Trainer Training: A Question Matrix

Tessa Woodward
Hilderstone College, Kent

Asking simple questions

One way of turning a spotlight onto a subject so as to think about it in detail is to ask a number of simple, fundamental questions and then to generate a variety of answers to them. If we take the topic of training teachers and then improving the trainers themselves, some possible questions are:

- What is a trainer?
- Are trainers necessary?
- What does a trainer have to be/do/have/know?
- How do people become teacher trainers?.
- How do trainers continue to progress/develop once in the job? What do they need for this?
- How are trainers evaluated?
- Where is the language learner in all this?
- What are the implications of all these questions and their answers for the trainer trainer?

As well as these basic questions I have some favourite questions of my own. These are:

- What are the dark sides to our current approaches to training?
- How do people get trained in other fields and in the professions and what can we learn from their methods?
- What is central to all learning and teaching no matter what the level, type or field?

If you prefer to work with less linear formats, take a look at the mind map at the end of the paper (see Appendix). It may be easier too to see connections between the questions with that format. I am sure that as you read you will want to cross out, reword or add to the questions I have listed in order that they may make more sense in your situation.

Once we have a set of questions that seem fundamental, interesting and relevant what can we do with them?

First use of the questions

First of all we can consider any work we are currently doing and see which of the above questions it seems to be answering. Some of my own work has been to collect strategies to enable trainers to do their core tasks (such as sharing information) in varied and interesting ways. Thus I think I have been trying to answer the questions. 'What does a trainer need to do?' and 'What does a trainer need in order to keep progressing?' Once we have in a sense 'placed' our own work, by seeing which questions we are most involved in answering, we can next consider how we would answer all of the questions, one by one.

What is a trainer?

In answering the first question, 'What is a trainer?', I would give a very broad definition. I believe that anyone who is helpful or useful to a teacher, whether they be a person with the title of teacher trainer and have a desk and office of their own, or someone who takes the time and trouble to listen to an account of a lesson gone wrong, has a training function. Thus language learners too have a training effect when they help each other to understand words that the teacher failed to explain well. That is, they do if the teacher listens to how they do it and takes note of the simple language or mimes used. So I thought my own definition was pretty all-encompassing until I met, for the first time, trainers from Tunisia and discovered that they had had to be closely observed in their language classes for long periods and then take state exams in linguistics, methodology and other subjects before they were allowed to call themselves teacher trainers. I realised how different other people's answers to the basic questions could be! So this brings me to the next use of the questions.

Second use of the questions

By finding out how other people answer the questions we can place our own ideas, in all their narrowness, and can start to broaden our understanding. When reading through the papers in this collection you might like to think first, what questions are the writers most involved in answering? Then, how does their answer differ from your own and what can be learned from this? I came across another broadening of my own definition of a trainer while enjoying Arlene Gilpin's and Harshwardhan Kadepurkar's papers (this volume). I realised that I had forgotten how, in cascade training, a trainer is someone who has only just been trained by someone else. The new trainer has to try to pass on, with as little dilution as possible, what they themselves have only just learned!

As teacher trainers we can sometimes assume, without realising, that *our* situation is the norm, the natural, the usual one. We can tend to forget that there are trainers all over the world working in vastly different circumstances and in vastly different ways from ourselves. And that they too probably think that their situation is the one that is normal!

Some unusual answers

Perhaps the most useful thing then that I can now go on to do is to give some unusual answers to the remaining questions, hoping that this may have the effect of reminding you what it is that you take for granted in your own work. Not all the answers that follow are my own but they are certainly answers that I am familiar with through working with trainers on article drafts, books, at conferences or in team teaching. So, let's now look at the second question.

Are trainers necessary?

The world is full of people with a little knowledge doing the dangerous thing, teaching others. Uncles teach nieces how to ride bikes even though they may not have been on a bike themselves for years and certainly don't have a bike-riding teacher's certificate! The niece doesn't mind, as long as she can wobble off on her bike successfully after a couple of afternoons. But usually when the person with the little knowledge starts being asked to teach large groups of people or to teach very often, then they don't mind picking up a few tips. So trainers then do sometimes come in handy. We could perhaps argue that the extent to which a trainer is necessary depends on the model of teacher training employed. Teachers trying to improve their own teaching via taping lessons, discussion with 'critical friends', and trying things out, will perhaps want only the lightest of involvement with a teacher trainer. Other teachers wanting a bit of a rest and a change might be happier with more of a jug and mug model for a while. I am reminded of a time some years ago when social workers in London went on strike for many weeks. When they got back to work they were astounded to discover that in many cases the clients had got on rather better without them! So perhaps a possible answer here might be that trainers are necessary to each other and maybe a little to some teachers!

What does a trainer have to be/do/have/know?

What does a trainer have to *be*? Surely we shouldn't imagine that personality is all? Yet when you ask teachers what they like and remember about their trainers, many will mention personal qualities such as sensitivity, flexibility, and sense of humour rather than the strategies and techniques used and often rather even than the content or knowledge passed on. They all have pretty strong views on what a trainer should be and should *not* be! My own top four attributes would be naturalness, honesty, lack of dogma and humour. At least one contributor to this collection would say that a trainer has to be a language observer too (see the paper by Jane Willis, this volume). One of the most important things I think that a trainer has to *do* is to keep teaching language on a regular basis and keep learning either languages or some other subject. These, to my mind, are as important as the usual core tasks of preparing sessions, sharing information, observing teachers, giving feedback and so on.

A trainer also has to find out the participants' individual and cultural

learning styles and adapt her or his own training style to these, as Donard Britten and Stephen Bax note (this volume). As for what a trainer has to *have*, apart from language competence and lots of different experiences, awareness of their own teaching and training methodology and the assumptions behind them would be top of my list (see Peter Maingay's paper, this volume). A useful additional question here might be: 'What does a trainer have to be/do/have/know *in excess* of a teacher?'[1].

How do people become – and develop as – trainers?

Longevity used perhaps to be the answer at the time when, as Kerr has put it, trainers tended to emerge from the EFL community 'rather like village elders' (Kerr 1979, cited in Britten 1985: 237). These days there are courses and exams, apprenticeships and cascades, staff development programmes and teams. Recently I have come across quite a few trainers who have fallen into their roles in the same sort of way as actors do ... by first understudying and then filling the role when someone falls ill or the company decides to tour abroad! Again these days there are special interest groups, magazines, books and conferences to help the trainer to progress once in the job, provided he or she has the time and money to take advantage of all these relatively new offerings. Teachers, when asked, often admit that they learn most from watching other people teach. Perhaps then we should set up trainer observation as the main path forward for our own training? Certainly, informal discussion and support from peers is extremely important to many trainers. Or on a different tack, many trainers I know say it is from other pursuits that they learn the really important things: voice production from singing, physical stamina from sports, conversation patterns in feedback from counselling and so on. For myself, two things are really important here. First, in any course or workshop for trainers it would seem to be essential to find out who the trainers are and what their ideas and constructs are at the start of the course and to work from that (see the papers by Bolitho and Wright and by Pozzo, this volume). The second thing is how much trainers can learn from the teachers we work with, if only we take the trouble to develop the art of finding out what the 'clients' think about our work. This moves me nicely on to the next question.

How are trainers evaluated?

The most important evaluators are obviously the teachers we work with. But apart from trainee feedback, I wonder how much, if at all, trainers *are* evaluated. Leaving aside occasional remarks from visiting assessors and chats with colleagues, I cannot think of a time when my training has been evaluated by anyone other than the teachers I am privileged to work with. Do we know, any more than we know what makes a good teacher, what makes a good trainer? If not, then how can we be evaluated? Do we not mostly go by whether we are hired again next year, whether the atmosphere in a course feels right, the remarks people make when we beg them to give us feedback? Perhaps we should all enter into relationships with

the 'critical friends' so crucial to teachers in action research projects. Then at least we could couple our self assessment with a view from the outside. The question, 'How are trainer *courses* evaluated?' is also important. There will be some answers to that as you read through this book.

Where is the language learner in all this?

If we are too focused on what a teacher trainer needs to know and how trainer trainers can develop, we are in danger of forgetting the central encounter on which all the others rest. We must not forget, while we are debating the models we prefer for training courses and building libraries of observation checklists, that all over the world there are language learners who, for example, have computers and very little time and who would like to learn English by having e-mail correspondence with a couple of native speakers and by strolling around the internet. There are teachers worldwide trying to respond swiftly and skilfully to a massive increase in learner variation. We must not become so self-absorbed or bureaucratised that *we* cannot respond. The 'we' here is much more likely to refer to native speaking trainers and trainer trainers since non-native speaker trainers regard language learning very often as their personal priority.

What are the implications of all these questions and answers for trainer training?

I have already argued for trainers to have the chance to watch other trainers at work and to talk to them about how they would answer the questions in this paper. Trainers should also have the chance to keep teaching and learning and to reflect on their own work and the assumptions behind it. Maybe in this it would be good to have the help of a mentor or critical friend. It could be useful for us to venture out of our own field into others, and of course for all of this we would need time and money!

What are the dark sides to our work?

You might think it odd that this is one of the questions that interests me at the moment. But ask any trainer and they will be able probably to give you examples from their work of collusion, resentment, embarrassment, dependency, obsequiousness, condescension, projection and irrationality, either on the part of themselves, their colleagues or in the groups they work with. I am not here referring to 'resistance', which I regard as a dreadful word coined to save us thinking or talking about 'people who do not particularly want to do what we are determined they should do' or at least not according to our time schedule! There is much in our teaching and training that assumes that group work is necessarily positive. It could be useful to look at what makes group work healthy and what it is that can make it instead irrational and negative. Of course the dark side is not necessarily all psychological. The constraints of teacher training institutions, lack of money and other externals can throw shadows on the work too.

How do people get trained in other fields and in the professions and what can we learn from their methods? What is central to all learning and teaching no matter what the level, type or field?

My last two questions are linked together. By looking at how people are trained in other fields, whether medical general practice or classical equitation, we may discover new ideas that we can borrow and adapt. I came across a rating scale that some family doctors use when watching or listening to tapes of themselves talking to clients. The scale ran from 1 to 10. Point 1 was labelled, 'Treats patients with disdain as if they were children with no views of their own'. The other end of the scale was labelled, 'Deals with patients on an adult to adult basis'. Doctors placed themselves on the scale and then asked a trainer or colleague to watch the tape and see how they would rate them. I thought this would make a very good scale to work with in both adult language classes and in teacher training. 'The trainer treats the trainees with disdain as if they were children with no opinions of their own.' The present emphasis in general practice training on according dignity to patients and involving them in the management of their own health is one I think we could fruitfully borrow. When looking at parallel fields we can also spot similarities camouflaged in slightly different terminology. An example here is one taken from riding teacher training. In riding arenas you have a trainer working with someone doing something physical, that is, riding a horse, and thus not usually talking themselves. Perhaps partly because of this, riding trainers seem to talk non-stop. Because of the distances involved, this wall-to-wall talk often happens at high volume. This in itself does not sound close to many EFL training rooms! However, the method used to combat the problem of the trainer losing their voice, after weeks of shouting in high winds, is the wearing of a one-way or two-way microphone and receiver. The teacher-rider wears a little headset so that they can hear messages spoken into a small microphone worn by the trainer on their headset. The equipment is very light and means that nobody is shouted at or loses their voice.

When I first saw the headsets, I was reminded of radio assisted practice, a scheme dreamed up at the University of Leeds by Peter Tomlinson (1988). Thus sometimes even the areas that seem most different from field to field end up yielding parallels. In turn, the discussion of teaching and training in other fields may lead us to see that some things are central to all learning encounters. Self-concept, eliciting, sharing, explaining, evaluating, responsibility, freedom to change or not, are some of the central areas that spring to my mind. The separating out of the different roles – the language learner, the teacher, the trainer, the trainer trainer – is not always useful. It can sometimes blind us to the fact that all this is really just learning and teaching. And some areas are common to us all no matter the field or the type of classroom. The common area of most interest to me at the moment as I write this is metaphor.

Metaphor, it is widely recognised now, is more than a special poetic device. It is fundamental to our thinking and our language (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980). We use it unconsciously to share and explain information.

For some years a central metaphor for grammar has been the brick wall. In this metaphor language is divided up into little bits. You have to lay down the pieces one by one. The second layer cannot be built until the first layer has been laid down correctly. Nowadays we are looking for different metaphors for grammar. Geoffrey Leech would find the metaphor of a growing, burgeoning plant to be more constructive since it carries the image of language progressing in many areas at the same time, organically, and with fast growing and then more quiescent patches. We all use metaphor unconsciously and consciously in our learning, teaching and training. Sometimes our use is skilful and constructive. Sometimes it traps us in old, less valuable ways of thinking. This is why I think it is a crucial area to think about in any learning or teaching endeavour.

One last question you might like to think about is: 'What do we actually know about trainer training?' That's a good one for me to finish off with since I can say: 'Hopefully more after we have all read this book than we knew before!'

Note

1 The questions 'What does a trainer have to be/do/have/know in excess of a teacher?', 'How are trainer courses evaluated?' and 'What do we actually know about trainer training?', were suggested by participants at the Symposium.

Appendix

TRAINER TRAINING: A QUESTION MATRIX

- HOW ARE TRAINERS EVALUATED?
- WHAT DOES A TRAINER HAVE TO KNOW? HAVE? BE?
- WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINER-TRAINING?
- WHAT HAPPENS IN OTHER FIELDS?
- ARE TRAINERS NECESSARY?
- WHAT IS A TRAINER?
- WHERE IS THE LANGUAGE LEARNER IN ALL THIS?
- WHAT IS THE DARK SIDE?
- HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME TRAINERS?
- WHAT IS CENTRAL TO ALL LEARNING AND TRAINING?
- WHAT DO THEY NEED?
- HOW DO TRAINERS DEVELOP?