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An instrument to elicit teachers' beliefs and assumptions

Helen Donaghue

Teachers' beliefs influence the acceptance and uptake of new approaches, techniques, and activities, and therefore play an important part in teacher development. Consequently, trainers running teacher education courses should consider encouraging participants to think about their personal beliefs and theories about teaching before providing input. This article proposes the use of an instrument designed to elicit teachers' beliefs based on Kelly's (1969) theory of personal constructs, using an adapted version of his repertory grid technique.

How teachers' beliefs can influence development

It is generally agreed that teachers' personal theories, beliefs, and assumptions need to be uncovered before development can occur, enabling critical reflection and then change. Beliefs about teaching, learners, or a teacher's role, for example, guide teachers in their practice, and are derived from sources such as experience and personality.

As an example of how beliefs can influence development, Lamb (1993: 75) describes following up an in-service course by interviewing participants of the course one year later. He describes this as a 'sobering experience' because he found participants feeling 'confused and frustrated'. This, he believes, is caused firstly by 'inability to apply the new ideas within the existing parameters of syllabus, examinations, and other practical constraints' but also by

mental parameters within which [participants] conceptualized the teaching and learning process, and which had determined how they had interpreted the ideas during and after the course.
(ibid.: 71, original emphasis)

This experience demonstrates the importance of teacher beliefs, and their influence on the acceptance and uptake of new approaches and techniques. Participants on a teacher development course who are simply presented with a string of activities will be unable to assimilate them unless they already have exactly the same beliefs and assumptions as the trainer, which is highly unlikely.

It seems that there is often a great difference in teacher development between input (from the trainer/expert), uptake (elements which participants find interesting and consider transferable to classrooms, i.e. which match their own theory), and output (what is actually implemented in the participants' classes). Attending an IATEFL

conference, for example, which typically consists of a series of one-off workshops or presentations, may be interesting (and this is of great value in increasing interest and motivation in teaching) but it would be illuminating to study how many of the ideas presented in the sessions are actually transferred into practice. Firstly, context difference will be responsible for filtering much of the input. Secondly, participants must understand the theory behind activities and techniques. Lastly, participants must allow new ideas to be assimilated into their personal theory, and to have the creativity and adaptability to transfer new knowledge into teaching practice.

All this points to the importance of beginning a development or training course with awareness-raising activities in order to bring participants' theories and underlying principles out into the open, to challenge them or incorporate them into the course content, and to facilitate change. This can help to maintain a cycle of reflection throughout the course. It is also important to be aware that participants may become temporarily destabilized as their beliefs and assumptions are challenged and changed, and may need time and support to re-establish confidence.

The difficulty of eliciting beliefs

The difficulty in eliciting beliefs lies in the fact that personal theories may be subconscious; teachers may be unable to articulate them. Also related to this is the issue of self-image; subconsciously or consciously, teachers may wish to promote a particular image of themselves. Furthermore, there is often a difference between espoused theory (theory claimed by a participant) and theory in action (what a participant actually does in the classroom). Faced with these difficulties, how can teacher beliefs be elicited?

Roberts (1998: 310–11) suggests a visualization activity which aims to elicit personal theories of teaching and learning. In this activity participants consider the roles of teachers and learners, and then think of and discuss metaphors. Roberts gives the example metaphor of 'The teacher's a judge' and 'The pupils are on trial'. However, the effectiveness of this activity must be questioned. In-service course participants are often experienced, sophisticated, and well read, and may have been on other similar in-service courses. It is very unlikely that they would give a response like 'the teacher's a judge'. Responses such as 'facilitator', 'guide', and 'informer', which are prevalent in EFL literature, are more likely. Secondly, teacher and learner roles are much discussed in the literature (and indeed in teacher education courses), so genuine personal theory is unlikely to be elicited from such an activity — participants may give the responses they think are expected of them. Similar activities such as eliciting answers to 'Try to agree on five important characteristics of good/bad teaching' (Doff 1988: 122) are often used at the beginning of courses but, again, they are familiar, and so may produce formulaic or insincere—and thus inaccurate—results. Edge (1992) suggests an interesting process of co-operative development which helps teachers see themselves clearly through discussion with others, but this process works best over time, and is therefore not suitable for a short teacher education course.

This article suggests an activity based on a repertory grid technique (RGT) activity (details below), which can be used at the beginning of a course, based loosely on Kelly's (1969) personal construct theory.

Personal construct theory

Kelly viewed man as a scientist who tries to make sense of the universe, himself, and the situations he encounters. He makes hypotheses, tests them, and then forms personal constructs. The constructs are his theories and beliefs, his way of organizing and making sense of the world, and they will change and be adapted with experience. For an excellent explanation of the construct theory see Fransella and Bannister (1977). Kelly's personal construct theory seems to mirror the reflective teaching process of forming ideas and beliefs based on experience, reflecting on them, and perhaps changing or adapting either beliefs and/or practice. Pope and Keen discuss how personal construct theory can develop teaching:

... individuals, students and teachers alike, [need] to be adaptive, personally viable and self-directive. Such self-direction or self-organisation can only come about if the individual makes an effort to explore his viewpoints, purposes, means for obtaining ends and keeps these under constant review.

(Pope and Keen 1981: 118)

Kelly devised the Repertory Grid Technique as an instrument to elicit personal construct systems, so it seems appropriate to use the same technique to elicit participants' theories and beliefs, or personal construct systems, about teaching. The grid can be seen as a reflective device to raise self-awareness, and to encourage understanding of other course participants' perspectives. Pope and Keen use the metaphor of a mirror to describe RGT:

... we argue that [RGT] is best used as a psychological 'mirror' which should help the individual, rather than the investigator, to understand his world.

(Pope and Keen 1981: 155)

Kelly viewed constructs as bi-polar arguing that we never affirm anything without denying something else, e.g. 'nice-nasty', 'here-there', 'past-future', 'odd-even'. The RGT requires subjects to decide, from three given elements, a way in which two of the elements are alike and the third is different. For example, when comparing three different people known to a subject (the 'elements', e.g. 'mother', 'self', 'friend') constructs such as 'sensitive to people's feelings/insensitive', or 'impatient/stops to think', may be elicited. The construct is recorded on a grid, and the subject proceeds to the next triad. The resulting grid is a personal construct record which can then be analysed and compared with other grids. See Appendix for an example of a completed grid.

The instrument Development

The RGT instrument below has been changed and developed. Firstly, two versions were piloted with a group of EFL teachers in a language school in the UK. These versions dealt with two aspects of teaching: classroom management and teaching in general. The trials were purely experimental, and had the following purposes:

- To see if teachers responded well to the activity: to find out if they found it useful, and were able to produce constructs.
- To see if teachers understood and accepted the personal construct theory behind the activity.
- To find out if instructions for the activity were clear and easy to understand.
- To explain and demonstrate the activity to other trainers and find out if they were interested in including it on development courses.

The conclusions were that the teachers responded well to the activity: they especially enjoyed the novelty and challenge of it, and found the theory and process interesting. The instructions were clear, and teachers completed the activity successfully. Lastly, the trainers were enthusiastic about including a similar activity on their courses.

One illuminating factor to come out of the trials was that teachers found abstract ideas very difficult to compare. In the RGT's original use (clinical psychology), the elements Kelly used were people known to the respondents (e.g. mother, father) so I decided that using the participants themselves, and teachers known to them as elements, would be more appropriate, and easier for participants to compare than aspects of teaching. (See Appendix for the list of final elements.) One criticism came from a trainer who objected to the element 'a teacher you consider ineffective', but this is vital, as both positive and negative elements must be included for meaningful comparison (and it is naive to pretend that ineffective teachers do not exist).

Piloting

From July to September 2000, the RGT instrument was piloted with English teachers from various European countries who came to the UK to do a two-week development course in teaching methodology. There were five groups of 5–8 participants over the summer, and three trainers. Participants did the RGT activity in their first session, with each RGT activity producing many constructs (see Appendix for examples of elicited constructs) and much discussion between pairs and in plenary. Below is an explanation of how to do the activity, and then a discussion of its effectiveness.

Activity procedure

- Trainers introduce the activity, explain the concept of personal constructs, and explain the aim of the activity: to elicit teachers' beliefs and assumptions about teaching.
- Participants are divided into pairs. Each pair receives one set of cards. Each card has an element of the grid on it. Pairs go through the cards, and each participant writes the name of a person who corresponds to the element on each card. Participant A writes the name of the person at the top of the card, and participant B writes it at the bottom, e.g.

<i>Judit</i> A teacher you learnt well with <i>Fernando</i>	<i>Zsolt</i> A student who learns English easily <i>Ana</i>
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Thus, when finished, each pair will have a set of cards with people known to them to compare in the activity. (It is important, for reasons of confidentiality, that pairs do not come from the same teaching context, and therefore will not know the people written on their partner's card. If this is unavoidable, then participants should be instructed to simply think of a corresponding person, and not to write their name on the cards.)

- Cards are shuffled, and each participant is given a grid. (See Appendix.)
- Pairs choose three cards at random, and then, individually, think of a way in which two of their three people are similar, and one is different. They record this on their grid, writing the way the two are similar (the construct) in the 'construct' column, ticking the two elements which are similar, and putting a cross in the column of the element which is different. (See Appendix for an example of a completed grid.)
- Pairs then compare their constructs, which usually generates discussion.
- Pairs then return the cards to the pile, shuffle them, choose three more at random, and repeat the procedure. (Pairs can reject triads if they find them too difficult to compare, and simply shuffle and choose again.)
- After approximately six turns, a plenary group feedback is conducted, with participants comparing constructs.

The activity should take about 45 minutes.

Results

Participants on the two-week development course were invited to answer an end-of-course questionnaire which included a question asking participants to evaluate the RGT activity:

Did this activity help you reflect on your attitude and beliefs about teaching?

Of the 23 questionnaire respondents, 19 (83%) said Yes, and 4 (17%) said No. Of the respondents who responded positively, some commented further on beliefs and attitudes, for example:

It helped me a lot to think about my attitude and about the main approaches to teaching.

It helped me to realise that the more open-minded you are the better teacher you may become. It's not difficult to have an opinion about others, but it is quite difficult to be critical about ourselves. The activity on 'personal teaching constructs' helped me to see myself through others, by comparing my own constructs to the other teachers. Even if the activity done in class [RGT] hadn't been useful to anything else—which is not true—it would have been a way to make me see myself through the others.

Of the four respondents who said the RGT activity was not helpful, three commented further. Respondent 1 seemed not to understand the aim of the activity, which is not to change beliefs or attitudes but to uncover and voice them:

It didn't change my principles, my attitude to teaching. Everything remained the same.

Interestingly, respondent 4, who said that the activity was helpful, made a similar comment:

I think my beliefs remained the same.

Both participants had the same trainer, so it is possible that the trainer did not explain the purpose of the activity properly. Respondent 22 thought that the activity was unnecessary:

I always reflect on my own about teaching. Everything was already clear.

We must accept that some course participants will feel like this, especially if they have a clear awareness of their own beliefs and attitudes about teaching. There may also be participants who resist exploring their attitudes and beliefs, and who therefore will not be receptive to the RGT activity (or indeed to a reflective approach).

Respondent 20 commented:

I didn't understand what I had to do afterwards. I can't see a practical point reflecting on my students or colleagues. They won't be better or worse.

The second part of this comment perhaps indicates that the respondent has not understood the aim of the activity, but this is difficult to interpret. However, her first comment is significant, and reflects a concern shared by respondent 17:

The activity was useful but I'm not sure how I can use the result of the analysis.

This point is crucial: what do we do with the constructs after they have been elicited? The three trainers who piloted the activity used them in different ways. One trainer discussed the grid's value as an introductory activity, saying that it gave the group interesting information about the participants, and provided a novel starting point for the course, as well as introducing the reflective element of the course. All trainers reported that the constructs generated discussion through comparison, and started participants thinking about their teaching. One trainer asked the group to sort their constructs into negative and positive, which also generated discussion as some constructs (she gave the example of 'strict') were controversial. Trainers tried to recall constructs during the course. For example, in a session about classroom management, the trainer selected constructs she considered relevant to the topic, and asked participants to rank them in order of importance to management. One trainer suggested that the activity had limited use on a two-week development course, and that it might perhaps be more interesting to use on a longer or pre-service course, where constructs from the beginning or end of course could be compared.

Most significantly, however, all trainers agreed that the constructs were best used as a prompt for reflection. In order to use the constructs

effectively participants need time to think about them, so they were asked to comment on their constructs in a learning log which the trainer read and responded to. This encouraged participants to fully reflect on the constructs and their teaching beliefs and practice. Trainers reported that, in fact, the log entries were often much more interesting than the activity, because they could see that participants had developed and expanded on the constructs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the RGT activity was successful in that most course participants found that it informed them about their personal constructs as related to teaching. Participants enjoyed comparing and discussing constructs, and trainers found that the activity provided useful insights into participants' teaching beliefs, and acted as a catalyst to thought and reflection at the beginning of the course. Trainers also found that it introduced and encouraged the notion of reflective thinking which underpinned the course. However, it is important to realize that the activity is in its infancy, and needs to be piloted on other and different types of courses, and hopefully then adapted and improved.

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The author

Helen Donaghue is an EFL teacher at Sharjah Women's College, UAE. She has an MSc in Applied Linguistics from Edinburgh University, and is interested in teacher education, discourse analysis, and EAP.

Email: helen.donaghue@totalise.co.uk

Appendix

RGT activity grid

Construct	A colleague you consider a good teacher	A colleague you consider ineffective	A teacher you learned well with	A teacher you didn't learn well with	Your present self as a teacher	Your ideal self as a teacher
Quiet	✓	✗		✓		
Sociable	✓			✗	✓	
Open		✗	✓		✓	
Creative			✓		✗	✓
Independent	✓	✗	✓			
Too accepting	✗	✓			✓	
Doesn't listen		✓		✓		✗
Strict			✓		✗	✓
Superficial		✓			✓	✗
Unmotivated	✓	✓	✗			