

## Course handbooks as mediating tools in learning to teach

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In many school-university teacher education partnerships, course handbooks are used to guide teacher mentoring and student teacher learning activities during placements in schools. Using data from a year long ethnographic study of a postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) programme in an English university, the function of course handbooks in mediating student teacher learning in two subject departments (History and Modern Foreign Languages) in one secondary school is analysed. Informed by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the analysis focuses on the handbooks as mediating tools (material/symbolic) in the activity of learning to teach. Qualitative differences of the handbooks-in-use are examined and this leads to a consideration of the potential of such tools for teacher learning in school-university partnerships.

### Key words

Teacher education; Student teacher learning; Handbooks; Mediation; Cultural Historical Activity Theory

The shift to school-based teacher education in England – made statutory in 1992 (DES 1992) – can be seen as arising out of a small number of earlier experiments (c.f. Benton 1990; Griffiths & Owen 1995), where close partnerships were developed between a university department of education and a group of committed local schools. In 1992, however, the partnership model of ITE (initial teacher education) was introduced across England by government Circular, into very different situations than those in which the partnership experiments had arisen. Nationally, university departments and colleges of teacher education had to implement the partnership model and different interpretations of partnership have emerged as political priorities have changed (Furlong *et al.* 2009).

Since 1992, higher education institutions (HEIs) have had to seek new ways in which to support their students' learning while placed in schools for considerable periods of time. One way of achieving this aim has been the preparation and distribution of course handbooks, texts that address both the student teacher and the school-based mentor teacher. In this article, we

focus on handbooks as tools in the process of learning to teach and we report on research, informed by cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) that investigated how such tools were picked up and used in ITE activity.

### **Different perspectives on learning to teach**

Arguments for different types of HEI contribution and consequently different ways that schools should work with student teachers have been outlined in the ITE research for many years (Barker 1996; Pring 1996; Blake *et al.* 1995; Second Author *et al.* 2010). Those advancing a more technician view refer to initial teacher training rather than education and have conceptualised learning to teach as a matter of simply acquiring competence (Furlong & Smith 1996). This viewpoint is disputed from a range of perspectives, including those that privilege teachers' tacit or 'craft' knowledge (e.g. Hagger & McIntyre 2006). Forms of distributed expertise found in the school context have been increasingly identified as key to student teacher learning (e.g. Edwards *et al.* 2002). Benefits from school-based learning are therefore seen to arise not only from increasing participation in teaching practices but in the critical examination of those practices by all participants (Second Author *et al.* 2010).

However, examining difference and promoting debate and inquiry can be difficult when working in ITE partnerships (Smagorinsky *et al.* 2003, 2004), even though 'in a truly effective collaborative relationship, dissimilarities between partners can in fact fuel the kind of intellectual discourse that interrupts traditional thinking and fosters the development of the teacher as knower' (Schulz & Hall 2004, 267). Overly concentrating on prescribed teaching standards limits the opportunities for student teachers to learn, as 'a standards-based technicized approach is unlikely to be responsive either to social contexts or to individual needs' (Menter 2009, 226).

A participatory approach to ITE leads to questions about why good teachers work in the way that they do. This does not view learning simply as a way of understanding ‘what works’, but recognises the need to understand why particular strategies work in specific classrooms. In this school-based approach, one of the mentor teachers’ aims is to help student teachers understand the local situation and its practices. Therefore, school staff help student teachers interpret and respond to events by sharing their expertise and local knowledge. Such a sociocultural pedagogy aims at assisting learners’ participation in school department communities where knowledge is used and constructed (Edwards *et al.* 2002; Second Author *et al.* 2010), and therefore highlights the importance of school placements in ITE. Course handbooks may therefore be considered as one of a range of tools that participants in school-based ITE may pick up and use in their joint work on teacher learning.

### **Designing the research**

The question that guided the research reported here asked whether and how ITE course handbooks mediate the learning of student teachers during school placements. We offer an analysis of how such handbooks are used by mentors and students to support student teachers’ learning in a one year postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) programme in England. We look specifically at the handbooks-in-use in two departments in one secondary school. It is important for us to stress at the outset that our analytic focus is on the handbooks in relation to student teachers’ learning to teach and we are not seeking to understand everything the student teachers were learning, how and where.

Our focus is exclusively on the mediation of the student teachers’ learning by the material and symbolic tool of the PGCE course handbook. All of the student teachers came from one

university ITE programme (which we will call Downtown University) and they were all taking secondary PGCEs in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and History. Downtown University's ITE provision was highly successful by any of the available measures – Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection grades; course evaluation outcomes; the national survey of newly qualified teachers conducted annually by the TDA; the number of graduating students securing first teaching posts; and the 'health' of the partnership in terms of the number of schools wishing to participate. The school in which the student teachers were placed (which we will refer to as Britley High School) was a successful 11-18 comprehensive situated in a small market town that had been part of Downtown University's teacher education partnership for over 15 years.

The data comes from a larger data set generated during a year-long ethnographic study of the operation of the Downtown University's ITE programme in four departments (MFL, History, Geography and Science) in Britley High School (First Author 2009). The data were generated through participant observation of meetings between student teachers and their mentors; meetings between university tutors, mentors and student teachers; lessons taught by student teachers and the feedback sessions with mentors; social interaction in subject department 'team rooms' or offices; and interviews with mentors, tutors and student teachers. The data set comprises extensive field notes written *in situ*, transcripts of recordings of formal meetings such as interviews, and various documents and tools. For the purposes of this article, we are focusing on data generated during the first (long) school placement, beginning in September with two days per week, rapidly increasing to three, and then full-time.

Initial data generation was aimed to help with familiarisation of the field and was partly achieved through somewhat ethnographic methods. Although having in mind a CHAT framework (outlined in the next section), data generation opportunities were not initially reduced

by narrowing the analytic focus. General procedures adopted for analysing data for the subject department analyses were by immersion in the data with the aim of generating areas for collation and comparison (see First Author 2010 for examples of how data were analysed.) The data presented in this article, although highly selective for our purpose here, is nonetheless representative of those throughout the research. Our reason for selecting History and MFL department data for discussion is that they represent two quite distinctive occasions for analysing the mediating function of handbooks in student teacher learning and are also illustrative of broader differences in ways of working on teacher education in school. In the interest of appreciating the full data set, we shall also briefly summarise how the handbooks were used in the other two departments.

In seeking to understand how the Downtown University ITE handbooks are used by mentors and student teachers in promoting and supporting learning in the History and MFL departments in Britley High School, our analysis is informed by CHAT, in particular the work of Vygotsky (1974, 1986), Leont'ev (1978), Cole (1996), Wertsch (2007) and Engeström (1999). The potential strength of a CHAT analysis in trying to address this question is that it focuses attention on learning as a social phenomenon, a process that takes place within social systems that have evolved culturally and historically and that offer participants in those systems certain physical or psychological tools with which to work on a shared object or societally significant goal. A central CHAT concept in our analysis is that of mediation, by which we mean the ways in which certain physical or psychological tools are picked up and used by participants in the learning activity. In analysing how PGCE course handbooks are used within the social practices of the subject departments, we are interpreting them as mediating, culturally-evolved material

and semiotic tools. It is to these relevant concepts in our CHAT analytical framework that we turn in the next section.

### **Analysing teacher learning in practice: a CHAT perspective**

Vygotsky proposed a relationship between the human subject and their environment that was mediated by *tools* that had developed over time within specific cultures. From a CHAT perspective, tools can be broadly material (or practical) or psychological. The prime example of a mediating psychological tool for Vygotsky was spoken language (Vygotsky 1986), where speech is regarded as being in a reciprocal relationship with the development of thinking. Tools develop historically and are therefore regarded as distinctively ‘human creations [that] include norms of cognition and imply ways of action’ (Miettinen 2001, 299). For Wertsch (2007), this mediating function of tools also demonstrates the ‘foundation for another of Vygotsky’s theoretical goals, namely building a link between social and historical processes, on the one hand, and individuals’ mental processes, on the other’ (p. 178). In other words, tool-use reveals something about the cultures within which the tools have developed as well as the thinking of those who work with them and, further, highlights the relationship between these two, social and historical processes.

In conceptualising the action of human subjects on aspects of their social worlds as *activity*, CHAT emphasises the importance of the volitional, object-oriented, collective nature of the action (Cole 1996). *Object*, in a CHAT analysis, is understood as the potentially shared problem or societally significant goal that humans are working on. Leont’ev described the object of activity as ‘its true motive’ (1981, 59) and, although there is some disagreement about whether object can be separated from motive (cf. Nardi 2005), one of the insights that a CHAT

perspective affords is the analysis of multiple motives working on the same object and distinguishing a diversity of motives among those (collectively) in the subject position. As participants in an activity system rarely talk in terms of how they construct and interpret the object of their activity, it is nonetheless possible for researchers to understand how the object is being construed by analysing how the participants use the available tools (Stetsenko 2005).

Our interest in this article is in how material and symbolic tools are used in the activity of learning to teach, specifically the use of PGCE course handbooks. The central methodological concept is therefore that of *mediation*. Wertsch distinguishes between what he saw as Vygotsky's 'two perspectives on mediation' (Wertsch 2007, 179). Explicit mediation is defined as when tools are 'purposefully introduced into human action' (ibid. 181). This form of mediation is also explicit in that 'the materiality of the stimulus means, or signs involved, tends to be obvious and non-transitory' (ibid. 180). Wertsch turns to Vygotsky's discussions of the role of language in mediating human consciousness to supply an example of implicit mediation. Implicit mediation is much more difficult to discern and to trace. Wertsch attributes qualities such as 'ephemeral' and 'fleeting' to the process of implicit mediation and notes that 'implicit mediation typically does not need to be artificially or intentionally introduced into ongoing action' (ibid), seeing it instead as part of an 'ongoing communicative stream' or series of social exchanges.

Although our focus is on PGCE course handbooks as tools that mediate student teachers' learning, we also draw in part on Engeström's (1991, 1999) second and third generations of activity theory (see figure 1 for an adaptation of Engeström's prototypical activity system in relation to the use of PGCE course handbooks.) Engeström's elaboration of the bottom line of the triangular representation of the activity system (*rules, community and division of labour*) is intended to help researchers understand how the process of mediation may be related to the

structures of power within particular social systems, how they have developed and play out in practice. Crucially, Engeström's contribution to CHAT encourages researchers to seek complexity in tracing learning and development across multiple and potentially conflicting activity systems (what he referred to as a third generation of activity theory). With reference to the present study, teacher mentors, university tutors and student teachers are all participants in multiple activity systems and take different subject positions in and between them. Activity systems, Engeström notes, are not 'homogenous entities' (Engeström 1993) and learning and development are not necessarily linear or vertical but complex, 'horizontal' (Engeström 1996) and 'subterranean' (Engeström 2007a; see also Second Author 2007a and b with specific reference to teacher education).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

However, in this article, our primary focus is on how PGCE course handbooks mediate student teachers' learning in what is an essentially school-based form of teacher education. As such we will focus on how these tools are used, specifically in relation to the object of the activity systems in which mentors, tutors and student teachers are participating. In seeking to understand the process of mediation in relation to the question of the object of activity, we have followed Kaptelinin & Miettinen (2005) in focusing on the evolution of the tool (the PGCE course handbook), the negotiation of its meaning among those who participate in the process of mediation, and the social structures that afford and constrain these negotiations:

The only way to get an insight into the nature of the object-related activity is to understand the material production of tools, the social exchanges among people, and the individual subjective

processes that participate in regulating the production of tools and social exchanges. (Kaptelinin & Miettinen 2005, 3)

### **Handbooks-in-use: mediating tools and social exchanges**

#### *The handbooks as material tools: description and evolution*

All of the handbooks in the four curriculum subjects that were part of the larger study were presented in plasticised ring binders, ranging in length from 148 to 238 pages. They were also supplemented with other information (for example, separate guidance leaflets for mentors). All the handbooks contained details of the course assignments, the university and school based programmes and assessment information. The handbooks were divided into separate sections and, although the organisation of these differed between the subjects, the design of the ring-binder (including physical size, colour scheme, layout and font) suggested a consistent, corporate 'brand' across the different subject areas. Subject handbooks were perceived to be important in the Downtown teacher education partnership, both within the university and in the schools.

Overall, the History handbook (238 pages) was the most detailed, outlining the week-by-week expectations of the student teachers with links to the QTS Standards and sample pro-formas (of lesson plans and student teacher profiles) in order to illustrate how these may be completed. The MFL handbook (176 pages) differed in that it was composed of a number of separate lists of expected tasks for the school placements, but these were not presented as part of a weekly programme (unlike the other subjects), and therefore suggested some flexibility as to when they were to be completed. There were also many optional activities outlined.

The handbooks in Geography and Science were less detailed than History and MFL, and because of this appeared to be designed principally to act as a record of work completed during

the school placement. Additionally, in MFL and History, there was a greater sense of a conceptual rationale underpinning the tasks, activities and guidance. For example, in MFL:

We hope that you will adopt this theoretical model of learning throughout your teaching career.

(MFL Handbook, page 3)

We will discuss the different ways by which you might learn to become a language teacher

against the backdrop of a theoretical model for the course as a whole. (MFL Handbook, page 17)

In History, there was an extensive reading list intended for the days student teachers were working in the university, and for each of the six main themes in the History programme. The purpose for engaging with the activities was clearly outlined with an emphasis on developing a high level of critical thinking and a ‘critical understanding of teaching through which you can extend your professional development in the future’ (History Handbook, page 124).

Typically, weekly school-based tasks in both History and MFL handbooks were addressed directly to the student teacher as reader/learner. History tasks often took the form of a number of highly-specified activities; for example:

Reading for week 11

(i) Black *et al.* (2002), (ii) Butler (2004)

Complete your evaluation question sheet for Friday 20 November.

Plan for your teaching next week. You should have formal, written lesson plans and written evaluations, preferably on the plans.

Finalise work on poster presentation (see week 9)

(History handbook, 153)

In MFL, it was more typical for a number of general requirements to be addressed to the reader and for the student teachers to be expected to make sense of how and when they were completed.

For example:

It is your responsibility in consultation with your mentor, to ensure that you have a comprehensive programme of observation of experienced teachers. You should take notes on all 10 categories of lesson observation throughout A weeks [the first part of the placement] and should aim to answer most of the ‘for you to do’ questions asked in each one.

(MFL handbook, 36)

In terms of their historical evolution, all of the handbooks had been written by the PGCE tutors or their predecessors in the role and were potentially open to continuous revision. Some text was shared across all subject handbooks (e.g. assessment criteria, entitlements to certain kinds of school-based experience, etc.) but most had been developed within the different subject areas. All subject tutors also commented in interview on the contributions of school mentors in helping to shape the handbooks as texts, mostly during regularly scheduled meetings of the school-based mentors. The tutors themselves had made different contributions to their evolution, however.

The History tutor (and the HEI’s lead tutor for that subject) had worked on the handbook for over 20 years, and was able to outline significant changes that have happened over the period:

What we have now is unrecognisable ... it is far more comprehensive; secondly the way in which it is structured changed very significantly when I did my own doctorate. The attempt has

been to structure it much more evidently in terms of the nature of experience that student teachers get in school.

(Interview, 14<sup>th</sup> August)

The MFL tutor had also made significant contributions over eight or nine years. She made many changes to the course and handbook, importing a lot of ideas developed during her previous teacher education work at another university. In summary, the History, MFL and Science tutors were able to talk about how their subject handbooks had evolved over the years and were able to describe significant changes. For History and MFL programmes, the development of the handbooks by the tutors appeared to be more self-generating, in contrast to the Science and Geography handbooks. For History, developments were associated with the History tutor's own doctoral study and, particularly, the way in which he conceptualised how student teachers learn in schools. For MFL, developments were also associated with the tutor's research programme, associated with providing a 'theoretical model' (MFL Handbook: pages 3, 17) for second language learning. These factors contributed to our decision to focus on the MFL and History handbooks-in-use in this article.

### **Handbook-in-use: History programme**

Unlike the mentors in the three other subject departments, the History mentor did not refer to the handbook regularly or explicitly in meetings with the student teacher. An exchange such as the following, however, showed the mentor's awareness that the handbook could be used with the student teacher, as a tool to organise their learning:

Mentor: Shall we try looking in the book at what we're meant to be talking about, because we keep forgetting to do that?

Student teacher: What should we have done?

(Field notes, November 22<sup>nd</sup>)

The mentor's flexibility ensured that the handbook did not drive the meetings, and frequently the student teacher came to them with her own agenda and list of questions to discuss. However, the mentor was aware of the university requirements in the handbook and produced his own version of weekly topics for discussion, as he felt that the handbook was too 'overloaded'. This was very well received by the History tutor who emphasised that the course should be tailored to student teachers' requirements: 'we are not trying to distort a reality there but work with it' (Interview with History tutor, 14<sup>th</sup> August).

This mentor's approach to using the handbook as a tool in working on the student teacher's learning showed a confidence in deciding what was appropriate and when, with the mentor occasionally questioning the suggestions in the handbook. Consequently, some tasks were not completed and this ensured that mentor meetings were responsive to the immediate social situation of the student teacher's learning. Therefore, discussions referred to the student teacher's experience; forms were not filled in as a bureaucratic requirement; and talk arose out of a specific context of current concerns and ideas, thereby connecting what was happening in school with the university programme. The handbook as a tool was seen to enable discursive mediation of the student teacher's learning and allowed diverse perspectives to be opened up for examination. The following exchange (extracted from a longer interaction) took place during a mentor meeting fairly early on in the student teacher's full-time placement in school in response to an activity set out in the History handbook:

[Mentor returns the student teacher's written activity (required by the handbook) with scribbles on the word-processed work. The focus of the activity was the importance and use of historical sources.]

Student teacher: In year 7 I started with sources which [History teacher 1] said were too difficult.

Mentor: Do we need to put other layers in first, raising tension in how we use sources? What are our ideas about students involved in history as a way of thinking about things? Why do students think they do history? Do they view sources as something they get facts from? Their levels of understanding – how do we make the link with practice? Differentiation in your poster example – you know when they hand the work in what they understood. Put in the case study how you realised the issues.

Student teacher: [Pupil] who has got the talk gets level 3 but when written, when he uses the source, he is level 1 [referring to national curriculum levels, which range from 1 to 8 followed by 'exceptional performance'].

Mentor: The source is giving perspective on the issue, how do sources lead you into differentiation? Note the contention in three sources – how do students realise the overlap? Support? Concept of source evaluation – how far are they challenged by literacy barriers? They may understand how it works and can't write it down and vice versa.

. . . What kind of questions can you use in class? Would you change them on reflection? How are you developing inference skills?

Student teacher: Some could develop that in poster lessons. [Lessons that use posters as sources for historical analysis.] I see [History teacher 2] and [History teacher 3] in lessons trying to draw out inferences from sources. Would that be worth doing? Scaffolding – pros and cons of frameworks. I presume they [the pupils] ignore me when they don't want to do it.

(Field notes, 17<sup>th</sup> January)

Even though the student teacher is on the receiving end of many questions here, they are largely rhetorical in function; their purpose appears to be to demonstrate that there are no easy answers. Three different teachers, including the mentor, are mentioned, demonstrating awareness of the collective work of the History department. Such exploratory talk opens up important distinctions in the conversation, raising questions which cannot be answered immediately but act as stimuli for future dialogue about the use-value of sources in History. This recognition of ongoing and dialogic exploration was typical of the discussions in History mentor meetings, and here the handbook can be seen as initiating the dialogue and introducing ideas that might extend it, now and in the future.

The History handbook emphasised the key role the mentor played in the school placement and positioned him as someone with responsibility for the student teacher's learning. In response to a question about the purpose of the handbook, the History tutor said:

It is meant to be an integrated programme so we all needed to have the same stuff. But the green sheets, which is the bit addressed to mentors. Those were specifically written with mentors in mind given that it is their responsibility to organise the programme in school and in order to make the overall programme sheets manageable they are very much a sort of quick summary of what should be happening....

(Interview with tutor, 14<sup>th</sup> August)

This explicitly shared understanding is designed to encourage all parties to fulfil what is clearly presented as a major responsibility, and the handbook therefore acts as a reminder of how the student teachers should, ideally, be learning in the school placement. It also reinforces the understanding that the learning activity is a collective enterprise, that is 'stretched over' (Lave

1988) participants in the ITE partnership and aspects of their environment, including the explicitly mediating tool of the course handbook and implicitly mediating mentor-student teacher dialogue.

### **Handbook-in-use: MFL programme**

Although the MFL mentor herself did not use the handbook in mentor meetings with her student teachers, and was prepared to organise the mentor meetings around what they wished to talk about, she nevertheless said in interview that she saw her role in part as ‘keeping an eye, and making [the student teachers] keep an eye on the enormous amount of paperwork’ (Interview with mentor, 10<sup>th</sup> January). With just such an ‘eye’ on an impending visit by the MFL tutors, she would ask if the paperwork was up to date but rarely looked at their teaching files herself (lesson plans, schemes of work, evaluations, etc). Again, in interview, she said ‘paperwork is not me and at this stage in my life is never going to be me’ (Interview with mentor, 10<sup>th</sup> January). Often, she used the MFL handbook as a totem of university authority in the partnership but did so in a very different way to the History mentor. In conversation with the student teachers, she positioned herself in relation to the handbook as an 'academic' text with intentions that were rarely realistic in the ‘real world’ of school, words used by the mentor herself in a mentor meeting (Field notes, 31<sup>st</sup> January). Throughout the placement, there were numerous occasions when she appeared to collude with the student teachers to circumvent the learning intentions of the MFL handbook. For example, in the following exchange, the mentor appears to be coaching the student teachers to deal with the handbook's requirements in a rather superficial way. The mentor and the student teachers (two were placed in this department) are reviewing a list of tasks in the handbook that

should have been completed by this point in the school placement (A weeks refer to the first part of the placement, and B weeks the second):

Mentor: Sorry folks, B week tasks?

Student teacher 1: Have we finished A week ones?

Mentor: I saw in the student evaluation sheet given out at the Downtown meeting that as adult learners you do not need constant reminders – I bet that was aimed at me.

[They all go through the lists saying what they feel they have done and what they are unsure about.]

Student teacher 1: Oh God

Mentor: I wish I knew what that meant.

Student teacher 1: Let's just say we have done GNVQ materials.

Mentor: But it might be checked. You could say you have seen the Business and Tourism thing [referring to the Business and Tourism General National Vocational Qualification] – you can't see what isn't done.

[They continue checking the list of activities.]

Student teacher 2: Questionnaire; a year 7 class in the autumn term – not done

Mentor: Drat I am going to ignore that feedback and just keep nagging you

Student teacher 1: There must be people who just don't do it

Mentor: Tick off what you have done – cobble some kind of survey together. You have to create a questionnaire so do one together; an example can be asking if they did MFL in primary school and for how long.

(Field notes, 31<sup>st</sup> January)

Here the handbook is seen as a checklist and is used efficiently, if instrumentally, in order to appear to comply with the requirements of the course. The mentor does not see some of the

tasks set as a priority for the student teachers' learning and this is reflected in her word-choices, for instance when she suggests a survey could be 'cobbled' together.

Similarly, in this exchange, the mentor is explicitly encouraging a strategy to help the student teachers respond to the MFL tutor's anticipated question about uncompleted tasks:

Mentor: B week tasks – say you have set them up for the following week. To be morally right, they ought to be done. Validly you can say that you kept tasks back, as you wanted to keep up your teaching. She [MFL tutor] will be fair.

Student teacher: She is really fair.

Mentor: So say what you know is outstanding but it is mapped in.

Student teacher 2: Other tasks? Evaluation of text book/CD Rom etc?

Student teacher: She won't do that.

Mentor: She won't do that but you have discussed with colleagues. She won't be unduly picky – we have generally said that Deutsch Heute 3 [a textbook] is rubbish.

(Field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> February)

In the hands of the MFL mentor and student teachers, the handbook became, at least in part, a 'dreaded list' (Field notes - 28<sup>th</sup> February), a pawn in a strategy ('validly you can say') with the MFL tutor during school visits. Even though the mentor and student teachers regarded the tutor as fair (and elsewhere in the data appear to hold her in high regard) the mentor usually paid lip service to making sure all the tasks were completed in a way that enabled the items to be 'ticked off' but without impacting negatively on the priority of the student teachers' taking on of a timetable. The necessity of ticking off the tasks was often viewed strategically, with the intention of satisfying the visiting MFL tutor with the appearance of compliance ('You don't want someone to suspect and then start looking at the work in detail'; Field notes, 17<sup>th</sup> January).

Indeed, the first question the mentor had for the student teachers after one assessment visit by the tutor was – ‘did [she] say anything about the paperwork?’ (Field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> March).

The pressures of fulfilling what the mentor and student teachers perceived as the handbook’s bureaucratic requirements were seen as in tension with discussions about teaching in school, and served to insulate the ostensible learning intentions of the teacher education partnership from the daily working practices of the school MFL department. This suggests that the university’s motive of enabling student teacher learning is, for the mentor and student teachers, directly in tension with their perceptions of fulfilling the requirements of the course. In other words, the objects of their activities are not shared; the PGCE course handbook’s rhetorical actions and the mentor’s interpersonal actions were directed towards rather different goals. The detailed guidance in the handbook for guiding the student teachers’ learning were not seen as relevant to the activities taking place in the school placement, where teaching classes and taking on a timetable were seen as the main goal. The student teachers explained in interview:

Some of them [the handbook tasks] I think are a waste of time like the shadowing of a MFL teacher because that means that you have to take a whole day out of the timetable. . . . I think the emphasis should be on teaching, and learning from that.

(Interview with MFL student teacher 1, 22<sup>nd</sup> February)

I suppose to a certain extent there are things you look in there and think I haven't done that yet. It's extremely ambitious in what it tries to achieve. It's also sometimes I look at it and you think bugger off because there are so many topics for us to go through, so many boxes to tick and so much stuff to look at, it can be really daunting . . . . You certainly do learn from it because it gives you direction and purpose and targets to meet, which is never a bad thing, and I know my

way around it quite well I suppose, which bits go where and things. But it doesn't really give you any advice on how to teach.

(Interview with MFL student teacher 2, 23<sup>rd</sup> February)

The course handbook is perceived as a diversion from the activity of learning to teach in the MFL department. There is an apparent contradiction in the recognition that the handbook is intended to help student teachers learn, but at the same time adds to their pressures of working in the school placement. It is both 'ambitious' and 'daunting'; yet the student teachers acknowledge its use in setting targets and giving 'direction'. It seems that, in use in the MFL department, the handbook has become a set of rules or regulations that are perceived to be set by, and subject to the external monitoring of, the MFL tutor.

### **Achieving coherence: the function of tools and rules in learning to teach**

In seeking to explain the different ways in which the MFL and History handbooks are picked up and used within the school subject department ITE activity systems, it is important to note that we do not seek to make any comment on the quality of these teacher education programmes. As we stated at the outset, there is good evidence from a variety of sources that the various subject programmes within the Downtown teacher education partnership are successful and highly-valued. Rather, we are concerned with trying to understand why the History and MFL course handbooks serve rather different functions and why the negotiations and social exchanges around the handbooks in the course of mentoring activity have such a different character and lead to such different kinds of learning. And we are, of course, aware that we are discussing just two examples of the handbooks-in-use in one school. Nonetheless, focusing on the MFL and History handbooks as they figure in the work of subject department mentoring has enabled us to reveal

important distinctions between handbooks as mediating tools in relation to the object of the activity systems in which these cultural tools have emerged over time and also in relation to the concept of partnership teacher education.

In both History and MFL departments, PGCE course handbooks are intrusions. Our analysis of the History handbook-in-use shows how a purposefully introduced tool can be implicitly mediated through dialogue and has the potential to make a qualitative difference to student teachers' learning. In other words, the History handbook – developed collaboratively with mentors over a long period and drawing on new knowledge developed among this group over that period – informs the mentoring practices and the dialogic interaction not in the sense of direct quotation but in the way that ideas from the text come to inhabit the social exchanges and negotiations of the mentor and the student teacher around the handbook in the course of the mentoring activity. The extent to which there is a shared object in this activity system is revealed not by the degree of compliance (with what are often quite highly-specified weekly tasks) but through the sense of continuing joint work on a shared problem and of ways of thinking and interacting that are embedded within the handbook-as-tool. The object of the activity system was the learning of the student teacher, learning to teach History in the Britley High School History department within the Downtown University teacher education partnership. Participants in the system, including the History tutor, regarded the handbook itself as a *process* and a *means* to an end, the end and the motive being, in part, becoming an effective teacher of History. In and of itself, the handbook as a material tool did not lead directly to learning as some sort of 'input' but instead had become a site for some shared understandings about how one learns to teach History. Therefore, the History handbook as a cultural tool could be said to have achieved some 'functional coherence' (Miettinen 2005, 60) in the various collaborators' work on the object of

activity. The History handbook reveals its cultural significance in the way that its historical development has become written into the text and is then rewritten by mentors and student teachers *out of it* in a coherent relation to the object of their joint activity. To put it another way, there is room for the agency of all of the participants in the system as they work together to envision a future for their joint activity.

Engeström has categorised levels of tool mediation based on the type of epistemic or knowledge-work the tool affords (Engeström 2007a, 34). In the case of the History handbook-in-use in Britley High School the handbook can be interpreted as a ‘where to?’ tool - a mediating tool that has an envisioning, future-oriented and ideas-driven set of affordances for student teacher learning. Therefore, when the handbook is used, it helps to initiate discussion about future activity. These open out ideas that test thinking, and question practice, which can then potentially lead to changing practice. Such discussions are vital as they acknowledge that the object of student teacher learning is a continually changing one.

In the MFL department, the handbook has come to be used rather differently. Indeed, there *are* direct quotations from it in mentor meetings (by the student teachers, who read from it) and the mentor draws attention to it as a distinctive material tool in the social exchanges around it. It is associated by the mentor and the student teachers with the regulations of the Downtown University teacher education partnership and with the external authority of the MFL tutor. The function of the handbook within the MFL ITE activity system at Britley High is interpreted as a set of rules; in the course of activity, the purposefully introduced tool has ‘slipped’ around the triangular representation of the system to become a rule (see Second Author 2008) within this community and a rather different division of labour has grown up around it. Therefore, the MFL handbook as an tool does not work in the same way *and* does not work on the same order of

object as that of the History ITE activity system. In the MFL setting, rather, the object of the activity system in which the handbook has become a rule is the mentor's relationship with the MFL tutor within the hierarchical social structures of a school-university teacher education partnership. The MFL mentor was observed working with the handbook and the student teachers very strategically in order to contrive a good working relationship with the tutor and to seek the tutor's positive view of their work by foregrounding compliance with a rather superficial interpretation of the tool.

The status of the MFL handbook as a mediating tool (its 'level' of mediation) - and the object of the MFL ITE activity system - are much more difficult to interpret than was the case in History. In part, this is because an analytic focus on the handbook as a mediating tool does not necessarily allow us to understand how the object is constructed and negotiated in the MFL ITE activity system. Other tools may have figured in equally complex ways in mediating MFL student teachers' learning in the Britley High School MFL department. However, we would suggest, in observing the social exchanges around the MFL handbook, it was not easy to discern whether there was a focus on the student teachers' learning that might be construed as a shared object at all. In Engeström's terms, the MFL handbook works at the level of a 'how?' mediating tool – concerned with the order and sequence of actions, 'timelines, plans, scripts, heuristic rules' (Engeström 2007a: 34). The 'how?' mediating tool is not perceived as having the same set of expansive and developmental affordances as the 'where to?' tool and can be associated with a qualitatively different kind of learning.

In understanding these differences and the question of the object of activity for MFL mentor and student teachers, it is useful to refer to the MFL tutor's own explanation of

differences between curriculum subjects in the Downtown University teacher education partnership:

I think we are a bit different from the other departments. . . because of the research background, MFL and Maths have a big, big research literature and all that literature is starting with the learners. Whereas very much the teacher education literature I think, I am not criticising here, I am just saying the difference, like History hasn't got a big how do kids learn History background, and so they focus on how do student teachers develop over the course of a year. So you find that our curriculum, we don't have as many discussions about how do you think you are learning over the course of the year, whereas I think they do. In Geography and History they do have a lot of that, you know think about yourselves, think about yourselves. Whether it's better or not I don't know.

(MFL tutor interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> July)

We anticipate that History and Geography education specialists would disagree about traditions of research in these subjects just as teacher education researchers will disagree with the characterisation of their work. Nevertheless, one explanation of the different ways in which these handbooks figured in mentors' and student teachers' work on learning to teach those subjects is that in History there was a strong, shared focus on the student teachers as learners and this phenomenon seemed to be of intellectual interest in the partnership whereas in MFL the interest was more, from the MFL tutor's perspective, demonstrating the relevance of a particular theoretical model of second language learning, and, from the mentor's perspective, working with the student teachers in a way that could be described as 'teaching by proxy' (Edwards & Protheroe 2004) and enculturating them into the habits of MFL teaching at Britley High. But whatever the different objects and motives of participants in the MFL ITE system, the

fundamental point is that they were not seen to be shared and the kinds of negotiations between participants in the partnership that would allow a shared object to emerge did not seem possible.

Tensions in how the handbook was used by the mentor and the tutor were not apparent in the Geography department, as here the handbook appeared to be treated as a rule in both the school and university ITE activity systems, rather than a tool mediating work on the object. Set tasks were completed as a matter of course before the rest of the mentor meetings took place ('we kind of get them out of the way at the beginning of mentor meetings' – student teacher, 22<sup>nd</sup> February). The science mentor also tended to use the handbook instrumentally. The mentor sheets provided in the handbook drove the meetings procedurally and this affected how the student teachers perceived their learning. For example, they were encouraged to focus on those aspects of their teaching that were deemed by other staff as necessary of attention, and this detracted from their own concerns, which were not voiced.

### **Conclusion: the potential of course handbooks as 'where to?' tools in learning to teach**

We began this article with a brief reference to the evolution of partnership teacher education through various innovations and experiments that were subsequently co-opted by the arena of policy. Locally-developed PGCE course handbooks have become one manifestation of the way ITE partnerships work – ideally, tools that arise out of ways of working and ways of thinking about teaching and learning and are intended to feed back into and inform those ways of working and thinking over time. If this intention is genuine and desirable (rather than regarding the handbook simply as a form of public relations or, on the other hand, a set of regulations), then we suggest that ITE partnerships might consider these handbooks as tools in the way that Stetsenko (2004) describes a text:

A text is alive in another way in that it is always born out of collective, not solitary, efforts of many people who are involved in the process of knowledge creation in multiple roles: as immediate and distant partners in dialogues of ideas, as opponents whose views are critiqued, and more often than not, as colleagues who collaborate shoulder to shoulder in carrying out the scholarly project. A scholarly text is alive in yet another sense: it always needs to be read by someone anew, to be made into a meaningful part of the reader's own life and work, thus continuing that text's existence within the continuously unfolding and creative human pursuits in the world.

(Stetsenko 2004, 501)

Stetsenko was referring to the texts of Vygotsky and how teachers and researchers might remake them for new purposes in new contexts so that they have new, practical meanings. The implications for teacher educators are similar in that conceptualising the PGCE course handbook as a tool in student teachers' learning means returning to the handbook as a living text requiring continual attention not so much for its 'content' but for what it potentially signifies within the ITE activity systems within which it is circulating. Continuing negotiations that unsettle and attempt to reconfigure stagnant meanings among participants in initial teacher education activity systems are vital if the handbook as a living text is to operate as a mediating tool and if the concept of partnership itself is to have more than a bureaucratic sense for teacher education. The point we are making is a Vygotskian one: to paraphrase Stetsenko (2004, 511), understanding the PGCE course handbook as a mediating tool means regarding it as part of a process of meaning-making in which deeds turn into words that, in the end, again become deeds. Relationships between participants in this meaning-making process need to be open to learning; there needs to be some freedom of movement within the activity systems, some space for participants' agency,

in order for qualitatively expansive or transformative learning to happen. PGCE course handbooks, as living texts of partnership teacher education that have emerged over time from the complex interactions between school teachers and university-based teacher educators, undoubtedly have a mediating potential for student teachers but only if they continue to evolve within living partnerships focused on their learning.

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**Figure 1**

## A potential ITE activity system in relation to the use of PGCE course handbooks



