Feel the Width: Teachers’ Expectations of an In-service Course

Ian Marsh

To cite this article: Ian Marsh (1987) Feel the Width: Teachers’ Expectations of an In-service Course, Journal of In-Service Education, 13:2, 76-80, DOI: 10.1080/0305763870130204

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0305763870130204

Published online: 12 Sep 2006.
Feel the Width: Teachers’ Expectations of an In-service Course

Ian Marsh
North East Wales Institute of Higher Education

This paper examines the reasons teachers give for participating in in-service courses and the expectations they have of such courses. The focus is on a one year, full time Diploma course based at the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, although the issues and findings raised by the study of this course have, I believe, a pertinence for INSET work in general. I have chosen to examine this particular course, entitled Diploma in the Education of the 14-19 Age Group, as I am one of the team of tutors working on it for a substantial part of their time-tables.

The material for this paper was gathered from lengthy, semi-structured interviews with the course members who followed the Diploma between September 1985 and July 1986. Each course member completed a questionnaire during the last fortnight of the course and I used this as a basis for and stimulus to the interview. These interviews centred on a discussion of the extent to which the course had or had not met the expectations and needs of the course members, the differences between their hopes and expectations and the reality they had experienced. Below I will report and comment on the motivations given for following the Diploma course and the expectations held. Working closely with, and having formed fairly close relations with, the subjects of one’s research throws up its own methodological problems and issues — in whose interests are the answers given; who sets the agenda for the interviews. It is clear that my role as tutor and researcher would be liable to influence the responses I received. To mitigate this effect I assured the course members that the information and comment they gave was in no way part of an evaluation of the course or of themselves, in fact all my material was gathered after the course work had been completed and assessed, to all intents and purposes after the formal part of the course had finished.

What follows is not a detailed quantitative analysis, and I did not set out to test a specific hypothesis, except in the vaguest sense that in-service courses are used by teachers in a wide variety of ways which will influence and determine the expectations held of such courses. This particular Diploma course, for example, was seen and used by a small group of fourteen experienced teachers (the teaching experience of this group ranged from eight years to thirty-two years and their teaching posts from Scale One to Senior Teacher) in quite distinct manners — a means for career progression; a time to reflect on education and on their role in it; a break; a morale booster.

It would seem logical to suggest that the expectations held of in-service courses will depend to a great extent on the reasons given for following them. If teachers have themselves chosen to follow a course it is reasonable to assume that they will have thought through the reasons for and against such a course of action and that this process will have strongly influenced their expectations. If, on the other hand, teachers have been nominated for a course, or persuaded to follow a particular course, then their expectations will be likely to have been influenced by the way in which the course is ‘sold’ to them, usually by those in positions of responsibility and seniority over them, Head Teachers for instance. In this case it is the expectations of the institution, and in particular of senior management within it, which will be crucial. Furthermore, institutions may themselves be constrained by LEA policy, with secondment of staff used as a means of managing falling rolls, either in a specific school or within an authority.

The fourteen members of the Diploma group all chose to come on the course although two were offered a secondment and then looked for a course to fit. When we look in more detail at the reasons given for following this course it is apparent that many teachers choose to follow a course because of the offer, or the possibility of an offer, of a place. In other words, there is little sense in a teacher making an application for a course that his or her authority would not support. Thus the sponsorship of the LEA for a particular course is of central importance; and it is likely to be the case that support for courses within an authority, in local colleges of higher education for instance, will be more readily forthcoming than support for applications...
to courses in other authorities — retrenchment in a period of crisis and cutback. While it might be unfair to suggest that teachers in general, and the participants on the 14-19 Diploma specifically, would follow any course, it is clear, and understandable, that practical issues will play a major part in determining who applies for in-service courses and what courses they apply for. Practical issues such as location, the way in which the course is viewed by the school or LEA, whether it will be seen as a useful addition to a curriculum vita and the likelihood of support from the LEA and the school.

Rather than try to group reasons for following the course and pre-course expectations under particular headings it is perhaps wiser to let the course members speak for themselves. While a vast array of issues and points were raised by the course members’ responses there was, nonetheless, an apparent meshing of two major thrusts. On the one hand there were the clearly personal reasons, the need for a ‘re-charging of batteries’, a break, often expressed in terms of a needed change and recompense after so many years teaching. On the other hand there were the professional, career influenced reasons, some clearly expressed in terms of aiming for a new role or area, others in terms of keeping up-to-date, being seen to be keen and flexible. And, of course, these two lines of reasoning and motivation are by no mean mutually exclusive.

The need for a break, a chance to reflect and take stock was, not surprisingly, mentioned by most of the course members.

‘Well I came on the course for several reasons really, some of them personal ones. I felt that after twenty years of teaching Physical Education and Welsh Studies I could do with something fresh and time to sit back and reflect on my position as a teacher ... and also experience, well, new ideas to enable me really to expand on the work I was involved with’ (Margaret).

‘It’s only in the last few years that I’ve considered wanting a year off ... I’ve been quite happy doing what I’ve been doing, but I think what hit me was that I feel although I’ve missed promotion, and if I’m not going to get promotion, well at least this is some compensation and it might help to lead to some promotion’ (Trevor).

Thus, the chance for a break and a period of reflection was seen as crucial, but the hope that career opportunities would go hand in hand with this was also important.

I. What were your aims, personally and professionally?
Graham Professionally to gain promotion. Personally, as professionally plus a break from teaching, to be able to take stock and have a rest.

For some, the chance of a break was the only motivating force and any career opportunities were seen as incidental and in the main irrelevant.

I. Would you like to explain why you wished to come on this course?
Paul Basically I knew someone from last year’s course and he enjoyed it ... the social aspect and the fact that there were only three days in college a week, I think they’ve tightened up a little this year haven’t they? The main reason I came on it was to get away from teaching ... I’d have taken a secondment years ago if I could have done, the only reason I’ve come on this course is because the secondment was available ... and as the DES pay 75% of my salary the LEA was only too happy to get rid of me ... My reason was for a year off, not for the piece of paper at the end of it, and I didn’t particularly care whether I had the piece of paper at the end of it or not ...

I. So, what were your expectations of the course pre-September 1985?
Paul To learn something of recent innovations in TEVI, YTS, CPVE and so on, but mainly to do it in a short working week.

As suggested above, the ‘professional’ motivations ranged from a vague desire to keep up with new developments to more clearly thought out attempts to make oneself more marketable in a situation where opportunities for career mobility were becoming more and more limited. Gone are the days when a reasonably competent, qualified teacher could expect to have gained regular promotions to a senior position by the time they were in their mid-thirties.

I. Two points I’d like to mention here. Firstly, why did you wish to come on a full time course and, secondly, why did you choose to apply for this particular course? Were you looking for a secondment or did the}
course attract you, if you can distinguish those two?

Gareth I think it’s a bit of both really. I was working in a Comprehensive School during a time when there were a lot of new initiatives and I basically saw the advert in the newspaper and it sounded interesting and I made enquiries about it. That’s how I came to apply and come on the course. So that I could keep up with these new initiatives.

I. You didn’t go out and say ‘I must find a course . . .’

Gareth No, not particularly, no.

I. Did you know anything about the course apart from what you’d read in the brochure?

Gareth Nothing whatsoever.

This view and pre-course position was echoed by other course members. ‘Prior to starting I never had a clear idea what the course was about, the course booklet left me none the wiser, so I didn’t have too many expectations’ (Tom).

‘I commenced the course with a completely open mind and therefore had no pre-determined expectations’ (Margaret).

Even without clear expectations as to the nature of the course, participants perceived strong practical reasons for their involvement. With falling rolls in many secondary schools, teachers are aware that flexibility and adaptability may become essential elements both for survival as well as promotion.

Tom I was in the position, the peculiar position, that my school was closing, and I was in an overstaffed department and it seemed advisable at the time to either go on a course or be redeployed elsewhere. So in answer to why go on a course, circumstances dictated that, that’s why I started looking in the course booklet. Why I chose this particular course; it seemed applicable to me in the sense that as a 14-19 Diploma course, one of the reasons why . . . High School is closing and I’m being redeployed is because of the f.e. intake, it is also going to become a sixth form college, so hopefully this course might have led me into something to do with that in that 14-19 is obviously a bridge between secondary and f.e. . . .

I. There were practical advantages plus the fact that the course also seemed to be what you were looking for.

Trevor Yes, but once I found out more about the course after my first application I still wanted to go on it . . . which was quite important to me, because I could have thought I didn’t get on that course for what happened, rather than wait, you wanted to go out and have some say in it?

Tom Yes, there was some input from me in the sense that, in that one of my desires was to increase my marketability and in the sense that it would increase my qualifications, which might fit me for other jobs; and it also deferred someone having to go from the department . . . I did see it as an opportunity to increase my qualification.

The major attractions of this particular in-service course would seem to be its potential for helping teachers who are looking for a change in emphasis or direction in their careers, for a chance to be considered for positions that would require some knowledge and expertise in the new educational initiatives, while at the same time providing a chance to reflect and think about their involvement in teaching. These factors are juxtaposed in Trevor’s comments.
whatever reason and tried something else, which I didn’t.

Career influenced reasons were mentioned more directly and specifically by a number of the course members. In talking about his aim to move into the f.e. sector, Tom pointed out.

‘First of all the pay’s better to be mercenary about it. And my qualification in terms of industrial experience might be useful in f.e. Things in secondary education are tending to gette pre-vocational anyway, so we’re led to believe, so why not gain payment for actually being involved in a vocational sort of education . . . might as well get the pay for it!’

Although this paper has been written before the course members have re-entered their regular teaching jobs, the number of them that have used this Diploma course, or are intending to use it, as a forerunner to further study is striking. Particularly in view of the fact that for the majority of the group it was their first involvement in academic study and written work for a number of years. Few of the course members started the course with the intention that it would be a way back into extended academic study, although this was a reason given by James. ‘Yes I was looking for a course and I wrote to several different colleges . . . I wanted to do a course because I found I wasn’t getting anywhere at . . . college really. I’d applied for some jobs without success, so I thought it was time I did something. I then wondered about whether to do an M.Ed., I wasn’t sure I’d be able to cope with that, so this in some ways was a taster. I thought it would offer a variety of information on current educational thinking and so on, really perhaps it would prompt me to select something from it, maybe to do an M.Ed. at a later date’. More generally, the course was seen by some as a period of retraining.

‘To be able to move from P.E. to classroom based teaching’ (John).

‘To aid a change in emphasis in my career, away from P.E. and toward pre-vocational education’ (Trevor).

While for some it might offer a chance to move out of secondary education.

‘An opportunity to look beyond secondary education for my own career development’ (Stephen).

In attempting to discover the motivations for engaging in in-service training I asked a number of the course members why they felt more teachers did not consider or apply for INSET courses, and specifically this one year Diploma course.

I. I wonder why, given that many teachers seem to be dissatisfied in some way with life in their schools, more teachers do not apply to go on courses such as this.

Gareth Well, I know of certain cases of members of staff in my school who are very frustrated and generally fed up and it would obviously be of therapeutic value for them to take a secondment, if only to have twelve months respite from contact with the kids. But I think people get to a point where they become so stagnated that they don’t even have the initiative to apply for these courses.

I. Do you think people worry that if they go away they might lose out on something?

Gareth Yes, I think also there could be the underlying fear that it would make them ill afterwards, because I know of cases of teachers who have been on secondment and have been unable to cope on their return to school. Whereas before they would be just competent teachers.

I. A lot of people have said to me that if you go on a course after a few years teaching you come back invigorated and refreshed, but what you’re saying is if you go away you might not want to go anywhere near the school again.

Gareth That’s correct, yes.

I. How do you feel about that? I mean do you feel you’re going to cope next year?

Gareth Yes, I think I’ll be O.K. I mean the second placement on this course was school based, I found I could easily cope with that and quite enjoyed it, although I was rather apprehensive before actually commencing it. No, I don’t have any particular worries personally.

As well as this double negative argument, that teachers don’t want to go on courses because they don’t think they’ll want to, or even be able to, return, other respondents suggested more practical reasons for teachers not considering secondment for in-service courses.

Trevor I think quite often people are put off by the fact that they don’t think they’ll get on them, so they don’t bother. People may feel, ‘Oh, I won’t get the secondment so I won’t bother applying for the course’.

I. A sort of inertia
Trevor I think other people who don’t consider the option of a course may develop in other ways in their school, they may develop a little empire for themselves within school ... it might not be because they’re sitting doing nothing ...

I. Is there a feeling that if one is away for a year one might miss out on something?
Trevor Yes, that was a factor I had to consider ... and I should imagine it influences other people. They delay in the hope of getting promotion, and if they do happen to get promotion then they’re satisfied with that rather than following the idea of going on a course.

The first point raised by Trevor, about people not applying for courses because they feel they won’t get accepted, was echoed by Tom.

'Think courses are largely seen by the ordinary classroom teacher as being a perk or prerogative of the hierarchy, 'I won’t bother applying for that because I won’t be accepted on it'.

While the fear of ‘missing out’ was mentioned by others.

Paul I think probably because a lot of teachers are more career minded than me, they feel they need to stay in school at a time when jobs are fairly thin on the ground and they don’t want to miss out ...

I. The danger is someone might step in your shoes..
Paul That’s right, or step into some shoes that become vacant which you won’t be aware of because you’re away.

As I suggested above, the expectations of a course will be strongly influenced by the reasons and motivations behind the applications for that course. Nonetheless, in order to examine the way in which the delivery of a course is perceived and the extent to which it is seen as having helped to meet these expectations (both during the period of the course and in the participants’ working lives after they have returned to their teaching positions) it would be useful to list some of the specific educational expectations, as well as the general professional hopes.

In answer to the question ‘What were your expectations of the course pre-September 1985?’ a desire to learn and gain information was held by most of the group.

‘An opportunity to think about innovations in the 14-19 sector unencumbered by school’ (Stephen).
‘An opportunity to get acquainted with as much as possible relevant to the 14-19 age group for my position in school as academic co-ordinator for years four and five’. (Phillip)
‘To regain enthusiasm for a now de-skilled, low status career, to stand back and evaluate one’s place and commitment in one’s school ... to gain knowledge of educational initiatives and changes’ (Elizabeth).
‘To become aware of and conversant with, the latest developments with respect to the 14-19 year old’ (Graham).
‘That it should afford time for reflection in my present appointment. I hoped that it would enable me to change direction in my career’ (Andrew).
‘To reflect on my current practice, to learn about new initiatives’ (James).

In this short report I have spent some time detailing the motivations for following this particular in-service course, and the expectations that the clients held of it. In concluding I will leave the last word to one of the less career conscious course members; a comment which, I feel, indicates the importance and the value of trying to get behind the reasons and motivations underlying participation in in-service training in general.

‘If I had expected more I’d probably have put more into it and got a great deal more out of it. Perhaps I’m wrong in assuming it doesn’t do much for people, it does as much as they want it to’ (Paul).

Note

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. In the interviews, I. denotes Interviewer/Jan Marsh ... denotes material edited out.

2. The research discussed in this paper is part of a more detailed, longitudinal study of the perceptions of the teachers following this in-service course and the extent to which their expectations are or are not met after they have returned to their regular work.

References