A PGCE psychology student

Patsy McCarthy describes her first week of teaching psychology

What's it really like when you 'become' a teacher of psychology? Here's what happened in my first week of teaching practice in a secondary school.

Sunday

Everything is organised: textbooks named, files labelled, deadlines entered into my 'teacher's planner'. My new wheeled bag is packed with textbooks, resources, whiteboard marker pens, red pens, green pens, stapler, hole puncher… It weighs a ton.

It will be the first day of my first school placement tomorrow.

I'm a bit apprehensive about the reaction of the students and staff. As a trainee teacher in my late fifties, I'm probably not what most schools would expect.

Monday

My first day comprised meeting staff and the other trainees. We had a comprehensive induction where we got to grips with the school's policies, procedures and protocols, safeguarding training and sessions on various aspects of school life. This was followed by a period observing teachers in psychology lessons and other subjects across the curriculum, and making notes about different teaching strategies and how behaviour management is dealt with. It was interesting to observe the different teaching styles; I've yet to see how mine will evolve.

My fears about encountering astonishment as an older trainee were completely unfounded. Everyone was very pleasant and welcoming, including the sixth formers that I'd be teaching.

As well as a weekly meeting with my mentor I will also be attending twice-weekly departmental meetings, whole-school briefings and sixth-form meetings. I will be attached to a sixth-form tutor group which will involve taking the register, dealing with pastoral issues, checking the dress code has been observed and delivering a tutor-led programme of activities. My teacher's planner is filling up.

Tuesday

My introduction to the year 13 tutor group was interesting. Although a few arrived promptly and looking reasonably smart, quite a few turned up long after the register had closed and the attire on most of them fell short of anyone's interpretation of smart. They looked vaguely perplexed when I questioned them about this. I was left wondering how on earth to interpret the dress code. Without a uniform, it's quite subjective. What does 'smart' mean exactly? The school is quite rigid in its application of a dress code for staff (suited and booted and I cannot remove my jacket) so I'm not sure how to proceed with this one….

Some of the lessons I've observed have been very dynamic and interactive and far removed from my own learning experiences.

Most students at school today have been exposed to technology all of their lives and research into this has shown that attention

spans are therefore shorter. This had been discussed in one of the professional studies sessions we attended at university in preparation of our teaching practice. The emphasis is on using creativity in the classroom and developing teaching resources that reflect learning (and reduced attentions spans) in a modern classroom. This will mean working on my creative and IT skills for lesson planning which will start very soon.

I shadowed the psychology teacher who is also my mentor today. In one lesson, some of the students were reticent at accepting my offers to help them. I felt a bit awkward but hovered about in case they changed their minds. In the next lesson, I was given a small group to work with who were struggling to get to grips with social influence. Among them was a very nice lad with SEN (dyslexia) and an exchange student from Germany. I decided to try and find out what they each knew and where they were struggling. It wasn't as easy as I thought as their levels of understanding were very different. The German girl had limited English and the boy with dyslexia had very poor self-esteem and worries that he will fail his A-levels. The others seemed disengaged. At least it's a psychological topic that I recalled quite readily. I fret at the thought of not being able to remember something, so bedtime reading is now my AQA psychology textbooks.

Wednesday

We had an early start for a morning meeting where we discussed the forthcoming 'meet the tutor' after school event, an open evening and parents' evening that I'll be attending.

I'm starting to become more familiar with everything and feel my experience as a member of support staff in a school is standing me in good stead. I understand the basic school structure so some things are familiar — it's just the faces that are different!

I am starting to have small successes that reinforce the reasons why I wanted to teach. The student with dyslexia I met yesterday in the small group I worked with also happens to be in the tutor group I'm attached to. I had an opportunity to talk to him, encourage and reassure him. I gave him some personal and anecdotal advice about my daughter's battles at school as a dyslexic and how, with perseverance and a few good strategies, she made it to university and now has a successful career. He visibly brightened at this and my offer to help where I could.

I do feel up against an avalanche of paperwork and admin tasks — I seem unable to get on top of it, then fret that I've forgotten something important.

Thursday

I delivered my first lesson today. I started with an online quiz, something they hadn't done before. I felt very shaky, petrified that it wouldn't work despite the numerous times I'd tested it beforehand. It went down very well with the students and I got brilliant feedback from my mentor who thought I was very confident in my delivery. At least I know I can hide my nerves. The boys, some of whom had come across as distinctly disengaged before, showed their competitive spirit and took to it enthusiastically. Result! The rest of the lesson was okay. I managed to keep a good pace but could have done with an extension activity.

We are encouraged to self-reflect on our teaching practice — something I don't need too much encouragement with as I tend to self-reflect (navel gaze) anyway. In hindsight, I should have made

Could you meet the challenge of creating interesting and up-to-date psychology lessons?

it easier for the weaker students — putting the answers up on the board after the quiz — but I'll do this next time.

My mentor has picked up on the good rapport I have with the students. She also confided that she has been singing my praises around school. I am thrilled. Of course, I need to take one day at a time. It may be beginner's luck!

Open evening was a great success. Lots of interest from potential psychology students from current KS4 and external applicants. As head of sixth form, my mentor was giving talks elsewhere so I was left holding the fort for psychology. I enjoyed it, but got home at 8.30 p.m. absolutely exhausted.

Friday

My first week is nearly over and I'm relieved. It has gone better than I'd hoped.

I seem to be spending a lot of time preparing lessons plans. I finish it, then I return to it, add a bit, delete a bit, then end up back where I started. I want to get them right but I must sort this out, especially as the teaching hours increase. I find myself constantly preoccupied thinking about different ideas, different ways to be creative, how to differentiate, how to craft my questions well.

I am consumed and feel in a bubble, but today was spent at university where I attended lectures and met again with my professional tutor and fellow 'psychos' who are experiencing much the same thoughts and feelings as me. I am very lucky. We have gelled together despite our age range. I find these days really inspiring and get a lot of support from my peers and tutors.

As psychology graduates we are able to draw much from our subject and implement this into our teaching practices. Psychology has contributed to most, if not all, teaching strategies and standards (not to mention life in general). From theories into human development and learning, how we construct and retain knowledge, individual differences and the social context of learning; it is all underpinned by psychological research and theory.

It's my hope that I will eventually be a good teacher and cascade the knowledge I have down to another generation of students.

Patsy McCarthy worked in higher education (student adviser) and a secondary school (small group intervention work for SEN/EAL/PP) while she studied for GCSEs and later a degree with the Open University.