



Beginner Teachers' conceptions of a successful lesson in English secondary schools: structure and implications

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The successful lesson is a central aspect of Beginner Teachers' (BTs') routine experience of teaching.
- Qualitative differences between BTs' conceptions of a successful lesson are described.
- These support a systems approach to BTs' thinking and confirm research into conceptions of learning.
- Findings suggest complex understanding of learning is insufficient for complex understanding of a successful lesson.
- Results add to teacher educators' pedagogical content knowledge.

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenographic study describes qualitative differences in Beginner Teachers' (BTs') conceptions of a phenomenon central to their routine experience of teaching: the successful lesson. Conceptions were found to be comprised of two independently related components, the structure of the successful lesson and its purpose. Evidence on the structure supports the adoption of a systems approach to BTs' thinking about lessons. Evidence on purpose confirms previous research into conceptions of learning. It was found that a sophisticated understanding of learning is not sufficient to ensure a sophisticated understanding of a successful lesson. These results add to teacher educators' pedagogical content knowledge.

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1. Introduction

It is often assumed that the sophistication of teachers' thinking has a major impact on their teaching strategies and therefore on the quality of student learning (e.g. Trigwell et al., 1999). It follows that teacher education programmes should prioritise the development of Beginner Teachers' (BTs') thinking. But thinking about what? Given the complexity of teaching it seems likely that there will be a number of important phenomena to focus on. This implies that BTs will need both a sophisticated understanding of individual phenomena, but also a sophisticated understanding of the relationships between phenomena. To be effective in their role, teacher educators will also need a good knowledge of how BTs understand important phenomena in teaching and the relationships between them.

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A large number of researchers have identified teaching and learning as two phenomena that are of critical importance (e.g. Boulton-Lewis, Brownlee, Berthelsen, & Dunbar, 2008; Entwistle, 2007; Paakari et al., 2011; Taylor & Booth, 2015; Tsai & Kuo, 2008; Wood, 2000). These researchers have often worked within the phenomenographic research tradition, developing punchy descriptions of qualitative differences in ways of understanding teaching and learning (referred to as conceptions). A few researchers have extended this work to explore relationships between conceptions of teaching and conceptions of learning (e.g. Prosser, Martin, & Ramsden, 2005).

This study focuses on a different (although related) phenomenon: the successful lesson. The successful lesson is an immediate and tangible aspect of teachers' (and BTs') routine experience of teaching and learning. This is partly because, as an organisational device, the lesson is a near ubiquitous feature of education in secondary schools in England (and elsewhere), with teachers (and BTs) drawing up lesson plans, describing their day in terms of numbers

of lessons and following a timetable divided into lessons. It is also because 'success' is a key aspect of teachers' (and BTs') motivation and identity, with teachers aiming to teach successful lessons, drawing personal and professional satisfaction from teaching them and often being judged by senior managers and inspectors on how successful their lessons are.

This study aims to describe BTs' conceptions of a successful lesson and to identify differences between more and less sophisticated conceptions. Since conceptions of teaching and learning are likely to be related to conceptions of a successful lesson, the study also aims to cast light on the way in which BTs' conceptions of these phenomena are related. The main possibilities are: i) that there is nothing distinctive about the successful lesson and that conceptions of this phenomenon are identical (or very similar) to previously described conceptions of teaching and learning, ii) that there is something distinctive about the successful lesson, but conceptions of it are separate from conceptions of teaching and learning and, iii) that conceptions of teaching and learning are embedded in conceptions of a successful lesson (or vice versa).

Findings in relation to these issues will contribute to teacher educators' knowledge of: i) the way in which BTs understand prominent aspects of their experience of teaching and, ii) the relationships between BTs' understandings of those prominent aspects. This knowledge is likely to be of significance in the design and implementation of teacher education programmes and the broad implications of the study's findings for teacher education are discussed in this paper.

In line with previous research in the field, this study adopts a phenomenographic approach to the analysis of BTs' conceptions of a successful lesson. Evidence is drawn from 23 BTs studying for teacher accreditation in economics and business studies at a top rated English University in 2016/17. To provide background, the next section briefly summarises the findings of previous phenomenographic research into conceptions of teaching and learning and explores these in the context of the successful lesson. After this results are presented and discussed.

2. Phenomenography, conceptions of teaching and learning and the successful lesson

Phenomenography aims to gather evidence of differences between the ways in which people understand the same phenomenon (Marton, 2015). Differences are assumed to be visible in the structure of peoples' thinking. This means that less sophisticated ways of thinking are usually embedded within more sophisticated ways of thinking. As a result, the most common outcome of phenomenographic research is a hierarchy of logically related descriptions of conceptions of a phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2012).

Phenomenography has been very successful in identifying differences between conceptions of teaching and conceptions of learning. Studies of conceptions of teaching typically describe a hierarchy ranging from knowledge transmission with a focus on teacher activity at the bottom, and conceptual change with a focus on student activity at the top (e.g. González, 2011; Kember, 1997; Taylor & Booth, 2015; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). Studies of conceptions of learning typically distinguish between the acquisition of knowledge at the lower levels and the constitution of knowledge at the higher levels. In other words, they move upwards in sophistication from an increase in the quantity of knowledge to an increase in its quality through conceptual change (e.g. Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty, 1993; Rossum & Hamer, 2010).

There has been good consistency between the conceptions discovered in different educational contexts, in different subject disciplines, amongst different groups of teachers (e.g. BTs and experienced teachers) and over time (e.g. Paakari et al., 2011; Taylor

& Booth, 2015; Wood, 2000). The results chime with non-phenomenographic studies of both experienced teachers' and BTs' conceptions (e.g. Chen, Brown, Hattie, & Millward, 2012; Cheng, Chan, Tang, & Cheng, 2009; Swinkels, Koopman, & Beijaard, 2013; Tigchelaar, Vermunt, & Brouwer, 2014).

Descriptions of BTs' conceptions are powerful for teacher educators because they make qualitative differences in BTs' understanding explicit. This can underpin the design of teacher education programmes and the associated learning activities. It can also make clearer the degree of conceptual change that such programmes and activities bring about in BTs. However, the findings are restricted in the extent to which they reflect the complexity of teaching, because they do not directly address the impact of relationships with other important phenomena in BTs' experience of teaching. In response to this, a small body of research has developed exploring the relationships between conceptions of teaching and learning and conceptions of other important phenomena such as subject knowledge (e.g. Prosser et al., 2005; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999).

This study extends this research to another phenomenon that appears prominent in BTs' everyday experience of teaching in an English secondary school: the successful lesson. This prominence arises partly from BTs' fundamental motivation to teach high quality lessons and partly from the ubiquity of the lesson as 'an organisational device to bring students into contact with the curriculum' (Desforges, 2015, p.xvi). In English secondary schools, the school day is typically divided into between 6 and 8 lessons lasting between 45 and 60 min. Experienced teachers usually teach around 20 to 25 lessons a week to a range of differently aged groups of students. This means that, by necessity, teachers have to package their efforts to promote student learning into what are often relatively short episodes, and also have to account for the periods of time that occur between lessons. In other words, they have to work out how the students' learning in any single lesson fits in to any learning that may occur over time. These constraints open up the possibility of a difference emerging between teachers' understandings of teaching and learning and their understandings of an individual successful lesson. BTs generally teach fewer lessons than experienced teachers, but are still subject to the same basic constraints.

In order to understand more about the potential relationships between BTs' thinking about the successful lesson and their thinking about teaching and learning, it is useful to look at how the relationship between teaching and learning has been treated in previous research. There have been two broad approaches. In one approach, teaching and learning are treated as if they are two distinct phenomena. This allows the exploration of associations between the two sets of conceptions. A high degree of correlation between the sophistication of conceptions of teaching and the sophistication of conceptions of learning has been established in some studies (e.g. González, 2011; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). In a second approach, teaching and learning are assumed to be practically inseparable. They are treated as if: i) they are both embedded in a single phenomenon (referred to as 'teaching and learning') or, ii) one (usually learning) is embedded within the other.

Prosser et al. (2005) take the former approach. They propose that conceptions of teaching and learning can be divided into 'referential' components (which might broadly be seen as qualitatively different conceptions of learning) and 'structural' components (which might broadly be seen as qualitatively different conceptions of teaching). Taylor and Booth (2015) represent the alternative approach. Their study claims to be researching conceptions of science *teaching* but their descriptions of conceptions seem to include aspects of learning. For example, one conception describes students as 'receiving' science knowledge, in another as

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