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Tacit Knowledge in Stories of Expert Teachers

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Abstract

Narratives are not only the carriers of hidden, otherwise incommunicable knowledge but also a medium for the teacher to understand the content (i.e. tacit knowledge). Our goal is to demonstrate how tacit knowledge is shared in the stories of experienced teachers. The teachers were asked to share events which had the greatest influence on their career in education, and which they would tell their future and beginning colleagues.

In order for beginning teachers to connect the knowledge of their subject and their teaching knowledge into practically applicable knowledge, much time is required, as well as problem-solving, listening to stories of experienced teachers, which is the focus of this study. This learning usually happens informally when the beginner teacher is not even aware of the learning. Narration is not only a method of transfer of tacit knowledge spontaneously but also a research method because through stories being told we learn about the process of sharing tacit knowledge. In this sense, narration is a research and an intervention method.

It appears that stories of experienced teachers can be divided into several groups, as much as tacit knowledge shared within them. This experience supports the initial assumption which is that tacit knowledge is personal, involves emotions and values of the given individual and their sharing presumes reflection. The individual experiences his or her stories in experiential texts and tells stories using the same words he or she uses to reflect on life and explain it to others. Through stories we give moral, practical or aesthetic meaning to situations and are able to better understand ourselves, our broader culture and our knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Teachers' storytelling about their professional life and practice is often spontaneously framed in the narrative form. Storytelling, whether taking the form of anecdotes, metaphors or images, is a natural way teachers give meaning to events and situations (Kelchtermans, 2009). Teacher knowledge is often described as tacit or craft knowledge beyond verbalisation (Brown – McIntyre, 1993 In Ottesen, 2007), therefore research focused on teacher thinking strives for the description and theorisation of the invisible (Ottesen, 2007, p. 41).

In order for beginning teachers to join their subject knowledge and teaching knowledge and produce more powerful pedagogical knowledge, a great amount of time is needed, as well as experimenting with problem-solving and listening to experienced teachers. This learning usually happens informally when the beginner teacher is not even aware of the learning.

Listening to stories is one of the forms of this type of learning. Practical personal knowledge usually takes the narrative form (cf. Gudmundsdottir, 2013, p. 145-146). Huberman (1983) calls this hidden knowledge "recipes" and notes that the knowledge is not received non-critically but the recipient intuitively compares it with how it is applicable in his or her classroom situation. The principles of experiential learning through stories apply here (cf. Krátká, 2010). An individual experiences his or her stories in experiential texts and tells stories using the same words he or she uses to reflect on life and explain it to others (cf. Clandinin – Connelly, 1991, p. 258-267 In Schön, 1991). Storytelling therefore contains a reflection of our perception of experience.

Narratives are not only the carriers of hidden, otherwise inexplicable, knowledge but also a medium for the teacher to understand the content. They enable the transmission of a specific type of knowledge which cannot be shared otherwise – so-called tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is personal, closely connected with a specific person and context. Tacit knowledge is not easily visible or explicable; it is deeply rooted in a person's actions, experience, thoughts and values (Wasonga – Murphy, 2006).

This paper focuses on stories of experienced teachers who were asked to discuss those events which had formed them the most during their teaching career and which they told (or still tell) to their trainee or beginner colleagues. A narrative allows us to explore life experience verbally and to express otherwise incommunicable emotions involved in the tacit knowledge being formed (cf. Sleeter, 2001).

2. Teacher careers

The following description of the individual stages of teacher professional career is very brief since I do not deal with narrative research of teachers' life biographies but focus on tacit knowledge which is shared through the stories. Here, a story is a means of transmitting and explicating specifically personal tacit knowledge and experience.

Much like the whole human life, a career of a teacher also consists of a number of stages which have their typical features. In their course, we can encounter typical phenomena and processes such as the so-called reality shock, establishing oneself in their profession but also re-evaluating one's choice of profession, its change, the becoming an expert within that profession, preparation for leaving the profession and retirement (Vágnerová, 2008). Authors differ in their naming of the stages of teacher professional development; despite that we can find some degree of agreement in the concept of a beginner, experienced and pre-retirement teacher.

Průcha (2002) defines teacher professional career in five stages: choice of the teaching profession (stage of motivation and choice of the study of teaching), professional start (beginner teacher), professional adaptation (first years of teaching), professional stabilisation (experienced teacher), professional twilight (burnout syndrome). According to Průcha (2002), individual stages are connected with teaching efficiency and quality. A higher stage of

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