CHAPTER

Identifying and mapping your complementary support systems: who are your partners in reflection?

Dot Heslop and Linda Devlin

Individual commitment is a group effort – that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.

Vince Lombard (American football coach)

Introduction

Learning to teach, and reflection on your teaching, are clearly not solitary activities. This chapter explores some of the possibilities for learning with others. In your professional training you will encounter may sources of support as well as the more documented, formal support from tutors and mentors. You will observe good role models of how to be as a teacher, and you will learn what sort of behaviours you wish to avoid. You will receive emotional support to sustain you, moral support to encourage you, and guidance on how to respond in given situations. You have already seen, in Chapter 5, how every person with whom you interact has their own personality and value system, and, like you, is required to ‘fit in’ with the norms and values of the institution. A key message of this chapter, therefore, is that your reflections with and about other people should be open-minded and responsive, taking account of the affective and the cognitive aspects of your professional relationships. As the chapter progresses, the following questions are addressed:

- What kinds of support exist within organizations, and who can offer it?
- How can you be proactive in seeking complementary support?
- What reflective skills will best support you in your encounters with a wide range of professionals?
What kinds of support exist within organizations?

In Chapter 5 we saw how sometimes formal support systems can fail to meet beginning teachers’ expectations or needs, and that few school experiences are unproblematic by the nature of things. In this chapter we provide ideas about how you can be proactive in identifying appropriate personal networks to supplement and complement formal support.

Consider first Andrew’s then Katie’s reflective comments below, about their experience of teaching PE and science in secondary school:

“Building good relationships with various staff members helps endlessly when in need of advice, gaining relevant and good specific feedback to teaching, and assistance when needed in controlling pupil behaviour. Everything is interlinked through building a good working relationship with members of the department and school.”

(Andrew, one-year PGCE, middle of final practice)

As a non-specialist in dance, but with the courage to teach it to Years 7 and 8, Andrew needed both educative (‘this is what you could do’) and supportive (‘you’ll be great at this, but I’m here to help’) input. Although not his mentor, the dance specialist had very specific expertise that Andrew lacked. He observed her teach, jointly reflected on the dynamics of his classes, clarified learning objectives and discussed teaching ideas. Initially they co-planned some lessons, but Andrew became increasingly autonomous as his confidence grew. An unexpected positive outcome was the motivational effect this had on the pupils, who benefited from the collaboration between expert and enthusiastic novice. Katie’s source of support came from a different source:

“In science teaching there is always a need to take advice when working in the labs. Bill the lab technician is always really helpful, advising how to improve methods by altering apparatus or chemicals. He has so much experience and has seen when things don’t go so well. It has been very worthwhile talking with him at the planning stage to make sure that I can learn from this and the pupils can have a better experience in the classroom.”

(Katie, one-year PGCE, start of final practice)

Bill had seen many teachers undertaking practical experiments with many different classes. Furthermore, he was always around when trainee teachers were taking their first tentative steps in demonstrating and engaging learners in practical science. His extensive experience was invaluable in helping Katie to know what she could hope to achieve with different classes and at different stages of her practice.

Contrast the above with Phil’s statement below:

“When my mentor asked me to see the professional tutor to discuss my final report, I felt nervous. She was a deputy head who commanded a lot of respect in the school, and was always busy. Why was she making time for me? She alloyed my fears straight away with a warm smile. She had read my profile, and she knew the Q standards inside out. We discussed my strengths, what I hoped to develop next, and how I planned to write my career entry profile. She surprised me by knowing that I had made real progress with my challenging Year 9 class, and asked me what I thought the pupils had learned during this process. She asked how I would build on this in my NQT year and wanted to know how much I understood about the C standards I would be working on next. I left her office feeling proud of what I had achieved, but not complacent. I was left in no doubt about what I still had to do to become worthy of the profession.”

(Phil, one-year MFL PGCE, end of final placement)

These case studies illustrate different types of support from which beginning teachers benefit. The non-managerial role of the dance specialist provided a challenging, but non-judgmental environment in which Andrew moved out of his comfort zone to extend his skills in teaching and learning a new activity area. In reflecting on necessary preparations for their teaching journey, Andrew and Katie nurtured relationships with more expert professionals in their learning community (Stoll et al. 2003). This could be described as a way of fulfilling the reflective practitioner’s need for time to ‘break from the technical rational models of learning to concrete problem solving’ (Schön, 1991: 24). In other words, perhaps intuitively, they recognized that informal support provided within their institution would help with areas where they lacked confidence. Phil’s meeting with the professional tutor had a managerial function, with an emphasis on the quality of his work in the context of the wider professional community. Yet there is evidence of ‘nurturing’ in that his successes were celebrated alongside the setting of targets for further development. A key message from the above is that whether support is formal (a designated mentor or tutor with responsibility for evaluating your performance and making judgments against professional standards) or semi-formal (working alongside other professionals who have high expectations of your behaviour and learning) or informal (offering help and information without the constraints of assessment or judgment) it can fall into any of the purposes identified in Table 6.1 (p. 94). Katie’s support was informal, but it provided an opportunity for structured learning. Andrew built up a strong personal
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.1</th>
<th>The types and functions of professional support</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Kadushin 1976</strong></td>
<td><strong>Educational</strong> The development of individuals in order that they maximize potential and contribute to organizational success</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Proctor 1988</strong></td>
<td><strong>Formative</strong> Constructive feedback to support development</td>
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<td><strong>Hawkins 1989</strong></td>
<td><strong>Developmental</strong> Developing the skills, understanding and capacities</td>
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<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td><strong>Supportive</strong> The maintenance of personal well-being, harmonious working relationships and collaborative practices</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Restorative</strong> Listening and supporting but also challenging to achieve potential</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Resourcing</strong> Recognising and addressing the emotional impact of working in stressful situations</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Qualitative</strong> Recognising and addressing human failings, blind spots and vulnerability</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>To support the development of relevant understanding and skills</strong></td>
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<td><strong>To provide a regular space for beginning teachers to reflect upon the content and process of their work</strong></td>
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<td><strong>To validate and support the beginning teacher both as a person and as a professional</strong></td>
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<td><strong>To ensure that as a person and as a professional the beginning teacher is not left to carry difficulties and anxieties alone</strong></td>
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<td><strong>To ensure that individuals plan and utilize their personal and professional resources effectively</strong></td>
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<td><strong>To assure individual and organizational quality</strong></td>
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<td><strong>To take disciplinary or corrective action if necessary</strong></td>
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**Provision of**

- Expert role models
- Structured learning
- Clarification of the skills and knowledge required in the specific setting
- Feedback on all aspects of work to support professional development
- Expectation that individuals will reach their full potential, with opportunities to do so.

- A listening ear to problems and tensions
- Feedback on content and process of work
- A celebration of successes
- Monitoring of potential weaknesses
- Rigorous, open discussion when problems arise

- A statement of expectations at macro level (for example professional standards) and micro level (for example organizational policy statements)
- Quality assurance mechanisms, monitoring systems and processes
- Opportunities for the beginning teacher to be proactive rather than reactive

*Source: Adapted from Hawkins and Shohet 2006: 58–9*
relationship with the dance teacher, but she gave him rigorous feedback on his teaching, and Phil's formal meeting, at which national standards were discussed, had a very personal and supportive 'feel'.

From the examples considered and the summary in Table 6.1 you can see that support can come from a range of formal, semi-formal and informal situations and relationships. For many beginning teachers support is provided by those immediately available colleagues working closely with you on a day-to-day basis. Although it is difficult to capture the full range of potential in this area, there are some obvious possibilities, including your mentor, your colleague in the department or year group, another NQT, senior staff, support staff working in the classroom and other colleagues who may briefly have a significant role to play. Modern languages teachers check their subject knowledge with the foreign language assistant in school, and design and technology trainees hone their skills on unfamiliar tools and equipment alongside the technical staff in the department.

As a beginning teacher it is important that you recognize the wide range of learning supports in your setting. However the formal support from a mentor, tutor line manager or coach will remain a central feature of your professional learning. Hawkins and Shohet (2006: 58) refer to three types of 'supervision' in supporting new professionals put forward by Kadushin (1976). These are defined as educative, supportive, and normative. They also highlight a similar model (Proctor 1988) defining these types as formative, restorative and normative, and add their own using the terms developmental, resourcing and qualitative. These terms are variously used in the supervision and induction of health care professionals, counsellors and social workers and since their development they have been increasingly applied to educational settings (Hawkins and Shohet 2006).

Whatever terminology is used, each recognizes:

- the complexities of professional knowledge and applying it in practice;
- the emotional stresses and strains of professional life;
- the entitlement of the 'client' (in the case of teaching, the learners) to a high quality service, and therefore the need for rigorous quality assurance.

Professional networks should therefore provide help and support in acquiring theoretical subject and pedagogic knowledge and applying it to the development of teaching skills. Hawkins and Shohet (2006: 59) have suggested foci for each of the categories listed, and these have been adopted for the purposes of the beginning teacher in Table 6.1.

Not all the possibilities for complementary support lie within the four walls of your school or college. There are also some valuable links to be made outside of the immediate working environment, for example, many local authorities release NQTs (like John in the example below) on a regular basis to attend newly qualified teacher networks, or share NQT training with a neighbouring school. Many subject associations may also offer reduced membership rates to beginning teachers with local and virtual support networks offering face-to-face events and forums. Many schools engage in network activity among groups of schools which serve a myriad of purposes. If you are still in training then the support networks established with your peers and other colleagues are invaluable, especially if they can be cross-phase and/or subject.

Who can support you?

Consider how interaction with a range of different people in a school setting can sometimes provide surprising opportunities for professional learning:

"Regular meetings each term with other NQTs have helped me realize several things. For example, we used an 'iceberg' model to explain why the students (and staff) did not behave as expected. This showed us that the visible part of people is not all there is. There are a lot of things underneath that you can't see that make up that person."

(John, primary NQT)

By reflecting on this image, John was able to use it to help him deal with a specific situation:

"This idea came at a point when there was a lot of tension amongst the staff in the year group, people not getting on very well. It helped to see people differently and to be encouraged to think about how to approach them. That helped a lot as we are usually more concerned with the work that needs to be done rather than the person that is doing it."

In addition to the opportunity to work with colleagues closely in the formal sessions, John also recognized the high level of significance of the informal outcomes of the programmed events. He explained:

"I go to the NQT meetings with Yvonne in reception. We don't have much chance to talk when we are there as we mainly talk to colleagues from other schools. It is the car journey on the way back that has turned out to be our most valuable time. We always talk about where things are going to apply in school and where it is not quite so relevant. This really helps me to see where I can use some of the ideas."

"
At this point it might be prudent to pause in order to reflect on the nature of the ‘informal chat’. Pentland’s (2007) view is that there is ‘no such thing as idle chat’. It is simply an activity that provides time for tacit communication and unconscious bonding. While it is important that you as a beginning teacher appreciate the value of this informal learning, there can be pitfalls.

Professional behaviour requires discretion; the wise person makes it a rule not to engage in gossip or to use unprofessional language. For example, the trainee who was overheard in the staff room telling her boyfriend on her mobile phone that she had ‘just had feedback from the mentor from Hell’ was asked to leave the school. Note Tom’s reflections:

“I managed to build good professional relationships with the staff at the school including those not in the PE department. I had regular contact with year group head teachers, LSAs (learning support assistants), maintenance, admin staff and dinner ladies.

(Tom, GTP PE Trainee, several months into teaching experience)"

Forming a good working relationship with everyone whose path you cross in life is clearly useful; in professional terms any organization where colleagues ‘get on’ together is more likely to be forward looking and dynamic as a result of collaborative learning and support. However, there are lines to be drawn in terms of professional values and practice.

### Reflective task 6.1 Building professional values into professional relationships

- This task is most useful if completed in discussion groups.
- Consider the statements of trainee teachers below.
- 1. What do you perceive to be the possible pitfalls of the networks formed?
- 2. What advice would you give to each trainee about how they develop relationships with non-teaching staff?
- 3. What might be the advantages of such networks?
- WILL: The caretaker knew all about those boys. He gave me really good advice about how to deal with them.
- JAS: The dinner lady had children in the school herself, so she was a good source of inside information.
- MARIE: The school secretary was on the phone to parents all the time, and really understood them. Talking to her helped me understand the children much better.

Tobias et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of acknowledging that relationships with students and their families must be based on mutual respect, trust and, where necessary, confidentiality. Forming good working relationships with non-teaching colleagues is very important, but their experience of pupils is not the same as having professional knowledge. Their research (Tobias et al. 2009) into ethics and moral reasoning in teacher education reported that trainees saw ‘talking about students’ personal issues in a staffroom’, as disrespectful to the student. Yet casual conversations, if conducted professionally, can be enormously helpful:

“In the staffroom, I mentioned the problems I was having with a boy in my Year 9 class and the teaching assistant told me about his problems at home and suggested I had a chat with his form tutor. He was great at suggesting some strategies. This made it so much easier to help him, and it helped me keep a sense of proportion about his behaviour.

(Tom, GTP PE Trainee, several months into teaching experience)"

When seeking support, you need to ask the question: ‘What are the benefits of this partnership? Are there any negatives?’ This is not easy at first, but as your knowledge and experience grow, you will be able to recognize what is useful, and why, in your professional networking. Consider Navdeep’s case study [6.1](#) to explore the potential benefits from finding alternative reflective partners. Note the positives that can come from this, but also be aware of the potential negatives.

### Case Study 6.1 Navdeep’s reflections

Navdeep experienced conflict with her mentor, whose feedback was frequently negative, with no opportunity to discuss or respond. This relationship was controlled by the teacher's managerial/normative style mentor, where he maintained the power. Navdeep, previously a confident and creative trainee, began to doubt her ability and reduced her imaginative and innovative approaches to teaching PE. This clash of values and **ethos** created an extremely challenging and potentially damaging environment.

A two-way process of mutual support developed with an NQT in the department. There were many positive elements to this partnership, including the mutual boosting of morale and sharing and development of resources. Their discussions, ideas and reflection on their teaching and learning ensured progression. Sharing lesson materials enabled both young teachers to explore different teaching styles and alternative approaches. This restorative/supportive partnership seemed to be working, but its effect was to ‘cut off’ the mentor, who was aware that the trainee and NQT had ‘joined forces’! Thus they did not identify any problems or ask for further support, but adopted a stance that ‘you just have to get on with it’.
Good intentions and positive support can mask problems that need addressing and prevent solutions from being found. Better to find a cure than to keep on taking the tablets!

**Reflective task 6.2 ‘Mapping’ your support systems**

1. Get a large piece of A3 paper or bigger and place your name, a symbol, or a picture that depicts yourself in the centre. Under this, add a question or problem to which you would like answers.
2. Begin a ‘spider diagram’, adding the types of support you need, along with names as you acquire them.
3. Consider what may be the disadvantages as well as the advantages of these encounters. Are you, for example, masking problems that need addressing rather than finding actual solutions?

This diagrammatic map is a good starting point for beginning to think about taking control of what you want to learn, and with whom.

**What reflective skills will best support my learning with others?**

As has been made clear in other chapters, knowledge and experience will lead to learning only where there is reflection in and on action. Making effective use of professional networking requires conscious reflection (see Chapter 4). Different people will offer different viewpoints, and there will be variations in their interpretation of events (see Chapter 3).

This can be helpful, provided that you are able to reflect critically, unpacking and processing the ideas of others and selecting which are useful to you. For example, some beginning teachers see different ideas presented to them as ‘confusing’; they are hoping for a single ‘magic bullet’ to solve their problems. Others see them as ‘enriching’ because they have learned how to reflect and filter until they have come to a tentative solution. You will see, at various times, guided, prompted, directed, nudged and pushed into action, and until you learn to manage this it can feel uncomfortable. For you to get the most from the network of support available to you, you need to develop your reflective skills in order to be able to sift advice and select what seems to be the best solution in your situation.

The power of talk

The power of dialogue and reflective practice is recognized as a tool for organizational problem solving (Schön 1983; Senge 1990; Isaacs 1999) and semi-formal support is one way in which this dialogue can be facilitated. The benefits of reflecting with others, in pairs and groups, can be used to develop awareness of the wide range of issues utilizing one or more support opportunities. Professionals in training or working sessions often pool their ideas in group activities, using language to reflectively explore and consider issues expressed in Figure 6.1.

Within a group, there may be different ways of interpreting and conceptualizing happenings, events or actions, as the activity in Reflective task 6.3 illustrates.
Empathy with others

During your training and beyond, staff create time to co-reflect in order to engage in meaningful dialogue with you. They recognize that a beginning teacher with less experience may have a valuable fresh view of the teaching context and practice within it. Many wish to invest time in shaping the identity of new professionals and learn from them. They recognize your views and experiences differ from theirs. These teachers recognize that the development of their empathy with learners is a significant outcome of their own professional learning (Beresford and Devlin 2006). Thus it is important for you to recognize that reflection with others, even more experienced others, is a two-way process from which all parties can benefit. You need to consider not just what you get from, but also what you can give, to the process. Busy professionals, however, need you to take responsibility for your learning by being well prepared for your encounters with them (see Chapter 10).

The role of self-reflection

Before beginning to reflect with others, your self-reflection should lead you to:

- identify and clearly articulate the issue you need help with (see Table 6.1);
- think about the responses you would like in your encounters with others – what should the outcomes be?
- find the ‘right person’ to help you, seeking advice if necessary;
- accept the constraints of the busy working life of others, and have realistic expectations;
- recognize any weaknesses or personal failings in your professional encounters, for example are you open to constructive criticism, or defensive?
- use previous encounters to build up your preferred ‘package’ of support (Hawkins and Shohet 2006: 37). What kind of help are you seeking? Early in your training, this may be a prescriptive solution, whereas later you may simply want to bounce your own ideas around with someone else.

Being prepared for reflective encounters with others through initial self-reflection helps you to make the most of support networks. When support roles are undertaken by busy professionals, they can result in reflective discussions becoming a set of ‘shoulds and should nots’ (Yero 2002). In discussing approaches and possibilities, a ‘quick fix’ might be to provide you with a list of things to try. This process, however, does not always nurture self-evaluation and thoughtful
reflection. It is more likely to occur if you come along with a 'blank sheet' or series of questions that those supporting you need to fill or respond to.

Using 'critical incidents' to stimulate your learning

In the case of Michael below, a specific 'learning moment' provided the impetus for his learning:

"I attended an after school session about 'out of seat learning' and how to improve attainment levels through classroom management. I learned that seating plans can be useful to help lower ability pupils work alongside the more able students. I'd really like to explore this idea further."

(Michael, mathematics PGCCE secondary, start of second placement)

Michael collected ideas on this theme through informal discussions with colleagues in the department, his pupils, and the teaching assistant (TA). He then had a very clear agenda item for discussion with his mentor. What is significant here is that talking about something that happened to you with others is a really good way of:

- making your learning visible to you and to others;
- identifying what you need to do to build on your learning;
- providing evidence of professional growth and development, for example for assessment against the Q or C standards.

Consider Julie’s reflective comments, below, about her experience of planning and organizing a Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) day in a secondary school:

"I became involved in planning and delivering a PSHE day with a focus on organizing a drink awareness session for Year 10 students. This was in a workshop format that would be repeated throughout the day, so all the Year 10 students would participate in a range of interactive activities. The team included one experienced school nurse, two trainee school nurses and two trainees. Our combined skills and knowledge soon got the planning buzzing, and not only did I add to my knowledge about the physiological effect of drink but gained insight into the psychological effect on families. This included valuable confidential information from the experienced school nurse about some pupils I found difficult to engage in lessons. The ideas we came up with were great for the day, but resulted in a major breakthrough for some of the students in PE. The knowledge gained from this partnership helped me see beyond the bad behaviour to the 'cause and effect'. More importantly it supported me to try new approaches and explore different ways of engaging some very challenging pupils. The reflective partnership continued through the rest of the placement, the nurse gained insight and skills in teaching and delivering information to the pupils from me, while I gained quality ideas on a range of medical conditions such as ADHD, Asperger syndrome and others specific to pupils I teach. Thank you school nurses.

(Julie, PE secondary PGCE, start of second placement)"

![Reflective task 6.4 Using critical incidents to develop your learning](image)

1. Use the reflective questions in Table 6.2 to help you explore ways of exploiting your own learning through critical incidents.
2. Add your new ideas to your map sketched earlier.

Table 6.2 Using critical incidents to question and reflect on professional learning

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<tr>
<th>Self-reflection (adapted from Brookfield 1995)</th>
<th>Reflection with others into practice</th>
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<tr>
<td>At what moment (in a critical incident) did I feel most engaged with what was happening? What action did I find most affirming or helpful? Who was involved? Why did this go well or not so well? At what moment (in specified situation or time period) did I feel most distant from what was happening? Am I listening carefully to the reflection on this issue? Do I need to rethink the way I have interpreted this incident? How did this make me feel about my own practice in relation to the practice of others? What about the critical incident has surprised me most?</td>
<td>How will the process of reflection on this incident influence practice? What do I need to know about the context in which I found myself, and who can tell me? What would others have done in this situation? Am I aligned to the thinking of other colleagues? What aspect of practice may be changed/continued on the basis of this experience? Am I placing enough/too much emphasis on this incident? How can a negative experience have potential for a positive outcome on my practice? What does this incident tell us about my professional learning? What have you learned from this experience and how will it influence future practice? What interventions or support by others I need to address unexpected issues?</td>
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Summary

The learning organizations in which you train and work provide rich ground for your professional learning. This chapter has encouraged you to tap that source by helping you to identify the types and purposes of support available to you and to build up a 'map' of your present and future learning needs. Case studies and reflections of beginning teachers illustrate the personal qualities and reflective skills needed to maximize these learning opportunities, and through the reflective tasks you have been encouraged to develop approaches to working with, and learning from, a range of significant professional others.

Conclusion

This chapter has emphasized the importance of incorporating formal, semi-formal and informal opportunities for reflection into your support network and the utilization of these reflections to inform your learning experiences. Personal reflection can be empowering, encouraging ownership of events, outcomes and future actions. Reflective practice with others is a skill that needs practice. It can consist of complex layers and manoeuvres, and needs to be based on trust, confidentiality, agreed boundaries and ground rules. Exchanges on an 'any time, any place, anywhere' basis with others can be helpful, but need reflective "filtering". "Practical wisdom" to make the most of your daily encounters will come through conscious reflection.

Key learning points

In order to maximize your professional learning you need to:

- understand the formal, semi-formal and informal networks of support within and outside the organization in which you are working;
- recognize that the needs of the learners are of paramount importance and all your professional learning is geared to ensuring that you meet the professional standards to the highest level possible. 'Support' is a complex concept that includes consideration for you as a person but is more focused on your development as a competent professional;
- appreciate the value of communication with colleagues and peers, and reflect on the impact of your relationship with them;
- use reflective processes to identify your priorities for learning and to 'sift' the ideas and advice given.

How can you use reflection to develop creativity in your classroom?

Lesley Mycroft and Paul Gurton

Prospective teachers who are trained in thinking and teaching creatively and in creative problem-solving will be better prepared to value and nurture the same creative characteristics in their classrooms.

(Abdullah 1996: 34)

A key issue for any beginning teacher is the ability to think outside the box. In an age where there is a plethora of web-based and paper 'resources' that support teaching at every stage and in every subject, it is sometimes hard for new entrants to the profession to see beyond the subject content and focus on the needs of the learners. Fundamental to good practice are teaching approaches that actively engage learners and support the development of understanding within, across and through a subject area. Honing these skills takes time and experience, but it also requires a flexible and creative approach - a willingness to experiment and take risks, and, importantly, an understanding of one's self as a learner too.

This chapter begins by discussing what 'creativity' might mean for you. It then goes on to provide some definitions of this complex notion. It is structured to help you see how to use reflection to develop creatively, and also how to be creative in your reflections. The following questions will be addressed as the chapter progresses:

- What is meant by 'creativity'?
- What is the relationship between creativity and reflective practice?
- How can creative thinking support the development of learner-centred approaches?
- Why is collaboration so important in the creative process?