



Applied Teaching Practices Study Group 3: Reflecting on Teaching Practice and Subject Knowledge

KEY NOTES

Thursday 5th March

Session Purpose and Overview

This study group focused on **reflecting on the trainees' current teaching practice, professional development, and the role subject knowledge plays in their teaching.**

The session provided trainees with an opportunity to reflect on their recent classroom experiences and to discuss strategies that have supported pupil engagement and learning. Trainees were encouraged to identify **specific teaching decisions that had positive outcomes**, as well as to consider how these approaches might be developed further in future lessons.

Michelle emphasised that teaching is **an ongoing process of development and reflection**. Even experienced teachers can deliver lessons that do not go entirely to plan, and this should not be seen as a failure. Instead, it is important to recognise that teaching practice evolves over time and that improvement often comes from small adjustments rather than complete changes to lesson design.

She also reassured trainees that although educational language and terminology may change, the core principles of effective teaching remain consistent.

Good teaching practices from previous decades often remain valid today. While new terminology may appear, strong teaching fundamentals continue to underpin effective learning.

The study group also created space for trainees to **share successful classroom strategies**, allowing participants to learn from each other's experiences and reflect on their own developing teaching practice.

Programme Reminder: Teaching Observation Requirement

Trainees were reminded that if they **have not yet received a formal teaching observation this term**, they must arrange one before the end of the course.

Observations may be conducted by either:

- The **in-school mentor**, or
- The **professional assessor**



The observation provides important evidence of teaching progress and contributes to the documentation required for **successful completion of the programme and certification**.

If trainees experience any difficulties organising their observation, they were advised to contact the course team so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

Session Learning Focus

By the end of the session, trainees were expected to:

- Identify opportunities to make **positive adjustments to their lesson planning and teaching delivery**
- Understand how **subject knowledge and curriculum knowledge support pupil progress**
- Recognise that **small improvements to teaching practice can have significant impact on learning**

Michelle emphasised the importance of maintaining perspective when reflecting on lessons. She explained that teachers should avoid assuming that an entire lesson has failed if one element did not work as planned.

She used the expression:

“Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.”

This idea highlights that a lesson may contain many successful elements even if some aspects require improvement. Effective reflection involves identifying **specific decisions or activities that could be refined**, rather than abandoning all of the work that has already been planned.

Part 1: Reflecting on Recent Teaching Success

The first activity invited trainees to reflect on **recent teaching experiences that had gone well**.

Participants were asked to consider:

- What specifically worked well in the lesson
- Why they believed the approach was successful
- Which teaching decisions may have contributed to this outcome

Michelle encouraged trainees to focus on **positive reflection**, as teachers often spend more time analysing what went wrong rather than recognising effective practice.



She also noted that success does not always need to involve major achievements. Sometimes a small improvement in behaviour, engagement, or understanding can represent meaningful progress.

Example 1: Improving Extended Writing in Computer Science

One trainee described their experience teaching **Key Stage 5 Computer Science students**, who initially struggled with extended written responses.

Initial Challenge

Students were expected to answer **9-mark exam questions**, but many were writing only two or three lines in response. This suggested that they were not yet confident in structuring extended explanations or developing detailed answers.

Strategy Implemented

To address this issue, the trainee and their mentor introduced several strategies designed to develop students' writing habits.

These included:

- Setting **regular long-answer exam questions** after completing topics
- Introducing reflective writing tasks similar to **learning journal activities**
- Asking students to reflect on what they had learned and how knowledge might apply in practical scenarios

Students were also encouraged to consider questions such as:

- What have you learned from this topic?
- Why might this knowledge be useful?
- How might this information be applied in a real-world situation?

In addition, the teacher began sharing **exam assessment criteria** more explicitly so that students could understand what examiners were expecting in high-quality answers.

They also introduced the use of **rubrics (or success criteria – what Dylan Williams refers to as ‘pre-flight checklists’)** through digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, which allowed students to know and understand explicitly the criteria that would be used to assess their work.

Outcome

Over time, students began to produce longer and more structured responses. Their writing demonstrated clearer explanations and greater engagement with the question requirements.



The trainee also reflected that many modern students tend to seek **quick solutions**, partly due to the influence of digital technologies and AI tools. **As a result, developing sustained writing skills requires deliberate teaching strategies and consistent practice.**

Teaching Insight: The Importance of Clear Expectations

Michelle highlighted several important teaching principles within this example.

Transparency of Expectations

Students are more likely to engage with tasks when teachers clearly explain:

- What they are expected to do
- How their work will be assessed
- Why the task is important for their success

When expectations are clearly communicated, students understand that tasks are not arbitrary but directly linked to their learning outcomes and exam performance.

Connecting Tasks to Student Motivation

Students often ask themselves whether an activity is worth their effort. By explicitly linking tasks to **exam success and skill development**, teachers can help pupils see the value in the work they are completing.

Using Success Criteria and Rubrics

Michelle explained that although different terms are sometimes used, **rubrics and success criteria essentially serve the same purpose.**

They provide a clear framework that helps students understand what successful work looks like.

Success criteria can:

- Clarify the **specific elements** required in a **strong** response
- Support teachers in **planning** lessons that address **assessment objectives**
- Help students **monitor** their **own progress** and improve their work

For teachers, regularly revisiting success criteria also prompts important reflective questions, such as:

- What knowledge should pupils gain from this lesson?
- What skills should they be able to demonstrate?
- Have these expectations been explained clearly?



Modelling High-Quality Work

Another strategy discussed during the session was the use of **model examples of successful work**.

Teachers can show pupils an example response and then guide them through analysing it. Students may be asked to identify where the work meets specific success criteria and to discuss why the example is effective.

This approach helps pupils move from abstract assessment language to a clearer understanding of how strong responses are structured.

Michelle suggested beginning with **shorter responses and fewer criteria**, gradually building students' confidence before introducing more complex tasks.

Teaching Insight: Developing as a Teacher Through Curriculum Knowledge

Michelle also reflected on her own professional development as a teacher. She explained that a key turning point in her teaching career occurred when she developed a **deep understanding of the curriculum and assessment objectives within her subject**.

When teachers understand their curriculum in detail, they can:

- Explain expectations clearly to pupils
- Use consistent professional language when discussing assessment
- Support students in understanding how to meet exam requirements

This shared understanding helps teachers and students work more effectively together, as both groups are clear about what successful learning looks like.

Part 2: Establishing Behaviour Expectations and Classroom Routines

Another trainee shared a strategy that had significantly improved the pupils' **behaviour and the overall learning atmosphere in lessons**.

Initial Challenge

The trainee explained that during cover lessons, classes often began in a noisy or unsettled state. Students would continue talking while the lesson was starting, which made it difficult to establish focus and begin learning activities effectively.



Initially, the trainee attempted to manage the situation by verbally asking students for silence. However, this approach often required raising their voice and repeatedly addressing the class, which was both tiring and ineffective.

Strategy Introduced: Silent Start Routine

The trainee described a strategy they had developed following advice from previous study group discussions.

Instead of repeatedly asking students to be quiet, the teacher began using a **visual instruction displayed on the classroom screen**.

The message read:

“I am not going to take the register until there is silence. Thank you.”

This message was displayed on the smartboard using a large text format so that it was immediately visible to all students entering the classroom.

The teacher would then stand quietly at the front of the room and **wait for silence before continuing the lesson**.

Importantly, the teacher did not repeat the instruction verbally. Instead, the expectation was communicated through the written message and through the teacher’s consistent behaviour.

Positive Reinforcement and Clear Expectations

Alongside this routine, the trainee also introduced **positive reinforcement**.

Students who settled quickly and produced good work were rewarded with:

- Positive behaviour points
- A report of their effort sent to the **Head of House or Head of Department**

The teacher explained that students responded particularly well to this recognition, as it acknowledged their effort and behaviour in a visible way.



As a result, both **classroom behaviour and the quality of student work improved significantly.**

Creating the Right Learning Atmosphere

The trainee reflected that the key improvement came from focusing on **the learning atmosphere at the start of the lesson.**

They recognised that if the classroom environment was noisy or disorganised, this affected all students, including those who wanted to learn.

By establishing silence before beginning the lesson, the teacher ensured that:

- Instructions could be heard clearly
- Students could focus on the task
- The classroom environment supported learning

This routine helped ensure that **all pupils had the opportunity to engage with the lesson effectively.**

Teaching Insight: Adapting Established Behaviour Strategies

Michelle highlighted that the trainee's approach reflected a well-known behaviour management principle associated with **Bill Rogers' behaviour management philosophy.**

Bill Rogers emphasises the importance of:

- Calm authority
- Consistent expectations
- Avoiding confrontation where possible

Traditionally, teachers following this approach might stand silently at the front of the room and wait until the class became quiet before continuing.



However, Michelle noted that the trainee had successfully **adapted this principle for a modern classroom environment** by using digital tools such as the smartboard to communicate expectations visually.

This demonstrated an important aspect of effective teaching: **taking established principles and adapting them to suit the context of a particular school or classroom.**

Developing Classroom Routines

Michelle explained that over time, repeated actions such as these become **established classroom routines**.

Once routines are embedded:

- Students begin to anticipate what will happen
- Behaviour becomes more predictable
- Less time is lost managing disruptions

She described routines as forming part of a teacher's **classroom persona**.

A teacher's classroom persona refers to the professional identity they establish with their pupils. This includes:

- The routines they use
- The expectations they set
- The way they communicate with students

When these elements become consistent, students begin to recognise and respond to them automatically.

Michelle explained that teachers often know their routines are working when students start referring to them in conversations, for example:

“In this teacher's class we always do this.”

This indicates that expectations have become clearly established.



Consistency as the Foundation of Behaviour Management

Michelle emphasised that the most important principle in behaviour management is **consistency**.

When teachers apply expectations consistently:

- Students understand what is expected of them
- Behaviour becomes easier to manage
- The classroom environment becomes calmer and more predictable

In contrast, inconsistent expectations can create confusion and encourage students to test boundaries.

For new teachers, developing this consistency can feel challenging, particularly when confidence is still developing. However, maintaining clear routines and expectations helps teachers gradually build authority in the classroom.

Developing Confidence as a New Teacher

The trainee reflected that earlier in the year, they had initially been perceived as a **very relaxed and friendly teacher**. While this created a positive relationship with students, some pupils interpreted this as meaning that expectations were flexible.

As a result, some students would:

- Avoid completing tasks
- Ignore instructions
- Attempt to take advantage of the informal atmosphere

By introducing clear routines and expectations, the trainee found that they were able to maintain a positive relationship with students while also ensuring that **all pupils participated in the lesson**.

The trainee noted that they now felt significantly more confident in their teaching decisions.



Students continued to recognise the teacher as approachable and engaging, but they also understood that expectations around behaviour and work completion were firm.

Balancing Approachability and Authority

Michelle highlighted that this balance is an important stage in teacher development.

New teachers often begin by trying to build positive relationships with students, which is important. However, they must also establish clear expectations so that the classroom environment remains productive.

When teachers become comfortable setting boundaries, they can maintain both:

- Positive relationships with pupils
- High expectations for behaviour and learning

Michelle noted that students generally prefer classrooms where expectations are clear and predictable. Even if pupils initially resist boundaries, they often appreciate the sense of structure and fairness that consistent routines provide.

The Role of Teacher Confidence

Another important point raised in the discussion was the role of **teacher confidence**.

Michelle explained that new teachers often feel uncertain about asserting authority, particularly when they are still developing their professional identity.

In some cases, teachers may feel that they must constantly negotiate with pupils or seek approval from them.

However, effective teaching requires teachers to recognise that they are responsible for maintaining the learning environment.

Michelle reassured trainees that it is acceptable to establish firm expectations.

Teachers do not need to adopt an authoritarian approach, but they must remain confident in their role as the person responsible for leading the classroom.

She described this process as sometimes involving an element of:



“Faking it until you make it.”

Even when teachers feel uncertain internally, maintaining a calm and confident outward approach can help establish authority and stability in the classroom.

Over time, this confidence becomes natural and genuine as teachers gain more experience.

Part 3: Subject Knowledge and Pedagogical Skill

The final section of the session focused on a discussion of a **blog article written by educational writer Tom Sherrington**, which explored the relationship between **subject knowledge and effective teaching**.

The article addressed an ongoing debate within education regarding whether strong **subject knowledge** or strong **pedagogical skill** is the most important factor in successful teaching.

Michelle explained that the purpose of this discussion was not to argue that one element is more important than the other, but rather to encourage trainees to recognise that **effective teaching requires a balance of both**.

The Debate Around Subject Knowledge

The discussion began by summarising the argument presented in the article.

Tom Sherrington had written in response to discussions on social media suggesting that **subject knowledge may not be essential for effective teaching**.

This view had caused concern among many teachers, as subject knowledge traditionally forms a core component of professional expertise in teaching.

One trainee explained that the article highlighted how a lack of subject knowledge can create difficulties in the classroom. For example, if a student asks a question that goes beyond the immediate lesson content, a teacher who lacks subject knowledge may struggle to respond confidently.

If this happens repeatedly, students may begin to question whether their teacher is able to guide them effectively through the subject.

Confidence in Responding to Student Questions

The discussion highlighted that strong subject knowledge allows teachers to:

- Respond confidently to student questions



- Provide deeper explanations when required
- Make connections between different topics within the curriculum

Without this knowledge, teachers may find themselves frequently responding to questions by saying:

“I will have to check that and come back to you.”

While this response is sometimes appropriate, relying on it too often may undermine teacher confidence and classroom authority.

Michelle acknowledged that it is completely acceptable for teachers to occasionally admit that they do not know the answer to a question.

In fact, it is often better to acknowledge uncertainty than to provide incorrect information.

Teachers can respond constructively by saying:

- “That is a really interesting question. Let me look into that and we will discuss it tomorrow.”

However, she also explained that teachers should aim to build their subject knowledge over time so that these situations become less frequent.

The Role of Pedagogical Skill

While strong subject knowledge is important, the article also emphasised that **knowing a subject does not automatically make someone an effective teacher.**

Teaching requires a separate set of professional skills related to **how knowledge is communicated and understood by learners.**

These skills include:

- Explaining ideas clearly
- Breaking down complex concepts
- Asking effective questions
- Checking pupil understanding
- Providing opportunities for practice
- Modelling and scaffolding learning so knowledge can flourish

A teacher who has extensive subject knowledge but cannot communicate it effectively may struggle to support pupil learning.



In contrast, a teacher with strong pedagogical skills may be able to guide students successfully through learning even if they are not an expert in every detail of the subject.

The Risk of Lecture-Based Teaching

One trainee reflected that teachers who are very knowledgeable in their subject can sometimes fall into the pattern of **lecture-style teaching**.

This occurs when teachers share large amounts of information without providing students with enough opportunities to:

- Think
- discuss
- practise applying their knowledge

While subject expertise can enrich lessons, it must be balanced with teaching strategies that actively involve pupils in the learning process.

Effective teaching therefore requires teachers to **translate their knowledge into accessible learning experiences**.

Linking Subject Knowledge and Rosenshine's Principles

Michelle connected this discussion to **Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction**, which trainees had previously explored in earlier training sessions.

Several of these principles emphasise the importance of:

- Breaking complex ideas into **smaller steps**
- Providing **guided practice**
- Checking for understanding
- Gradually increasing independence

These strategies help teachers transform subject knowledge into learning experiences that pupils can understand and retain.

For example, a teacher may possess detailed knowledge of a historical topic, but effective teaching requires structuring this knowledge in a way that allows students to build understanding gradually.

The Importance of Discussion and Practice



Michelle emphasised that pupils often need **time to talk about ideas before they are able to write about them effectively.**

For example, when pupils engage in:

- class discussions
- debates
- structured questioning

they begin to organise their thoughts and clarify their understanding of the topic.

This process helps them develop the confidence needed to produce more complex written responses later.

Teachers therefore benefit from incorporating opportunities for **discussion and verbal reasoning** before expecting pupils to complete independent written tasks.

Supporting Student Thinking Through Structured Learning

The session also highlighted the importance of **scaffolding learning activities.**

Scaffolding involves providing structured support that helps pupils progress through a task step by step.

Examples of scaffolding may include:

- Providing sentence starters
- Breaking writing tasks into smaller sections
- Using guided questions to prompt thinking
- Providing partially completed examples

These strategies help pupils develop confidence while gradually increasing the level of challenge.

Recognising the Cognitive Demands on Pupils

Michelle also reminded trainees that pupils experience many different subjects throughout the school day.

Students move from one lesson to another, constantly adjusting to:

- different topics
- different teachers
- different expectations



Because of this, teachers should avoid assuming that pupils will immediately recall previous knowledge or understand the expectations of a task.

Instead, teachers should begin lessons by:

- briefly revisiting previous learning
- reminding pupils of key concepts
- reconnecting the lesson with the wider topic

This approach helps pupils re-engage with the subject and prepares them to access new learning more effectively.

The Importance of Engagement in Teaching

Michelle reflected on classroom observations she had conducted in the past, where some lessons relied heavily on worksheets and passive activities.

She described situations where teachers repeatedly provided worksheets without creating opportunities for discussion or deeper engagement.

In these cases, teaching became focused primarily on **setting tasks rather than supporting learning**.

Michelle explained that effective teaching requires more than simply assigning activities. It involves actively guiding pupils through the learning process and encouraging them to think critically about the subject.

She emphasised that pupils are more likely to remember lessons that involve:

- meaningful discussion
- active participation
- opportunities to explore ideas

rather than lessons based solely on completing worksheets.

Behaviour as the Foundation of Effective Teaching

The discussion concluded by linking subject knowledge and pedagogy to the importance of **classroom behaviour and learning environment**.

Michelle explained that even the most carefully planned lesson cannot succeed if the classroom environment is not conducive to learning.

Before effective teaching can take place, teachers must ensure that:

- pupils are settled
- expectations are clear



- the classroom atmosphere supports concentration

Once this foundation is established, teachers are able to deliver instruction effectively and support meaningful learning.