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Introduction

The English further education (FE) sector caters for over 4.2 million learners and, whilst international comparisons are not straightforward, there are some similarities between FE colleges, community colleges in the USA, and the technical and further education institutes in Australia. Sitting somewhat uncomfortably between schools on the one hand and universities on the other, FE provides a diverse range of learning opportunities for individuals, business and community groups. This includes provision for people with learning difficulties, intermediate and advanced vocational training, and courses of higher education. Further education, however, has always been mainly concerned with learning for the workplace (Ainley and Bailey 1997, pp. 8-10). The origins of many FE colleges can be traced back to the mechanics institutes of the nineteenth century and traditionally they focused mainly on training apprentices and technicians for the engineering workshops and manufacturing industries that dominated the UK economy. Mirroring broader social and economic changes, the remit of FE colleges has changed significantly over recent years. Nowadays education and training for the service sector - whether this is in the care home, hotel, salon or office - is FE's staple diet.

What is often overlooked is that colleges are a significant source of employment in their own right. English FE colleges employ almost 270,000 people in a range of teaching, support and administrative roles (LLUK 2010, p. 4); and, whilst they are primarily involved with external clients, colleges are also significant providers of work-based learning (WBL) for their own workforce – especially their teaching staff. This is important as, in stark contrast to schoolteachers, ninety percent of FE teachers begin their teaching careers without a teaching qualification (UCET 2009 p.1). Most undertake 'in-service' teacher training alongside paid work in the classroom. This situation derives, in part, from FE's peculiar history and roots where traditionally the emphasis was upon learning from a skilled practitioner whose subject knowledge rather than pedagogy was considered the chief determinant of teaching quality. Today, such simplistic assumptions are increasingly challenged. However, there is still a need to recruit staff with up-to-date vocational skills and knowledge and so, for most FE teachers, teaching is not their first career. Some continue to practise their original vocation alongside teaching in FE.

Objectives

This paper focuses on the role of FE colleges as providers of WBL for their own employees. It uses Fuller and Unwin's (Unwin & Fuller 2003; Fuller and Unwin 2004) work on expansive and restrictive learning environments as a framework to problematise the position of FE colleges as employers and developers of their teaching staff. The paper argues that the WBL experience of many trainee teachers is impoverished by a workplace culture that often prioritises expedience over the development of professional knowledge and creative practice. In an increasingly performative environment, trainee FE teachers are expected to make rapid transitions to full professional roles with limited opportunity to engage in broader forms of learning and development. Whilst successive UK governments have promoted the notion that economic prosperity and social well-

being rests upon the development of highly-skilled and knowledgeable labour (Avis 2007), we argue that significant alterations to WBL practices are necessary if colleges are to prepare their teachers effectively to meet the challenges of educating and training the current and future workforce.

Data sources and methods

This paper draws on data from a small-scale qualitative research project undertaken during 2009 at two FE colleges in the north of England – ‘Dale College’ and ‘Urban College’. The ‘core business’ of both colleges is in providing vocational education and training for their local communities, but in some ways the two institutions are quite different. Dale College is located in a semi-rural market town and, although it has undergone significant growth over recent years, Dale College is still relatively small. It also has a ‘softer’ and more ‘people-centred’ enterprise culture rather than the ‘crude efficiency’ model that characterises many FE colleges (Alexiadou 2000). In contrast, Urban College, is located in a large conurbation, is much bigger and has had a rather turbulent recent history. In the 1990s it experienced a significant programme of restructuring and redundancies under a ‘charismatic’ principal and there remains a ‘harder’ managerial culture. There are around 350 English FE colleges and, as such, we recognise that the findings from this project are unlikely to be representative of all colleges. Nevertheless, we argue that the data gained from these two case studies provide an informed insight into the nature of in-service FE teacher training and issues commonly arising for those undertaking such programmes.

The research was based on semi-structured interviews conducted in both colleges. Two managers responsible for human resources (HR), four teacher trainers and twenty trainee teachers - ten from each institution - took part in the project. All trainees were employed as paid teachers. Reflecting the diverse nature of FE, the trainees came from a variety of vocational backgrounds; many had gained extensive work experience before coming into teaching. The trainees taught on a range of provision including health and social care; information technology; art and design; childcare; performing arts; and uniformed and public services courses. Roughly half were employed on a full-time basis. For those employed part-time, the amount of teaching varied significantly: some taught for only a few hours a week, whilst others were almost full-time. The interviews with the trainee teachers covered three broad themes: the trainee’s journey into teaching and their current teaching role; the nature of their learning on their training programme; and an exploration of the tensions and symbioses deriving from being both an employed teacher and a trainee teacher. HR managers and teacher trainers were interviewed to gain their views on the role of trainee teachers in the two colleges; to compare these views to those of the trainee teachers; and to help understand the culture in which the trainees work. We recognise that HR managers and teacher trainers influence the environment in which trainee teachers work and contribute to their professional formation. Interviews with HR managers and teacher trainers focused on perceptions of the challenges and opportunities facing in-service trainee teachers.

Theoretical framework

Fuller and Unwin's (2004) expansive and restrictive framework of approaches to workforce development provides a conceptual instrument to consider the context for WBL of FE teachers; both what is overt as well as what is implicit. The framework, moreover, allows WBL to be examined within its broader socio-economic context and relates to the tension of the employer/employee relationship (Evans et al 2006: 3). Billett (2002: 457) argues:

Workplace experiences ... are the product of the historical-cultural practices and situational factors that constitute the particular work practice.

Their understanding of this relationship between individual agency and socio-economic context is informed by a recognition that agency and structure mutually shape and curtail. Fuller and Unwin's framework provides a taxonomy of approaches to workforce development which describe either end of a continuum from the expansive, which enhance opportunities for learning; to the restrictive, which limit workforce development. It contains two broad categories (Evans et al 2006: 41-42):

1. "Those which arise from understandings about the organizational context and culture (for example, work organization, job design, control, and distribution of knowledge and skills)."

2. "[T]hose which relate to understandings of how employees learn (through engaging in different forms of participation)."

Descriptors of an expansive approach to workforce development include (Fuller & Unwin 2004: 130):

- . Technical skills valued
- . Planned time off-the-job including for knowledge-based courses and for reflection
- . Organizational recognition of and support for employers as learners

The corresponding descriptors characterising restrictive approaches are:

- . Technical skills taken for granted
- . Virtually all-on-job: limited opportunities for reflection
- . Lack of organizational recognition of and support for employees as learners

This final feature is significant in our own investigation of practices in FE colleges.

Results

Since 2001 there has been a statutory requirement for FE teachers to gain a teaching qualification within the first few years of employment. This constitutes a stark priority for both individual staff and college management. Arguably, access to qualifications is evidence of expansive practice but the findings from this research point to inconsistency, even within the same college, of employer support for teacher training. Furthermore, the status given to this training by senior HR managers was markedly different between the two colleges. Although the trainees almost unanimously considered their training course to be useful and even enjoyable, access to mentors, time off for study and the attitudes of managers were reliant upon localised, often random factors. This inconsistency suggests “[l]ack of organizational recognition of and support for employees as learners” (Fuller & Unwin 2004: 130). Data indicate little coherence in how trainees were developed by the organisation with much relying upon the variable goodwill and capacity of trainees’ colleagues. As one trainee at Urban college described:

I don't think, for the most part, I'm conceived as a trainee teacher in terms of responsibilities that I've been given

There was sparse evidence of any reification of the workplace curriculum in either college. The exception to this was “paperwork”; for some of the trainees learning to cope with bureaucracy such as student attendance and progress returns appeared to take precedence over pedagogy. Related to this was a strong organisational expectation that the trainee teacher rapidly made the transition to a full role. As one trainee at Urban College said: “*you are a teacher and you're doing the job of a teacher and you're paid as a teacher*”. For the majority, the only space where they were considered trainees was in the weekly training class. This rapid transition left little time to reflect on their development. For some, training became perfunctory, as expressed by one trainee at Dale College who had only tolerated the weekly sessions “*by thinking that it's all going to be over in two hours and I've only got two months to go now.*” There is also strong evidence from this study that trainees have highly restricted access to communities of practice beyond their own; there was very little “boundary crossing” (Fuller & Unwin 2004: 130) between different curriculum areas or parts of the college. Even within the trainees’ own community of practice the high staff turnover, the extensive use of part-time and temporary teachers, alongside heavy workloads resulted in a restricted culture of support and development.

Significance and Recommendations

Understandably, FE colleges are primarily considered as sites of vocational education and training for students and trainees. This research, however, considered colleges as sites of learning for the many thousands of teachers employed in the sector. Far from exhibiting good practice in WBL, this focus on colleges as developers of their own staff has exposed significant weaknesses in the organisation of WBL for new teachers in the two organisations in the study. If as Fuller and Unwin argue (2004: 131) expansive

approaches are more likely “to promote synergies between personal and organizational development”, this may help to explain the lack of development of new teachers’ practice and of pedagogy in FE more generally (Coffield, 2008). In order to address these issues we recommend that FE employers:

- . Recognise trainee teachers as a defined category of employee; new teachers should be encouraged to see themselves as trainees with the licence to experiment.
- . Set and implement policies that prioritise pedagogical development over both administrative systems and operational expedience. This would mean, for example, trainees could not be pulled out of class to cover for absent colleagues or over-burdened with administrative responsibilities.
- . Increase trainee teachers’ workloads incrementally to allow them time for observation of colleagues and to reflect on their own developing practice.
- . Adjust the workload of teacher trainers in recognition of their key workplace role in supporting and developing new teachers.

We recommend that these strategies are implemented as part of an overall policy thrust within which FE employers recognise teaching and learning as the highest priority for the teachers they employ.

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