with the reality of what is actually being achieved. Thus, the answer in the case of some individual children might be "daydreaming" or "wasting time." In which case a number of "why?" questions would also arise.

The second question—What were the children learning?—can be difficult to answer. How can anyone know? Is it possible ever to be certain? If the question was what might the children have been learning, there might be a greater likelihood of receiving an answer. The trouble is that teaching has both intended and unintended results, so that the answers to the question may be largely unknowable. Even if we think that we know the answers, we need to ask ourselves and others whether our evidence is sufficient basis for a conclusion. Even if we have no evidence that learning has taken place, this need not imply that there has been no learning. It might suggest that the children have had no opportunity to show what they have learned.

The third question—How worthwhile was it?—is also somewhat problematical. It is possible to believe, subjectively, that an activity is/was worthwhile, mainly because it matches a currently held set of *a priori* value assumptions. However, it is also necessary to ask whether this set of assumption can stand the objective test of scrutiny by an informed outside observer. Again, "why?" and "how much?" questions start to interpose themselves.

The fourth question—What did you (teacher/tutor/student) do?—appears,

deceptively, to be a straight factual question. However, there are always the hidden, implied questions. What did you fail to do? Did you have to sort out priorities between one child's demands and another's? How far could the choice of what you did affect the children, yourself, or other members of the team?

By the time the fifth and sixth questions are reached—What did you learn? and What will you do next?—it should be possible for students, teacher, and tutor alike to discern more clearly the nature of the reflective enterprise on which they are engaged. The enquiry is not merely an examination of surface phenomena, but a continuous probing of the hidden, implied assumptions that direct individual sections. So the response to the question "What will you do next?" leads first to a declaration of current intentions and then to a resumption of the same cycle of plan-teach-observe-describe-evaluate-reflect.

It might be reasonable to suggest that theoretically, at least, there can be three processes by which teachers acquire the repertoire of knowledge, skills, norms, values, modes of thinking, etc., characteristic of the profession of teaching.

In the first place, student teachers may be initiated into teaching largely as a result of the intellectual and social influence of their teacher education programme. In practice, however, the influence of their training institution may be somewhat circumscribed.

One recent international survey of teaching in nine countries across five continents suggested that teachers employed only limited variations in their behaviour. Only three primary types of activity occurred to a greater or lesser extent in the classrooms in all participating countries. Teachers talk "at" or "with" their classes; the children work on assignments at their desks or laboratory benches, and a small percentage of time is taken up with a set of general classroom management activities.

We might incidentally note that there were also behaviours that the vast majority of teachers in most countries did not generally show: *e.g.*, using examples, asking opinion questions, saying they didn't know, checking pupils' understanding.

Despite wide societal and cultural differences, variations in training methods, duration of training, time spent in practical teaching, and the process of professional induction, it appears that teachers have absorbed a generalised, professional model that is similar in most societies. The main influence in the generation of the model appears to be the teachers with whom students work on their teaching practice (practicum) rather than the theoretical viewpoints of their training institution.

The notion of tutor domination appears to be a myth. Should we, therefore, replace it with the pupil-teacher model of "sitting with Nellie," *i.e.*, coming predominantly under the influence of one teacher. This approach has often rightly been derided as a pedagogical cop-out. It is likely to produce a new teacher who is preoccupied with the minutiae of classroom life, resistant to new ideas, and often pedagogically narrow. The more so if the supervising teacher suffers from "teacher

lust," *i.e.*, an obsession with inculcating his or her own ideas and practices into a suggestible student.

The third possibility is that both the training institution and the teacher in school should abdicate at least some of their power in order for students to develop as independent, reflective teachers. This model views teachers as neither individuals who follow slavishly the prescriptions of their trainers, nor who imitate in detail the set of behaviours exhibited by class teachers. Reflective teachers will have sufficient intellectual and professional confidence to observe and analyse their own and others' practice; they will be able to evaluate and develop their children's learning and cooperate with others; above all, they will have learned to work out their own salvation in the process.