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CASE STUDY: TA TO TEACHER: AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE INTO TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to sketch out a case study of the BA (Hons) in Primary Education, delivered by Anspear and the University of Buckingham, as an ongoing alternative route into teaching aimed at addressing some aspects of the recruitment and retention crisis in the schools sector in England. While the policy response to the crisis has revolved around secondary school teachers, this elides the scale of the challenge facing primary education along with the recruitment, retention and development of teaching assistants. This article outlines the rationale for developing an undergraduate degree specifically for teaching assistants working in primary settings, the core principles of the degree programme, and how we have used established science of learning and learning design principles in order to develop digital learning content for the degree.

Keywords: teaching assistants, teacher recruitment, higher education, online learning, science of learning, learning design, Deans for Impact, Gagne's nine events of instruction

The aim of this piece is to outline an alternative degree-based route into teaching designed to build on the skills and expertise of teaching assistants based in primary education settings. This route is 'alternative' in an additional sense as it is built around a core of online learning: this piece therefore also outlines some key principles of learning design and the ways in which these have informed the development of online learning materials for the degree.

ABOUT THE BA ROUTE

The BA (Hons) in Primary Education is a three-year online course delivered by educational technology company Anspear and the University of Buckingham, with the aim of providing a degree-level qualification and subsequent route into teacher training for those who do not already hold a first degree. It is aimed at teaching assistants, learning support assistants and other

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role titles abbreviated here under the umbrella of 'TAs' who are employed in primary education settings, including prep schools and special schools.

RATIONALE FOR THE BA

The recruitment and retention crisis in teaching in England scarcely needs introduction. In response to these challenges, the policy focus has been on secondary school teachers and teachers in shortage subjects, rather than primary schools. However, the most recent NFER labour market forecast has found that: "Primary recruitment... which is usually at or above its target each year, is forecast to reach only 83 per cent of target next year" (2024). Meanwhile, TAs comprise a significant proportion of the education workforce in primary schools:

> Over the last 20 years, the number of TAs in mainstream schools in England has more than trebled (DfE, 2017b, 2021c). At the most recent count (DfE, 2021c), TAs comprised 28 per cent of the overall school workforce: 35 per cent of the primary and nursery school workforce, 13 per cent of the secondary school workforce, and 52 per cent of the special school workforce. (Webster, 2022, p.14)

TAs who are already in post typically have a wealth of knowledge and experience in school, including strong working relationships with teachers and pupils, and many TAs are interested in further professional development. However, a recent survey of 150 TAs carried out by NCFE found that around half of TAs surveyed felt that they had inadequate job security (2023, p. 6) and that their role is not respected (p. 7). The headline finding was that 73% of TAs surveyed had considered or were actively planning to leave the profession (p. 6). Without training and developing this workforce, schools risk losing the knowledge and experience that TAs provide, as well as cutting off a potential supply of future teachers. Data from a national survey of 9,055 TAs showed that many TAs took on multiple responsibilities above and beyond their job description during and after the school closures of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hall and Webster, 2023). Interviews following up on the survey's main themes found that: "The most effective strategies for recognising and valuing TAs... involved integrating TAs into the school community and school processes, such as lesson planning, and investing in and supporting their development as classroom professionals" (p. 13); these strategies included supporting TAs to become teachers (p. 14).

As these findings suggest, TAs are motivated to seek professional development, despite or perhaps because of the challenges of their current roles. A recent NAPTA survey of 400 primary TAs for a large training provider found that 80% of respondents wanted to take a more active role in their own development (Anspear, 2024). Meanwhile, research by the Department for Education found that over half of the TAs interviewed were interested in becoming teachers (2019, p. 17). However, the DfE research also identified

several challenges for TAs interested in a teaching career: length of training, especially for TAs who would need to obtain a first degree; cost of training, including loss of salary; workload; and confidence around being able to obtain the qualifications needed, especially where TAs had been out of education for a long time (pp. 22–23). The interviewees also identified possible solutions or incentives to address these issues, including support from their current employer, the option to stay in their local area, and training pathways tailored specifically to TAs (pp. 23–24).

CORE PRINCIPLES OF THE BA

Based on this context and looking at the potential TA to teacher pipeline, we worked with partners in schools, MATs and at the University to identify some of the key considerations and objectives for the BA. 'We' refers here to the combined team at Anspear and the University of Buckingham, alongside Nicola Masters with whom we have been working closely on course development.

Firstly, we wanted the BA to address TAs' concerns about undertaking academic studies while also bridging the perceived research-to-practice gap between academic approaches to education on the one hand, and professional practice and experience in schools on the other hand. Therefore it was important for this route to enable TAs to continue in post, earning a salary and building their professional experience and expertise, thereby minimising financial risk, loss of professional skills, and staffing issues for schools that might occur with a route that required TAs to take partial leave or more extended time out of work to undertake a degree. We wanted TAs to feel that their existing experience is valued, and to feel highly supported in approaching academic studies, especially for those who had been out of education for a long time. We also wanted these links between practice and research to shape and be reflected in the overall course design of the degree and learning materials for each module, bringing together the expertise of senior leaders and subject experts in primary education and teacher training, online learning developers, and the University's quality assurers, alongside feedback from students. Assessments have been designed to enable students to showcase their own knowledge, reflections and observations of their workplaces while also requiring them to make explicit their commentary on the relationship between theory and practice.

Secondly, we designed the BA around a core of online learning material blended with live online lectures, webinars and meetings with tutors, and an employment requirement ensuring learning would be strongly connected with workplace experiences. This model aims to enable students to minimise the impact of their studies on their working life as well as reaching for the 50:50 balance that some research has suggested may be an optimal blend of online and in-person learning (Owston and York, 2018). E-learning in tertiary

education has been a prominent concern for at least 20 years (OECD, 2005), while periodic spikes of enthusiasm for online learning through vehicles such as MOOCs have made way for the normalisation of online learning for higher education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although its recent developments were fuelled by necessity, online learning can provide effective learning experiences for students at this level. Indeed, a meta-analysis of blended learning approaches in higher education found that replacing classroom time with online learning environments was no less effective for meeting learning outcomes than classroom time itself (Müller and Mildenberger, 2021). However, while online learning can be successfully deployed for the purposes of higher education, the quality of this learning experience remains a major factor in whether or not students succeed: a meta-analysis pre-dating COVID-19 found that the quality of instructional design was a factor in the efficacy of online learning in higher education (Castro and Tumibay, 2019). As the BA's online learning content can also be accessed via a mobile application, the specific implications of this medium for the management of cognitive load (Curum and Khedo, 2021) including optimising layouts to adapt to multiple screen dimensions and supporting retention through multimedia learning are also factored into the technological and instructional design.

Finally, we wanted to support the wider professionalisation aims of TAs, enabling them to gain a degree that provides academic training and widens options for the future. While the intention is to encourage students on the BA to continue into teacher training and gain QTS, an education degree can lead to a range of career options. One of the further benefits of an undergraduate degree in education is grappling with big questions. What do we mean by 'childhood'? What is education for? When did we decide that everyone should go to school? How do people learn? How important is play and creativity? These are all questions that allow undergraduates to develop the critical thinking skills often considered essential for teacher training (Golden, 2023) and that can support other graduate outcomes, including postgraduate study and research.

EVALUATING THE BA

The BA's first cohort of 93 students started their studies in the summer of 2023. Alongside the usual formal accreditation and quality assurance processes required for an undergraduate degree, we are also working directly with student cohorts to evaluate the BA. Evaluation of learning materials is a critical stage of instructional design. Moreover, recent research suggests that when undergraduate students' voices are involved in design changes, their engagement improves (Zhu, Zhu and Hua, 2024). With this in mind, we have so far worked with the first cohort via a student survey and focus group to look at ways to improve student experience and provide further support for the

development of academic skills. Further research and engagement activities will be carried out as the BA continues to develop.

LEARNING DESIGN PRINCIPLES

In order to facilitate study alongside work in schools, the BA uses a blended teaching and learning model. The BA's blended approach combines a requirement for ongoing workplace experience with online learning materials, live online lectures, webinars and meetings with tutors, as well as multiple modes of assessment including computer-marked multiple choice questions, reflective journal writing and essay writing. The degree programme is divided into ten modules containing two units each, plus the final Year 3 module of the BA, which requires students to plan and undertake a small-scale research project in school. Units are broken down into week-by-week learning content and readings: this structured approach supports students to plan their workload around their other commitments and is designed to aid retention of new learning.

For the purposes of this article, I will outline some of the underlying principles that inform Anspear's content design for the BA's online learning materials (which students can access either via an app download or via the web or both), and how these relate to established concepts from the science of learning and instructional design. To illustrate this, two well-known frameworks – the science of learning research summary produced by Deans for Impact, and Robert Gagné's events of instruction – are outlined alongside examples of concepts in practice in the BA learning materials.

The Deans for Impact research summary provides an overview of some of the key findings of cognitive science research in the field of learning. While the Deans' presentation and exemplification of this framework speaks primarily to teacher-student interactions rather than student interactions with online learning materials, the same underlying principles can be seen at play in the curriculum design that informs the development of these materials, as well as the user experience (UX) design.

For five of the six core themes and related cognitive principles and research identified by the Deans, I have described below what this looks like in practice in the BA's online learning materials. The sixth core theme summarised by the Deans is *misconceptions about learning*, which are addressed at the level of quality assurance processes at the University, as well as through our processes of engaging with educational research and best practices in learning design and UX design.

1. *Understanding new ideas:*
   Sequencing and pacing are key strategies for enabling students to understand new ideas. In the BA, each unit breaks down its main learning outcomes into four or five chunks, which are further subdivided. At the content level, each chunk aims to move students from 'known' to 'new'

knowledge, while at the task level, the 'I do, we do, you do' model of learning, also known as the Gradual Release of Responsibility approach to instruction (Fisher and Frey, 2021), is used. Explanations support the learning of new ideas and the development of academic skills, for instance through worked examples of how to make links between theory and practice.

2. *Learning and retention of new information:*
   Learning and retention of new information is supported through well-chosen examples and the use of narrative features. For example, learning on the history of primary education prior to 1944 includes a newly-published audio recording of an interviewee who attended elementary school in the North of England between 1904 and 1912. To support retention, the course content also interleaves different types of task on the same learning topic, such as writing a reflection, summarising a reading and planning a practical activity. The overarching curriculum design spirals in order to space out new learning on repeated topics: focused study of child development, for example, is introduced and subsequently developed in units 1.1, 3.1 and 5.1. Low-stakes computer-marked quizzing is used at weekly intervals.

3. *Problem-solving:*
   The Deans identify core knowledge as the base upon which students can develop their problem-solving abilities. The BA course materials provide core substantive and disciplinary knowledge of the academic study of education that students need to be able to interpret more complex readings and complete reflective and critical writing tasks. The Deans identify quality feedback as another important facet of supporting problem-solving. While the most important feedback BA students receive is and will continue to be from their human tutors and markers, they also receive feedback via computer-marked multiple choice questions. Meanwhile, we are developing new models including an AI-powered mechanism for instant feedback on answers to open-ended questions and evaluative commentary on students' academic writing skills.

4. *Transferring knowledge*:
   The BA's online learning materials are designed to encourage the transfer of theory to practice and practice to theory. This is achieved through alternating and interleaving discussions of research findings, education statistics, philosophical and psychological approaches, and practical classroom strategies. Students can respond to prompts that ask them to make comparisons, consider and evaluate their own views and experiences, plan practical activities, and position their own work within a broader context of current thinking, policy and practice. Each module includes at

least one reflective journal task which requires students to make links between their observations and conversations in school, and their learning on the course.

5. *Motivation:*
   Students can monitor their own learning through elements of UX design that provide visual markers of task completion, quiz performance and overall progress. At the content design level, elements such as 'teaching quizzes' are used to provide explanations and further prompts for reflection following a quiz question. Other tasks require students to write explanations of what they have just learned and how it relates to their workplace experiences and prior knowledge. Students complete a simple low-stakes self-evaluation for each week's work along with a reflection on what they have learned and what they are motivated to find out more about.

The learning materials on the BA course also contain prompts for students to reflect on both their individual learning and on the relationships between the educational concepts they are studying and the design of their course materials. In other words, metacognition is baked in to the BA's presentation of education as an academic and professional discipline: students are encouraged to evaluate the course materials in light of their newly gained knowledge about concepts relating to the science of learning, models of assessment, creative approaches, cultural capital, and so on.

These overarching principles inform the course development as a whole. In terms of sequencing chunks of learning, the principles of instructional design also provide an important framework. Robert Gagné's (1965) nine events of instruction have long proved a useful model for course design for online, hybrid and in-person learning alike. A learning sequence is based on these 'events':

1. Gain attention
2. Inform learners of objectives
3. Stimulate recall of prior learning
4. Presenting the learning content or stimulus
5. Provide learning guidance
6. Elicit performance through opportunities for practice
7. Provide feedback
8. Assess performance
9. Enhance retention and transfer

This list is adapted from examples which can be found in guides from Northern Illinois University (2020) and University of Florida (2018). These guides provide useful overviews of the application of this model for higher education course designers, although I would also like to draw readers' attention to the extremely useful resource, *Gagnes [sic] 9 events of instruction featuring cats* (2015).

If we take Gagné's third event as an example, stimulating recall of prior learning, this is structured into the BA's online learning materials through methods such as building on learning from previous units, making explicit links between units, and asking students to reflect on their previous experiences and knowledge about the topic. For example, students are prompted to reflect on their own experiences of various aspects of schooling and how this has influenced their current views on broad topics such as pedagogy, curriculum and behaviour, as well as specific topics such as school meals and how these relate to broader critical questions about the role of schools in society. These reflections form the basis of engagement and critical comparison with the learning material and required readings. This example demonstrates one of the ways in which we intend to make and strengthen links between theory and practice, and value TAs' existing knowledge while at the same time supporting their academic and professional development.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of this article has been to sketch out a case study of the BA (Hons) in Primary Education as an ongoing alternative route into teaching aimed at addressing some aspects of the recruitment and retention crisis in the schools sector in England. While the policy response to the crisis has revolved around secondary school teachers, this elides the scale of the challenge facing primary education along with the recruitment, retention and development of teaching assistants.

In developing the case study in question, this article has also outlined the rationale and learning design principles that have informed the course developers' decision-making processes and the anticipated impact on learning of these design decisions. Further evaluative and quantitative work looking at ongoing course development and effectiveness for learners will be carried out as current and future cohorts continue with their studies, and relevant findings from this work will be shared with the wider higher education and teacher training professions.

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