GTIP Think Piece – Writing at Masters level (Clare Brooks)

Most geography PGCE courses are in the process of changing from certificate courses to courses which award M Level credits. In this Think Piece Clare Brooks (University of London Institute of Education) examines the implications of changing from a PGCE to an M Level course with a particular focus on how this change has influenced assignments, assignment criteria and preparation for assignments at her own institution.

Menu
- What is 'Masters Level'? P1
- What is 'M Levelness'? P2
- What problems will students experience? P2
- Designing assignments, p3
- Giving useful feedback, p3
- Improving writing quality, p4
- Conclusion, p4
- Bibliography, p5

What is 'Masters Level'?
All PGCE courses face legislative changes which require them to identify themselves now as either Masters Level (or M Level) or Honours level (or H Level) courses. Most PGCE courses in the UK have elected to combine M and H Level accreditation ranging from the minimum of 40 credits up to 120 credits at M Level.

Even though many assignments produced by PGCE students during their training year are often of a very high standard and could almost certainly be seen as being comparable to Masters level assignments already, designing and preparing students specifically for assignments that will be marked against M Level criteria poses some significant questions for PGCE tutors. These are:
- What do we mean by Masters Level and how does it differ from our current assessment practice?
- What problems might PGCE students experience in writing assignments for M Level?
- How can the design of assignments support students' professional and intellectual development?
- What useful feedback and preparation can we provide for students to support their writing skills at M Level?
- How can we improve students' writing quality at M Level?

Transferring the whole or part of your current PGCE to M Level can present challenges, both in the design of the course and in ensuring that your students are prepared for, and able to meet the challenge of, writing at M Level. This Think Piece focuses specifically on supporting students for coursework assignments that will be assessed against M Level criteria. Examples will be taken from my own institution, the University of London Institute of Education (IOE). Whilst I am aware that other institutions will vary, I hope that these exemplars will help you when thinking about your own course.
What is 'M levelness'?
For each institution M Level criteria will vary slightly. The QAA Code of Practice states:

- that students should be assessed in a variety of ways that are appropriate to the activities in which they are engaged
- that students should be aware of how they are being assessed
- that students should understand how the outcomes of assessment are being used

The QAA Code of Practice is clear that, whilst these basic principles of good practice should underpin all assessment at this level, the responsibility for interpreting these principles lies with each institution. The consequence of this is that a tremendous variety in assessment practice at both local and institutional level continues to exist.

On the IOE PGCE course, we have adapted our existing criteria that we use for general Masters Degrees. Our desire was to ensure that the Masters Level criteria reflect both the professional work that PGCE students are engaged in and the practice dimension of their work. Whilst developing these criteria, we debated the differences between students completing Masters Level work on a PGCE course rather than a traditional academic Masters degree. For our institution, the main differences we felt would be that:

1. PGCE students are also engaging in professional training and as such their developing practice as geography teachers gives them a wealth of experience upon which they can reflect critically.
2. PGCE students learn about teaching partly by reflecting critically on their practice. This is modelled in a style of course that encourages them to ask themselves critical questions, to evaluate their own practice and to reflect on their reading to enable them to modify their practice. We felt that our assessment strategies needed to reflect this to enable our PGCE students to be accredited for developing these skills.

Examine the M Level criteria we have adopted and those at your own institution. You might like to consider:

- How do the criteria differ from your current criteria for assessing PGCE students' assignments?
- What are the dimensions that give these criteria 'M Levelness'?
- What problems would your PGCE students face in meeting these criteria?

What problems will students experience?
Although the difference between M Level criteria and PGCE criteria will vary with each institution, I think the main differences are:

- The need to demonstrate understanding of 'theory'
- The need to demonstrate critical reflection on practice
- The need to generate a synthesis between both theory and 'practice'

PGCE students come from a variety of backgrounds; some may be straight from university at an undergraduate or postgraduate level, others may also have had a range of other professional experiences. The writing that they are expected to do for a PGCE assignment, however, is likely to differ significantly to any previous coursework requirements:

- Most undergraduate essays require students to make extensive use of arguments from other scholars rather than to report on or analyse experience.
- Few undergraduate or postgraduate courses require students to reflect on their own practice in the way that a PGCE course does.
Even having undertaken dissertation research, few will be familiar with writing in a critically reflective style suitable to meet the M Level criteria.

These problems can be expressed in a variety of ways:

- Discomfort with using the active voice rather than the passive voice:
  - 'Upon completion of this lesson, I felt that...'
  - 'Upon completion of this lesson, it was thought that...'
- A tendency to try to objectify their observations (for instance, declaring that something that they have observed with one class is true of all classes, or of that class all of the time)
- Building an argument based on experience and practice, and reflection
- Difficulty with linking theory and practice in a critically reflective way

Looking back on your reflections of the difficulties your PGCE students may face, consider to what extent those difficulties are:

1. linked to adopting the appropriate 'voice' in their assignments
2. associated with linking theory and practice, and showing that those reflections have resulted in a greater understanding of both.

**Designing assignments**

The appropriate design of an M Level assignment can go some way to enable students to meet the criteria successfully. It is possible, for instance, to design an assignment that enables students to write about an aspect of teaching geography in a purely theoretical way without reflecting on practice. I would argue, however, that designing an assignment that would allow students to reflect on their practice and to consider the 'lessons learnt' from engaging with the literature, would not only enable them meet the M Level criteria but would also be an extremely valuable way of enabling them to reflect on and develop their own practice.

On the PGCE course at the IOE, we have developed three assignments that are marked against the M Level criteria referred to above.

Below is a brief description of each assignment which shows how we have tried to design the assignments so that students reflect on theory and practice:

**M Level PGCE Assignments**

Giving useful feedback

Assessment for learning strategies can be very useful in encouraging PGCE students to reflect on their practice as well as their writing. In particular, we have found the following useful for communicating to students the structure and appropriate standard of academic writing expected in their writing:

- Showing examples of previous assignments, and encouraging them to mark them using the grading criteria
- Modelling extracts of assignments which demonstrate the link between theory and practice...
- Offering formative feedback on draft assignments
- Encouraging PGCE students to use the online support available from our Academic Literacy programme
Improving writing quality
In our experience, PGCE students tend to find writing reflectively problematic. The following activities for a PGCE session illustrate how we have tried to support them in developing the reflective element of their writing.

Background:
For their first assignment, the students have to teach a sequence of lessons (6-8) and critically evaluate the sequence. They are also encouraged to write a short report on what they have learnt from the experience, particularly reflecting on the development of their understanding of teaching geography. This workshop takes place after they have taught the sequence of lessons. Their skills in critical reflection are developing and so our focus in this session is to enable them to express that in writing in a suitable way.

Preparation:
PGCE students are asked to come to the session with a lesson plan from their sequence of lessons as well as their evaluation of that lesson.

Workshop sequence:
1. Peer assessment, students share their plan and evaluation with a neighbour. The neighbour is encouraged to highlight which areas of the evaluation are descriptive and which are evaluative.
2. Whole group feedback on task highlighting the following issues:
   a. How much description is necessary to inform the reader?
   b. What kind of evidence is useful to persuade the reader of the evaluative comments?
   c. How can the writer convince the reader that they have learnt from experience and theory in this text?
3. Tutor input suggests a paragraph structure for the evaluations. The paragraph structure is in three parts:
   a. What was this lesson episode trying to achieve? (purpose)
   b. What happened in this part of the lesson? (description)
   c. How successful was it and how do you know? (evaluation and evidence)
4. Students select one paragraph from their evaluation and re-write it using this structure.
5. In pairs, students look again at the new paragraph and consider the extent to which it matches the criteria.
6. Summary: students then consider what else is contained in the criteria that is absent from this particular evaluation.

Conclusion
Learning to teach is challenging under any circumstances, but increased academic pressure can make it even worse for many PGCE students. Feedback from our last cohort has been that they have felt that their assignments have made them think and reflect on their practice in a way that challenged their understanding of teaching geography. They have told us that they think that writing the assignments has made them better teachers. Assignments enable our PGCEs to meet the course requirements. If the assignments can help their professional development too, then they will have been worth all the effort.
Bibliography

Useful texts for developing academic literacy:


Useful texts for understanding theory:
All titles in the GA’s *Theory into Practice* series can be purchased in the [GA](http://www.geography.org.uk).


The GA’s *Secondary Geography Handbook* is also useful - particularly the questions at the end of each section to develop reflective thinking.

Useful texts for developing critique in geography education: