

ALLOWING FOR LEARNING: A CRITICAL ISSUE FOR TESOL CERTIFICATE COURSE TUTORS

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It's a horrible set of compromises that more or less works in a commercial reality (CELTA course tutor, December 2002).

Introduction

This paper reports on research recently completed as a Ph.D. thesis into the experiences of participants on short pre-service courses leading to the award of an internationally-recognized certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults. Examples of such courses include the UK-based Cambridge ESOL Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (the CELTA), the Trinity College London Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (the CertTESOL), as well as the US-based School for International Training Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages Certificate (the SIT TESOL Certificate). These courses together represent a significant proportion of the training of new TESOL teachers worldwide: Cambridge ESOL alone, for example, through CELTA courses, trains over 10, 000 new TESOL teachers annually (Cambridge ESOL Examinations: CELTA, 2007).

Such courses are, in all cases, planned centrally but implemented in many different international locations. For example, Cambridge ESOL, from their headquarters in the UK, prepares standardized course requirements and the syllabus for their CELTA. These are then distributed to centres around the world and implemented by tutors. Currently, over 900 CELTA courses are held annually in 286 centres in 54 countries (Cambridge ESOL Examinations: CELTA 2007). While some decisions such as course intensity and scheduling may be made at a local level, allowing tutors to a certain extent to respond to local conditions (for example, courses may be offered over 4 weeks, 6 weeks, 12 weeks, or longer, responding to working patterns prevalent in the local community), all decisions concerning course requirements and content are taken centrally.

Motivation to carry out this investigation was prompted by the many trainees I had come into contact with over the years who described how

they had "survived" a certificate course and were thankful the experience was over. This is in accord with Ferguson and Donno's (2003 31) description of trainees who "somehow muddle through". On the other hand, there were those, myself included, who would describe their certificate course as "one of the most powerful educational experiences of their [lives]" (Obituary of John Haycraft, *The Independent*, 28th May 1996). Given that we are engaged in the preparation of new teachers for a lifetime, potentially, of engaging with learning, it interested me that participants' experiences could be so diverse. I therefore set out to investigate these courses from the perspective of the participant, and find out why they should have such different impacts.

The research established that for several reasons such courses tend to be underpinned by a 'transfer' view of learning, that is, learning is seen as a question of replicating techniques, which, because they are known to be successful, trainees are expected to accept. While the tutor and other experienced teachers are viewed as experts in their field, replete with experience, ideas, and wisdom, the trainee may be seen at the start of a course in deficit terms, more or less as an empty vessel. Learning on a course is seen through the demonstration of mastery of techniques in teaching practice, which, it has been suggested (Brandt 2006: 362) is a misnomer, because such emphasis precludes opportunities for unassessed practice and limits opportunities for critical reflection upon the event, which trainees could use to explain or justify the decisions they have taken with regard to their teaching.

This transfer model exists against a backdrop of changes to the culture of the language learning classroom, which in recent years has been influenced by developments in our understanding of adult learning. For example, greater attention is now being paid to our adult language learners' need for self-direction and individualization (the

proliferation of independent learning centres in language schools and universities is in part a response to this). It is suggested that not only does the transfer model fail to take account of developments in our understanding of adult learning in relation to the trainee-as-learner, but that the model as applied can cause bewilderment because it creates conflict for the trainee, caught between the roles of trainee-as-learner (experiencing a transfer model) and trainee-as-teacher (expected to take account of recent developments in adult learning that are suggestive of a more transformational approach). For example, in contrast to the notion of individualization in relation to the language learner, the fact that certificate courses are centrally-planned inevitably leads to a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the trainee that allows for limited response to the distinct cultural contexts in which certificate courses are run and, therefore, from which both trainees *and* language learners may be drawn.

A transfer model, however, does offer a number of advantages to institutions, and it is successful from many perspectives. In particular, it facilitates the perceived need for standardization that exists in a context in which a course is centrally-planned but internationally-implemented. Employers of course graduates can be reasonably confident that a graduate of a course in, say, Bogota, will have comparable skills to someone who earned their certificate in Hong Kong. It is also the case that all three qualifications mentioned above are recognized internationally. Trainees who take one of these qualifications can expect any reputable future employer in most countries to be familiar with the qualification, and to reward its holder accordingly. The data also suggested that trainees appreciate being able to complete the course and gain their qualification in a relatively short time. It appears to be an achievable goal, for which reason alone many are attracted to a certificate course.

However, are such difficulties with the transfer model as those mentioned briefly above outweighed by these advantages? Is a model that 'more or less works' an acceptable model to use at this formative stage of a teacher's professional development? This paper seeks to address such questions.

Research focus: certificate courses

Certificate courses encompass the development of both teaching skills and language awareness. There are usually three obligatory components: 1) contact between candidates and tutors, comprising input, tutorials, feedback, etc. (accounting for up to 100 hours); 2) supervised teaching practice (6 hours); and 3) guided observation of experienced teachers, in which trainees are given a task to complete while observing experienced teachers in the classroom (6 hours minimum). The aim of such tasks is to focus attention on relevant aspects of a lesson; they are often designed to relate to a particular stage of the course. Trainees can therefore expect to receive at least 112 hours of training. Assessment is continuous and includes all teaching practice and a number of written assignments. There are no formal examinations.

Applicants for such courses must be adults (that is, over 20, though exceptions may be made in some cases) and while expected to have a standard of education equivalent to that needed to enter higher education, they may or not have work or teaching experience. They are also required to have a level of proficiency in English that will allow them to teach at a range of levels of proficiency.

From the early motivation to research that is described above, the research questions that finally emerged after an iterative process were:

- How are such courses experienced by participants?
- What are trainees' learning-related concerns?

Research methods

In order to attempt to answer such questions, an ethnographic approach, defined by its use of qualitative methods of enquiry, was taken to the research context. The research included 2 phases and, over a 4 year period, involved 95 participants in 9 countries. Participants included 63 past or current trainees, and 32 people who were tutors at the time of the research. Both part-time and full-time courses were represented in the data. Various data-gathering techniques were developed, including conducting participant interviews, collecting participant journals, administering questionnaires, and shadowing trainees throughout a complete course. All data were gathered according to an ethical framework of 7 criteria

(Patton 1990), including informed participant consent, guaranteed anonymity, and confidentiality.

The first phase of the research was a case study of 23 participants (18 trainees and 5 tutors) involved in a 12-week, part-time course. Outcomes took the form of 20 statements, and these were used as the basis of questionnaires designed to elicit further data in the second research phase, the aim being to substantiate, reject, supplement or modify the 20 phase 1 statements. Access to a large number of potential respondents around the world was sought, achieved through a process termed 'generative networking' (Brandt, 2004), which is comparable to 'snowball sampling' (a technique for developing a respondent base through referral, whereby existing respondents identify further potential participants from among their colleagues and acquaintances), differing slightly from it in its reliance upon email as the medium of communication. The application of 'generative networking' provided access to 237 internationally-located respondents from an initial database of 22 contacts, and led to the eventual receipt of 72 completed questionnaires (45 current or former trainees and 27 current tutors).

The sampling strategy adopted in phase 1 relied upon self-selection, and so, to determine resulting bias, reasons for the decision to respond, or not respond, were sought. In the case of tutors, the reason most often cited for responding was interest in the course, while many of those who did not complete the questionnaire cited lack of time. In the case of trainees, however, it was found that those who were satisfied with their experience were far more likely to respond. Anger at having failed or at not doing as well as expected was one of the main reasons given for trainees not responding, and it may be that further research into this group would be worthwhile.

While data were actively sought from tutors in both phases of the research, the central focus of the research was on trainees' experiences. Tutor data were therefore studied in order to provide an alternative perspective on the observations contained within trainee data.

In relation to phase 2 data in particular, participants had been asked to respond discursively and so qualitative techniques were employed in analysis. Initially two data books were created, one for tutors and one for trainees, and data were analyzed by collating all responses to the

same question, then searching for themes within the collated responses. Themes were then coded to facilitate subsequent identification of patterns (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Miles & Huberman 1994; Denzin & Lincoln 2000). Once this process had been completed and all data had been entered, it was possible to reorganize them according to the identified themes, enabling the identification of consistencies or differences within the data.

This process led to outcomes in the form of 26 critical issues in the preparation of TESOL teachers. For purposes of discussion and further investigation, these outcomes were organized into 5 broader themes which suggested themselves: teaching practice, feedback, observation, collaboration, and a collection of miscellaneous issues.

Critical issues in TESOL teacher preparation

The 26 issues identified in the research, organized into the 5 themes, are summarized briefly below.

Teaching Practice

- T1. Trainee - tutor relationship difficulties

A good relationship was considered essential as some trainees felt this increased the chances of receiving a good final grade. Trainees also felt obliged to familiarize themselves with a tutor's preferences, so that they could teach accordingly.

- T2. Complying with tutor expectations; emphasis is on replication

Trainees sometimes felt that the techniques they were expected to demonstrate ran counter to their preferences or instincts. Consequently they experienced anxiety when asked to do something they did not agree with, see the relevance of, feel confident performing, or understand.

- T3. Teaching practice equated with assessment; no time for practice

Some trainees felt under pressure to demonstrate key techniques in a limited time to allow assessment to take place. They craved time to practice without being assessed or monitored. The pressure also led them to avoid taking any risks or experimenting in teaching practice.

- T4. Teaching practice learners differ from "real" learners

Trainees found that their teaching practice learners

differed in a number of ways from those attending regular classes. One of the most significant differences was that trainees found that language learners could be 'primed' by, in some cases, substantial prior experience in the role of language learner for teaching practice purposes.

- T5. Benefit of having teaching practice video-recorded

All trainees agreed that it was beneficial for teaching practice to be video-recorded, to allow for later reflection and analysis. However, the data suggested that this was done only once or twice on any one course.

- T6. Demonstration of technique is prioritised over meeting learners' needs in teaching practice

Many trainees mentioned that they were expected to prioritize the demonstration of techniques in teaching practice, sometimes at the expense of focusing on learners' needs in a lesson. This led to language learners being described as existing as a 'means to an end' and as 'guinea pigs solely for us to practise on'.

- T7. Pressure of time leads tutors to concentrate on trainees' learning and performance; the experience from the perspective of the language learners is given much less attention

Tutors agreed that the main focus of the course was on trainees' learning and performance, and that they had little available time in which to discuss the experience from the point of view of the language learners. While all tutors recognized that this was far from desirable, they felt it was inevitable in the time available.

- T8. Strong desire for unsupervised teaching practice

Although unsupervised teaching practice was not precluded in the documentation of any course studied, in practice it was found to be available only by special arrangement, and was rarely taken up by trainees who were in some cases not aware that this was available. However, trainees expressed a strong desire for scheduled unsupervised teaching practice, to provide an opportunity for practice without assessment. (This area is addressed more fully in Brandt, 2006.)

Feedback

- F1. Need for authentic feedback

Trainees quickly became aware that tutors were capable of manipulating feedback. For example, tutors were found to give positive feedback, even when not easily justified, when they felt that a trainee might not be able to cope with more negative feedback

- F2. Real feedback is equated with criticism

There was a tendency for trainees to believe that useful feedback necessarily entailed negative criticism, which they found more acceptable from tutors than from peers.

- F3. Feedback can be overly negative

Many trainees found that feedback became increasingly harsh as the course progressed. A number of reasons for this were suggested, including: a) as the course progressed, tutors were under increasing pressure to ensure that trainees understood what they had to do in order to pass; and b) increasing familiarity with each other may have given tutors greater license to provide more negative feedback.

- F4. Tutor inconsistency

As might be expected, tutors differed in their interpretation of objectives and application of criteria. Trainees complained that there was little time or opportunity to ask for clarification in this regard, and said that they were "just expected to accept it without any explanation or discussion."

- F5. Inconsistency in peer and tutor feedback

Trainees were frequently frustrated by comments from their peers which were inconsistent with comments from their tutor, and often remained so as tutors did not have sufficient opportunities to address the inconsistency. Trainees also received feedback that was inconsistent with their own views, but were reluctant to question this because of pressure of time.

- F6. Benefit of attending peers' feedback diminishes as course progresses

Trainees were usually expected to comment upon a peer's lesson. However, they understandably preferred to avoid the confrontation that tended

to result from giving negative feedback. They also became increasingly focused on their own survival and performance as the course progressed. These factors meant that trainees tended to take progressively less interest in each other's performance.

- F7. Feedback influenced by quality of tutor-trainee relationship

A good relationship with the teaching practice tutor was considered essential for success and progress. It was felt in particular to lead to more positive feedback after teaching practice, and to a better overall result. Consequently trainees' anxiety was increased when the relationship was a poor one.

- F8. Trainees' need to justify decisions, prevented by lack of time

Trainees were initially keen to use feedback as an opportunity to explain what they were trying to achieve. However, it quickly became apparent to them that there was little time available for this.

- F9. Need for immediate feedback especially on a failing lesson

Trainees appealed for immediate performance feedback on a 'failing' lesson, to ensure adequate remaining time for demonstration of improvement. The data suggested that some tutors delayed informing trainees of failure, in the hope that improvement would be apparent in subsequent lessons. (This area is addressed more fully in Brandt, *forthcoming*, 2008.)

Observation

- O1. Differences between what trainees are expected to do, and what trainees observe experienced teachers doing

Tutors recognized that there were differences between what they teach trainees to do, and what trainees observe experienced teachers doing. They felt that this could be acceptable if they had the opportunity to discuss reasons for it with trainees; however the opportunity for this was precluded, largely through lack of time.

- O2. Experienced teachers rarely using recommended techniques

Some trainees found that they were sometimes

required to demonstrate a skill that they rarely saw being demonstrated by experienced teachers. Experienced teachers, however, were aware of this issue and occasionally made a special effort to demonstrate the technique or skill which they knew the trainees expected to see.

- O3. Trainees criticised when they have copied experienced teachers' technique

Trainees sometimes observed an experienced teacher doing something which they later tried to use themselves. However, they found themselves criticised – not for copying, but for the implementation itself, even when in their eyes it had been successful.

- O4. Benefit of guided observation decreases as course progresses

Guided observation was invariably described as useful and essential at the beginning of the course. Its value however diminished as trainees became more cynical and more occupied or distracted by other aspects of the course.

Collaboration

- C1. Collaboration became less successful as course progressed and trainees became more competitive

Collaborating towards a teaching practice lesson was described as very useful in the early stages, as trainees enjoyed working together and learned from each other, but it became increasingly problematic. Trainees reported anxiety in particular with regard to opportunities created while collaborating for peers to "pinch ideas". This was felt to be threatening in the context of assessment, where trainees were keen to receive and retain credit for their own ideas.

- C2. Collaboration negatively affected by tutor favouritism

Trainees felt that their ability to collaborate effectively with a peer could be hindered by a tutor showing favoritism for that peer.

- C3. Pressure of time hinders collaboration

Some trainees described finding that the time that was required for collaboration to be effective was not justified by the benefits. They also experienced unfairness in terms of either the quality or the quantity of time and effort each

member of the group put into the task, and found that they did not have the time available to address such problems.

Miscellaneous

- M1. Insufficient attention paid to learners’ learning

Trainees felt strongly that language learners were not the main focus of their training and that they were unable to address their needs. They referred to this situation in very negative terms.

- M2. Final grades are felt to reflect actual performance but not potential

Most trainees felt that the grade they had been awarded was a good reflection of their performance; but not, however, of their ability or potential.

Model of learning

The model of learning reflected in the issues above is one in which learning is seen as a matter of transfer or ‘being told’, with a number of features. It:

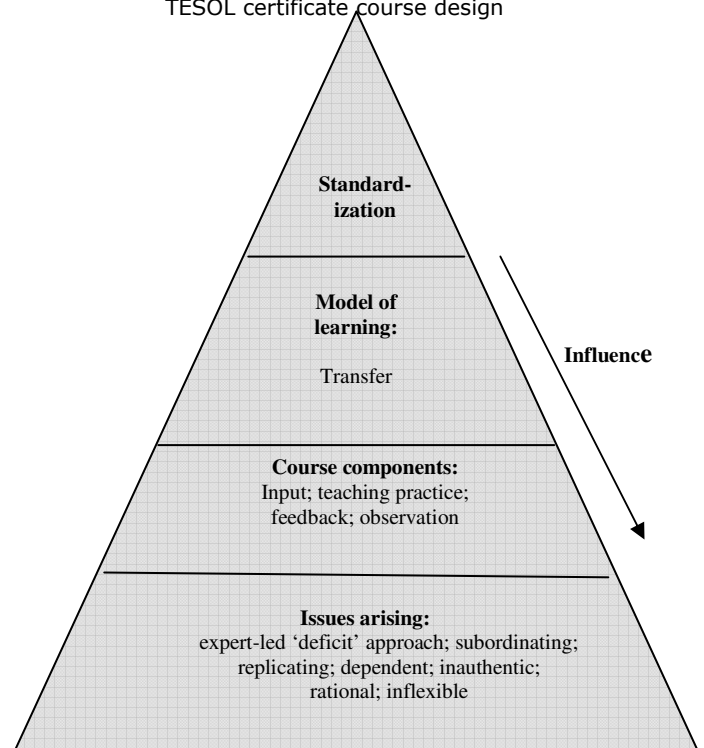
- is expert-directed (tutor has it; trainee needs it; e.g. T1; F4)
- may be subordinating (tutor takes precedence over experienced teacher, teacher over trainee, trainee over language learner; e.g. T4; T6; T7)
- is replicating (trainees are expected to copy techniques known to work, with little further reflection or question; e.g. T2; T6; T7)
- is dependent (trainees are dependent upon tutors for feedback and believe that their success or failure is linked to their relationship with their tutor; e.g. T1; F7; F9; C2)
- leads to the creation of inauthentic structures (significant aspects of the course are artificial; e.g. T4; T6; F1; O1; O2; M1)
- is rational (trainees experience little opportunity to reflect, experiment, explore, ask questions; e.g. F4; F5; C3, M2)

- is inflexible (course structures were not able to respond flexibly to trainees’ changing needs as they moved through the course; e.g. F6; O4; C1)

This model fits comfortably with the perceived need for standardization, because it removes as much variability between courses as possible.

However, “standardization [can lead to] homogeneity of actual and desired student learning [and it] can threaten creativity, assessment of multiple intelligences, and the promotion of individuality.” (Braskamp & Braskamp 1997). It is suggested that in the case of certificate courses as described above, the need for standardization drives the overall approach and is likely to lead to the kind of issues described above. A relationship between standardization, the transfer model of learning and the issues arising in the research is suggested in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: A standardization-driven approach to TESOL certificate course design



To address such issues and difficulties, it is instructive to turn to the area of adult learning.

Adult learning

A recent review of research into adult learning studied several models of adult learning from

perspectives that include behaviourist, cognitive and developmental. Its authors concluded that:

It is important to resist inappropriate models of adult development, particularly those that assume there is a single developmental path and end-point towards which we should all be aiming. [...] It is clear that it would be partial and misleading to see adult learning [...] as something that can be fully controlled by a teacher transmitting particular curriculum content. Instead, learning is present in a dialectical interaction between individual, situational and social factors. The learner's contexts, purposes, and practices are the most important factors in the process (Tusting and Barton 2003: 34 – 36).

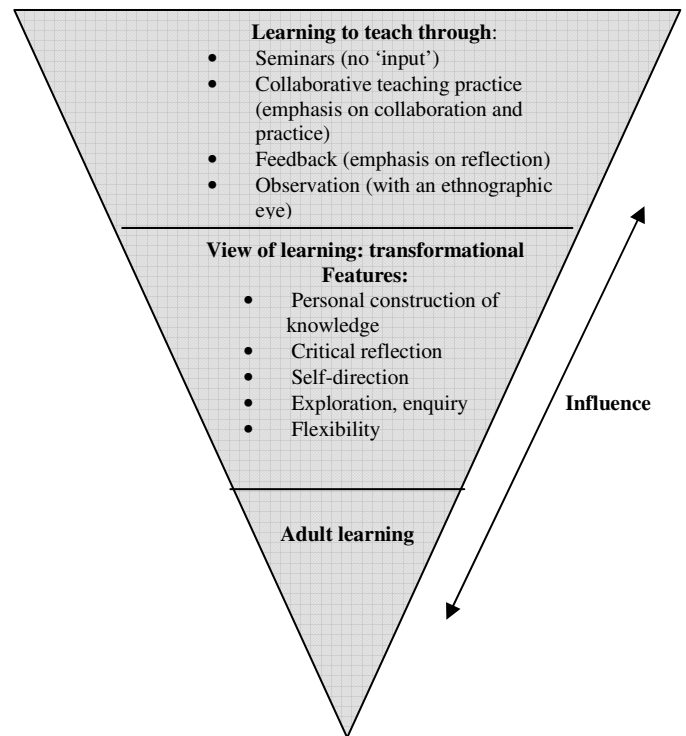
They summarize their work by identifying a number of inferences that may be drawn about adult learning. These include the following characteristics. Adults:

- have their own motivations for learning and build on existing knowledge.
- have a drive towards self-direction.
- have the ability to learn about their own learning processes and can benefit from discussion and reflection on this.
- learn by engaging in practice and participating.
- build and reflect upon their experience.
- experience a great deal of learning that is incidental and idiosyncratic, and learn through reflective learning that is unique to each person.
- are able to reorganize experience and 'see' situations in new ways. Thus adult learning is potentially transformative, personally and socially. (adapted from Tusting and Barton 2003: 36)

To accommodate such understandings, it is suggested that the development of professional competence should be seen less as a question of replication of technical expertise, or *training*, and more as the development of artistry (Schön 1987), or *education*, where reflection, dialogue, discussion and debate underpin collaborative enquiry, and where learning (that of trainees and that of language learners) is assigned a pivotal and locally-contextualised role. It is suggested therefore that

in place of standardization, we should consider an approach that foregrounds learning. Such a learning-based approach could be illustrated as follows:

Figure 2: A learning-based approach to TESOL certificate course design



Features of this approach would include an emphasis on:

- dialogue and discussion in seminars, to include both tutors and experienced teachers, who share and explain their views, values and personal belief systems
- unassessed teaching practice opportunities (Brandt 2006)
- the integration of reflection and feedback (Brandt 2008, *forthcoming*)
- greater recognition and opportunities for application of a trainee's existing skills and previous experience
- opportunities for self-direction (e.g. through access to a library including an extensive collection of video-recorded

lessons)

- reflection and setting/achieving personal goals
- observing experienced teachers with an ‘ethnographic eye’ i.e. trainees become ‘participant observers’ and take part in classroom activities rather than observe from the perspective of an outsider
- non-competitive, supportive teamwork
- prioritizing of learning (the trainee’s and the language learner’s), which becomes an object of enquiry
- involving all participants in the process, including the language learner
- authenticity at all stages e.g. through the involvement of genuine (that is, unprimed) language learners whose needs are considered and planned for
- flexibility and responsiveness to trainees’ changing needs during the course

The approach, reflecting a developmental, transformational, perspective, suggestive more of education and development than of training, would prompt further shifts in vocabulary, from ‘trainee’ to ‘participant’; from ‘outcome’ to ‘performance’ and from ‘input’ to ‘learning’, for example.

Conclusion: the challenge for teacher educators

It is suggested that the current model may be having a repressive effect on development and change as tutors, largely unenfranchised in terms of certificate course design, are technicians implementing another’s plan, a plan that has been prepared at some distance from the context in which it is applied, and which tutors are expected to replicate from one course to the next. The opportunity to create and be involved in the development of an approach to training that draws upon the synergy of several individual tutors’ strengths, interests, values, belief systems and experience, which encourages ownership and pride, and which is designed with the needs in mind of members of the communities in which courses are held, is largely absent.

However it is suggested that tutors, armed with such understandings of adult learning as those discussed above, could readily become – or be invited to become – more closely involved in the design of a course that is driven by learning.

An alternative approach suggests itself, which would ‘allow for learning’, as discussed above. It would be possible for a central organisation or organisations to identify core performance criteria and standards that someone would be expected to meet at the end of a certificate course. Decisions regarding the kind of course that would best meet these criteria and standards could however be left to individual centres. Given greater freedom to design their own courses, significant differences may eventually emerge between courses, as one would offer more time for unassessed teaching practice while another adopted more of an apprenticeship approach, assigning trainees to work alongside experienced teachers, for example. Some courses and centres would become known for the quality of their training course, and greater choice would be provided to the trainee in terms of finding a model that best matched his or her learning preferences. Employers would therefore judge the quality of an applicant’s qualification in terms of the reputation of the centre where he or she had trained, as well as the qualifications of its staff, its syllabus, its criteria and standards, much as is currently the case with degrees and universities worldwide.

In the case outlined above, accreditation would still be feasible and useful, providing an external validation of the internal training decisions and processes in relation to core criteria and standards. However, it might be worth considering the allocation of this task to a professional body that represents the needs and interests of all stakeholders in the process, that is, trainees, tutors, institutions and language learners worldwide.

One of the main advantages of such an approach would be greater integrity: the approach to the development of new teachers of ESOL would be underpinned and reinforced by values which, informed by current understandings of adult learning, are increasingly promoted in language learning classrooms.

The challenge, then, is for providers of certificate courses to move away from a standardized, centralized course structure that translates into a “horrible sets of compromises”, towards “[having] standards without

standardization [...], high expectations without undue rigidity, and [being] demanding without becoming overly prescriptive.” (Braskamp & Braskamp 1997).

For this to take place, a first step may be for certificate course tutors around the world to recognise that they are capable of contributing more towards the design of their own courses, and to see that therein lie opportunities for their own learning and development.

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