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# ***Neopass@ction*: a tool for training beginning teachers**

***Patrick Picard and Luc Ria***

## **Abstract**

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## **Teacher training and recruitment in France: recent trends**

Profound changes are under way in the field of training and recruitment of teachers in France. Under the previous training system, teachers only needed to hold a '*Licence*' ('*baccalauréat*' + 3 years) in order to sit recruitment examinations:

- Future teachers in **schools** used to spend one year on a work-study course in a teachers' training university institute (IUFM), with several internships overseen by trainers in the field (expert instructors who qualified by gaining a specialist degree).
- Future teachers in **upper secondary schools and academies** used to be assigned to an establishment on a part-time basis, while also attending courses and internships organised for them by the IUFMs, with a view to deepening disciplinary knowledge and pedagogic instruction.
- During their first year after qualifying, grade one and grade two teachers benefited from several weeks of specific **internships** organised by the IUFM in tandem with the inspection body (National Education inspectors and educational advisors for grade one; academy inspectors, Regional Educational inspectors and tutors for Grade two).

This training method did not meet with universal approval, as, after leaving IUFMs, a significant number of young teachers felt that they were not adequately prepared to deal with the various occupational difficulties they were to meet. June 2010 saw the recruitment of the first batch of teachers under the '**Masterisation**' scheme, whereby all French teachers, whether Grade One (school) or Grade Two (upper secondary school and academies), both private and public, are hired only after completing five years of tertiary education after the '*baccalauréat*'. To become a fully qualified teacher in France, a person, therefore, has to meet two criteria: hold a Master's degree and pass the recruitment examination held by the Ministry of National Education, thereby earning the status of civil servant (recruitment by the state after one year of probation, and academic posting for grade one teachers and national posting for grade two teachers). Teachers employed by private establishments must also pass examinations and are paid by the State if hired through a '*contracted*' teachers' network, but they are not classed as civil servants. It should be noted that, exclusively for Grade Two teachers, there is also currently parallel recruitment by education offices of temporary and contract-based public employees to meet unforeseen emergency requirements not covered by the original postings or transfers. These

non-qualified teachers may sometimes, on the back of several years of service, pass an internal examination to become fully qualified civil servants.

**The reform of basic training in 2010**, as a result of the '*Masterisation*', represents a radical shake-up of the system for gaining entrance into the teaching profession, as follows:

- Lengthening training time compels students hoping to become teachers to obtain their Master's degree, notably by writing a memoir during the second additional year, and also to prepare for the recruitment examination, which is held over two phases. Written examinations take place early in the second year of the Master's, and oral examinations are held at the end of the year. Numerous students can, therefore, find themselves continuing to study throughout the second year of their Master's, even though they will not be entitled to graduate as teachers because they already failed the written examination: they must, therefore, consider re-orienting themselves towards another career, or attempt to pass the written examination the following year.
- Their training is now the sole preserve of universities which, in France, are not controlled by the Ministry of National Education, but rather by the Ministry of Higher Teaching and Research. The universities enjoy a large degree of autonomy as a result of the LRU<sup>1</sup> law. The future employer is only involved peripherally in the basic training path, through the convention that links it with a university for placing students on the internships that may be carried out during the two years of Master's study.
- The teachers' recruitment examination (at the end of Year 2 of the Master's) mainly assesses disciplinary knowledge, especially during the written admission tests. The oral examinations can give a better gauge of candidates' pedagogic and relational knowledge, but, overall, the university syllabus does not guarantee that those who pass the recruitment examination will master the '*minimal*' professional competences.
- During the first year after passing the recruitment examination, intern teachers are appointed directly to a school, with full-time responsibility for classes. They are given proximity support and attend several internship meetings, depending on the available budget. The expert instructors and educational advisers (Grade One for schools) and tutors (Grade two for upper secondary schools and academies) perform this role, overseen by inspectors. Teachers qualify at the end of this year of internships, unless they receive a negative assessment, in which case they are let go.

All of these reasons conspire to ensure that young teachers' professional suitability (in the sense of their capacity to fulfil their role in an ordinary professional context) is really inadequate when they are assigned to their first classes, in the role of civil-service interns. As soon as the new system for gaining entrance into the profession came into effect in September 2010, several dissenting voices drew attention to the substantial difficulties encountered by newly-posted teachers. The usual difficulties experienced when entering the profession seemed to be more pronounced for them. They suffered more from fatigue, support difficulties were more acute and field trainers were frequently called to provide emergency solutions, while their ability to do so was inhibited by the fact that they could not find a suitable balance between practical classroom experience and detached analysis of occupational situations. Such a balance would enable beginning teachers to learn

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<sup>1</sup> Law relating to universities' liberty and responsibilities.

progressively appropriate responses. Teachers' unions, without dismissing the principle of Masterisation, have called for the first year as an intern to run on a split-time basis, thereby giving scope for genuine professional training.

### **Development of research on the work of teachers and beginning teachers: new ideas for improving training?**

In recent years in France, there have been several research programmes into the professional activity of teachers, including beginning teachers. Working on the basis of assumptions regarding the theory of the profession, these programmes aim to deepen understanding of the difficulties of *'the real job'* compared to the work prescribed by the institution (e.g. Ria, 2006; Saujat, 2010). In a professional world that offers plenty of instructions as to *'what must be done'*, but relatively few as to *'how to do it'*, the programmes' starting point entails taking seriously the *'provisional representations or spontaneous beliefs'* that teachers form over the various stages of their career to cope with the urgent situations that they constantly come up against. These research programmes consider it crucial to give due weight to beginning teachers' circumstances if they are to arrive at a proper understanding of their development stages and the compromises that they make in carrying out their jobs (Wittorski, 2007). Plans may be made to show them *'what must be done'* through *'expert'* sessions, but trainers know that beginners sometimes emerge from these at a loss: *'It's a nicely-run class. But how do I get to the stage? Where do I start?'* When there is a large gulf between the *'job as dreamed'* and the *'job in reality'*, disillusionment can set in.

This phenomenon is rendered all the more intense by the fact that the job of a teacher has undergone considerable changes over the last ten years, as a host of new prescriptions and organisations have sprouted up: school work plans; collective work; partnerships with social-educational or economic operators; joint-intervention; cultural projects; assessment by competency; efforts to eradicate violence or school drop-outs; personalised assistance; relations with parents; partnerships with Defence; the place of information technologies; efforts to lower class-repetition rates; schooling for disabled children, etc. This long and varied list illustrates the extent of changes to which teachers must adapt. They are faced with a wider spectrum of tasks, must perform ever more after-class or out-of-class work, and need to get involved in collective action and partnership activities around shared projects and interventions aimed at increasingly wide target groups.

In France, the new professional model is defined in a system of references encompassing ten especially-exacting teacher competences. An international symposium<sup>2</sup> on the transformation of the teaching profession, that was held in March 2011 by the creators of the **Neopass@ction** project, gave rise to a scientific discussion on the professional changes to teachers' work, and the need to harness the input of various career scientists to get a clear understanding of the profession as a whole and of the various specific components of it.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.inrp.fr/metier-enseignant>

The contribution of research to the modelling of teachers' work, particularly that of beginners, can pave the way to new forms of training and support for beginning teachers. One of the questions that arise, then, is how best to choose between several types of training advice. Is it about helping young teachers to appropriate the ordinary tasks of the job? Is it about bolstering their feeling of professional security? Is it about developing new competences to handle the new instructions, thereby giving them a role in '*transforming*' the job? Is it about helping them to cope with the professional dilemmas that they will have to negotiate in the course of their careers? On all of these issues, the team that worked together as part of the **Neopass@ction** of the INRP, and then the *Institut Français de l'Éducation* (French Institute of Education - ENS Lyon), reached various conclusions.

### Origin of **Neopass@ction**: a team with a multiple angles of approach

Since 1993, the Centre Alain-Savary in the INRP has been singularly investigating the link between research and the production of resources for trainers and institutional officials, especially in difficult areas and priority education areas. It was behind the hosting of a first '*consensus conference*'<sup>3</sup> (2007), which highlighted several tensions common to teachers dealing with priority education target groups. These were: the socialisation approach vs learning approach; motivation by instant results vs demand for long-term learning; class management vs educational differentiation.

In order to provide teachers with a better understanding of how to balance these tensions, and also to arrive at an appreciation of how teachers' work could be better re-organised (by reshaping the various dimensions of a teacher's job in-class and beyond, both individually and when working with other staff members), the Centre Alain-Savary conducted a research project with several university research teams<sup>4</sup> who gathered testimonies and data on practices, while working for several years with young teachers in difficult areas<sup>5</sup>. Using video recordings, the researchers observed a wide array of '*ordinary*' working situations that gave them a better understanding of the **specificities of the workplace situations encountered by beginners** and the ways they devise to deal with them. This enabled the researchers to build theoretical models about the job of beginning teachers.

These data and models, which were discussed during research seminars at the Centre Alain-Savary, were presented to trainers and institutional officials who were invited to take part in trainers' training sessions organised at the INRP (Carraud, 2011). The working theory was

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<sup>3</sup> How can training be changed to provide better support in '*difficult areas*'? Consensus conference organised by INRP - Centre Alain Savary-, IUFM Créteil, IUFM Versailles, Wednesday 24 January 2007 in Paris. <http://cas.inrp.fr/CAS/formations/ressources-pour-les-formateurs-en-education-prioritaire/conference-de-consensus>

<sup>4</sup> Laboratoire ACTé of IUFM Auvergne, Université Blaise Pascal de Clermont 2; Laboratoire CIRCEF- ESCOL of Paris 8; Laboratoire LIRDEF of IUFM Languedoc-Roussillon, Université de Montpellier 2; Laboratoire SES-CREFI-T, Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail; UMR ADEF, Université de Provence; UMR Education and Politiques, Université de Lyon 2.

<sup>5</sup> The way that the Ministry of national education's assignment system work means that young teachers are often appointed to the positions that are considered the least attractive by older teachers. In some very difficult schools, annual turnover of new teachers can exceed 50%.

that the research material could become training tools aimed at reinforcing the resources already used by trainers for supporting beginners in the first years of their careers. But experience taught us that it would not necessarily be that straight-forward. How could we be sure that the video material gathered, which was intended to be used to deepen understanding (they often show young teachers in delicate situations), would not be used for other purposes, to form caricatures without nuances, or fuel criticisms without precautions, thereby placing the filmed people in jeopardy, causing the very opposite result to the one intended?

The research group then spawned the idea of devising an organised platform of resources that would present an ethical framework for use, video resources, support texts and proposals for structuring training. This idea was endorsed by the INRP senior management, which declared it a priority project for the 2010-2011: **Neopass@ction**.

### **Neopass@ction: a tool for developing enhancing the work of teachers and trainers**

**Neopass@ction** aims, firstly, to show the complexity of the real job: for every topic explored, the ‘*typical*’ class situation is examined (i.e. representations of the various ‘*behaviours for dealing with things*’ for beginners faced with difficult pupils and classes). For the class situation, a summary of the filmed teacher’s ‘*career experience*’ gives background information on his or her experience, motives, expectations from the situation, what he or she intended to do, what he or she would have tried to do, the urgent choices made, and any questions that he or she may have. Other beginners give their impressions of the filmed situation, explaining what they would have done differently, commenting on what their colleague did and recounting how their own experiences compare with that of their colleagues.

The platform also gets input from more seasoned teachers - some trainers, some not - who share their reactions and experiences and explain how they would have handled the situations, mentioning what techniques they use to deal with them, or indicating to what extent the questions put forward by the beginners may still be at the centre of their daily professional concerns. For each topic, therefore, some one hundred short accounts form a body of ‘*professional real-life experiences*’ that helps enrich the profession and increase understanding of the professional responses built by teachers.

The topics put forward by **Neopass@ction** are aimed at both Grade One and Grade Two. There are currently five topics, which were chosen on the basis of their importance to young teachers:

- Getting pupils to work (2<sup>nd</sup> level)
- Helping pupils in class
- Getting pupils to talk (1<sup>st</sup> level)
- Habits and instructions in nursery
- Doing double classes (1<sup>st</sup> level).

Other topics are being developed. Training courses are also offered to beginning teachers in a special area, enabling them to put into practice several scenarios depending on their own objectives and constraints.

## How can this type of tool be used?

The main aim of the platform designers is to provide beginning teachers with answers to the professional questions that they ask themselves. The initial observations made by young teachers who use the platform, including those who access it '*autonomously*', show that they relate to the situations studied. This reassures them that the problems they face are not unique to them: they are not personal problems, but professional ones. They find the tool is effective at enabling them to take a detached view of their own specific work by exploring the generic problems encountered by beginners (Ria and Leblanc, 2011, publication pending).

But the **Neopass@ction** also aims to become another tool in the box of the trainers who support beginning teachers: learning to observe, problem-solving, exchanging, contextualising - reorganising didactic approaches is not a solitary exercise. The platform can, then, be a tool for organising collective work geared towards resolving the '*tensions*' and '*controversies*' in the job and enabling trainers and teachers to do better what they have to do, especially in the most difficult situations. One of the specialities of the resource is that it does not only show classroom situations, but also allows the young teachers filmed to express themselves, offering more insight into the significance that they attach to their actions, the dilemmas that they have to manage and the provisional compromises that they make. The platform allows users to catch up with some of the filmed teachers several months or, years later, and learn about the new resources that they have been able to develop.

Rather than remaining overhead and perpetuating the usual approaches of contrasting novices with experts and speaking in terms of shortcomings compared to an ideal, inaccessible model, identifying the typical transformation-dynamics of novices opens the way for designing training resources that encourage intermediary activities that reflect different '*objective*' and '*subjective*' forms of effectiveness. The mechanisms designed from this vision of transformation do not seek to teach what should be done in a prescriptive fashion. Rather, they seek to impart an understanding of how situations in the workplace may pan out or be influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by the actions taken at a given moment. This training approach not only focuses on themes that are critical for beginners, but also ones which are crucial for the profession as a whole. It is underpinned by the principle of helping teachers to anticipate changes in the way they work, in order to rise to the various challenges of the job that they have yet to encounter, and which they are likely to meet in the first months or years of their teaching careers.

Beginners can, therefore, forearm themselves by drawing on the resources in several ways:

- Identifying with the peer or '*quasi-peer*' activities

- Shed personal guilt by gaining awareness of the typical characteristics of a beginning community that is learning the job
- Understand the dynamics for transforming beginners' activity (and their own dynamic)
- Experience vicariously situations that other beginners have found themselves in assess the effects on pupils
- Learn other way of behaving that they can try out properly in their own classrooms
- Pre-empt situations that they have not yet encountered by capitalising on the experiences gained by peers
- Learn from more experienced teachers and get views that are detached from their own professional concerns.

### Careful observation is carried out to understand the dynamics of how the tool is really used, and to pose questions to training methods

**Neopass@ction's** work is based to a large extent on video resources that can make significant contributions to the development and learning of beginning teachers (Mollo and Falzon, 2004; Leblanc and Veyrunes, 2011). It examines the models of support and professional preparation for beginning teachers. Unlike some training models that are based on identifying and disseminating '*good practices*', **Neopass@ction's** approaches are structured on the basis of principles rooted in the job's day-to-day activity (Ria and Leblanc, 2011):

- Work from the **concerns** expressed by the beginners themselves and the hazards that they describe rather than concentrating primarily on the explanations that experienced teachers or trainers may come up with.
- Offer situations that are sufficient **representative** for beginners to identify with them and compare similarities and differences with peers in order to garner reassurance: '*it's not a personal problem, it's a beginner problem (or even an occupational problem)*'.
- Understand that the job is always a more or less operational **compromise** between what the teacher is asked to do and what that demands from the people are. The compromises differ according to the people concerned, but are historically part of the job, which has always fallen back on texts in search of ways to navigate through transformations to what has to be done. These compromises need to be debated by professionals in order to avoid causing undermining teachers and the effectiveness of teaching.
- Show how the **transformations** affect the subjects, demonstrate the interaction between necessary stabilisation phases that enable beginners to build self-help abilities and phases of reasonable self-criticism that may give rise to new professional techniques.
- Devise the '*standards of personal viability*' for beginner teachers and the stakes of disciplinary knowledge and pupils' learning; they create a context that is conducive to pupils' work.



## A new era of teacher training?

***‘Learning from situations, learning from beginners and learning from the experiences of the most seasoned teachers’.*** This is the triple-paradigm pursued by research, and in reference to which the designers of the **Neopass@ction** approach should be evaluated. This essential combination challenges the support and training situations that may currently be offered to beginner teachers:

- It asks those responsible for structuring training to judiciously shape face-to-face group work sessions (supported by a tutor/trainer who can reorient discussions of representative experiences on the basis of beginners’ personal accounts), and remote usage of the platform’s resources, including via new media (telephones and tablets).
- It challenges trainers to re-examine the model of developing professional techniques and beginners’ competences at various levels (classrooms, schools, looks exchanges with peers, individual tuition, training courses or gatherings, etc.) and extrapolate conclusions that can be translated into actions.
- It provokes new questions relating to the overlap between *‘beginners’ problems’* and *‘occupational problems’*. Seasoned teachers’ techniques for advancing pupil learning are not exactly identical to those prescribed by educationalists or educational researchers. Accordingly, while beginning teachers wonder about *‘the impossibility of dividing ourselves equally into 24’* to provide individual attention to pupils, the most seasoned teachers also describe their own dilemmas with regard to the assorted prescriptions of the job. By making the dilemmas and debates explicit, the **Neopass@ction** platform also strives to strengthen professional discussions on the live issues of the job in order to help professionals invent new resources to address them.
- It leads, then, to a reformulation of the categories set out by research which, by dint of its particular focuses, are often split between those which prioritise the knowledge of techniques to be taught and those that prioritise the techniques for teaching. The real-life situations hosted at **Neopass@ction** shows that these two dimensions of the job frequently overlap substantially. These are: a) the disciplinary knowledge required to understand the didactic problems encountered by pupils and teachers in learning situations, and b) the mastering of these *‘professional techniques’* to be implemented to ensure the smooth running of classes.

The trainers’ task, therefore, is to highlight this new understanding, these new methods and the new linkages in order to appreciate more the various aspects, and thereby enable beginners to gradually bolster their feeling of being able to perform their job effectively and enable pupils to benefit from structured learning. This knowledge specific to trainers is also debated by the professionals themselves.

## A collaboration and essential *‘toing-and-froing’*

That is why the **Neopass@ction** management team pays careful attention to innovative uses on the grounds that our facility can be added to trainers’ toolbox. To this end, several academies have already made arrangements with the *Institut Français de l’Éducation des formations de formateurs* (French Teachers’ Training Institute). National seminars have also

been organised to pool information about how different users avail themselves of the tool. Educational scenarios designed for trainers are progressively being incorporated into the platform, and resources are continually being amended to reflect the needs expressed, or the comments made. This engineering of the training is the subject of specific study by the university researchers following the project. In addition, several doctorate theses, focusing on the uses of **Neopass@ction**, are in progress, and these should eventually enhance the scientific capacity to perform stringent assessments of it. Only by undertaking all of this, can we know for sure whether such a platform can be genuinely useful for training teachers (beginners as well as the most seasoned).

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