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'Learner-centred' assessment policies in further education: putting teachers' time under pressure

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Abstract

Since incorporation of further education (FE) in England in 1992, much research has critiqued the performative pressures on FE teachers created by a managerialist audit culture. These critiques have demonstrated the detrimental effects of the technicised delivery of learning outcomes on more learner-centred pedagogies. However, FE policies now purport to place greater emphasis on learner-centredness. In this paper, we question the meanings such policies give to this notion, and examine how they are shaping teachers' practice. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of trainee and newly qualified FE teachers, we innovatively apply a social theory of time to analyse the resulting time pressures that teachers encountered. In particular, the distinction between 'clock time' and 'process time' is used as a specific lens through which to interpret the data. We argue that FE policies misappropriate and subvert the notion of learner-centredness by focusing on assessment outcomes; and that they expect teachers to devote more time to learners, but without an associated allocation of adequate time resources. As a result, there may be a danger of losing more teachers from the profession. These findings may have cross-sector relevance in schools and higher education, as well as internationally.

Keywords: Learner centred pedagogy; time; further education; assessment policy

Introduction

The rise of managerialist audit cultures and competitive funding mechanisms in English further education (FE), ushered in by incorporation in 1992, have had profound effects on the working lives of teachers. These have been well documented. The transformation of learning into a business (Ainley and Bailey, 1997), with its attendant performance criteria and target setting, has exercised a level of control over teachers which has undermined their sense of professionalism and led them to question what constitutes a 'good' teacher under new managerialist regimes (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). Such regimes have blurred the distinction between the professional and manager allowing managerialism to dominate and drive sector thinking (Plowright and Barr, 2012). This has been exacerbated by the rhetoric of competitiveness which dominates the post-compulsory sector (Avis, 2007), and has intensified to the extent that it is not only colleges which are in competition with each other, but even the departments within them (Garbett *et al.,* 2013). Performative regimes and audit cultures not only affect teachers' sense of professional identity, but also add to their daily workload by subjecting them to an incessant stream of 'information lint' (Eriksen 2001, viii) – for example, target grades, progress grades and attendance information – which demand teacher response and fill any available gaps in the college day. Major curriculum changes have also

contributed to this problem, creating a 're-take' culture in colleges and fostering a second-chance mentality in students (Poon Scott, 2011). Increased workloads resulting from these trends find teachers working consistently over hours, with work spilling over into personal time including holidays (Avis, Bathmaker and Parsons, 2001; Jephcote *et al.*, 2008).

Here, we present evidence from an ethnographic study of trainee and newly qualified teachers' experiences in the FE workplace to examine how this change has locked teachers into a cyclical mode of assessment which places even greater additional demands on teacher time; and which also influences the use of time and the values associated with that use. The paper argues that the managerial justification for these additional demands is often now attributed to the promotion of learner-centredness and the expectation that, if teachers devote increasing amounts of time to assessment activity, then levels of student achievement will rise. However, such a focus seems contrary to the humanistic roots of learner-centredness, which emphasise instead the facilitative role of the teacher in developing independent students who accept responsibility for their own learning. Although issues of performativity have typically been studied through theories of professionalism, here we apply – innovatively – a social theory of time to analyse the effects of these pressures. The paper therefore contributes new empirical evidence of intensifying pressures on teachers in post-compulsory education, as well as advancing a new theoretical interpretation thereof which links the use, values and power relations of teaching time to current discourses of 'learner-centredness'. We conclude by considering the impact of continuing time pressures on teachers and the implications for staff retention in the sector and more broadly.

First, then, we outline changes in post-compulsory assessment policy, before going on to consider the contested notion of 'learner-centredness' which supposedly underpins them.

Changing assessment policies in FE

The intensification of assessment-related time demands in FE can be traced back to the advent of Curriculum 2000 which heralded a shift in post-16 assessment activity (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). Before the year 2000, A Level[1] candidates sat a single set of examinations at the end of a two-year study period. Post-2000, this changed to a four-point assessment design, with a total of six assessed modules (three modules examined in January and/or June of each study year), effectively punctuating the academic year with additional assessment points. One of the arguments in favour of this change was that it relieved the candidates of pressure from lengthy exams at the end of the two years' study and replaced them with shorter, more regular exams with an exit qualification (AS level) at the end of one year's study, as well as the full A Level (A2) qualification at the end of two years. Although theoretically more flexible in nature, this change was set against the target-driven culture fostered by the government of the day (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). It led to a significant number of candidates re-sitting examinations multiple times in a bid to improve their grade profile.

Although a partial policy U-turn in 2010 saw most A Level subject assessment reduce from six to four modules over the two-year period, the focus on target grades has not abated. The re-sit culture survives, often encouraged by colleges which are

under pressure to gain the highest grades, both for the students and, significantly, for the college. Recent changes to A Level examinations, announced in 2012 (Ofqual, 2012) which revert to the pre-2000 model are, in part, a bid to address this re-sit culture. However, the second chance mentality born out of such a culture is evident not only for students assessed by examination, but also in vocational courses assessed by course-work assignments, where students will often make multiple submissions of assignments until the required grading criteria are met (Torrance, 2007, Jephcote *et al.,* 2008). The growth of this second chance mentality has been fostered by the shift in discourse from teaching to learning, which in turn has placed the focus of teacher activity firmly on the learner (Jephcote *et al,* 2008). This has also been compounded by the rise of customer service cultures in colleges, which has resulted in the traditional teacher-student relationship being replaced by a supplier-client relationship (Bauman, 2005): if the customer, or learner, is not satisfied with an outcome the first time round, then it falls to the supplier, or teacher, to effect a more desirable outcome in the future.

Learner-centredness: a contested concept

Such a consumerist focus on learner satisfaction stands in stark contrast to what has previously been understood by learner-centredness, so it is useful at this stage to consider what is actually meant by the latter term. In theoretical terms, learner-centredness is a pedagogical approach which has its roots in humanism: it represents a move away from a didactic, teacher-centred approach, to one where the teacher acts in the role of facilitator, encouraging learners to be self-motivated and independent. There is an important literature which focuses largely on the contrast between teacher-centred and learner-centred pedagogies (see for example Gill, 2008 and Parsons and Beauchamp, 2012). However, the detail of this debate lies beyond the remit of this paper, and here we focus on different conceptualisations of learner-centredness in academic as well as policy and practitioner-oriented literatures.

Over time, the term learner-centredness has come to mean different things to different people, becoming an umbrella term to encompass a variety of pedagogical approaches, for example flexible, experiential or self-directed learning (Gyamtso and Maxwell, 2012). Although subject to varying interpretations, the concept of learner-centredness is rooted in a humanist perspective which does not sit easily within target-driven college cultures that place emphasis on student outcomes. Indeed, Fielding (2007) draws a distinction between the 'high-performance learning organisation [in which] *the personal is for the sake of/expressive of the functional*' and the 'person-centred learning community [in which] *the functional is for the sake of/expressive of the personal*' (p.394). Fielding is critical of 'high-performance organisations', which claim to be learner-centred and which utilise the 'seductive technologies of learning styles, of emotional intelligence, of differentiation' (p.400), but which in fact subordinate the needs of all persons to those of the organisation, placing emphasis on targets and league tables which take precedence over the interests of learners and teachers. Drawing on the philosophy of John Macmurray, he argues that persons are fundamentally social; that learning is best located in mutually reciprocal relationships; and that functionalism should not predominate in education. Of particular relevance to this paper is Fielding's observation that, even though very different from each other, the high-performance learning organisation

and the person-centred learning community can be difficult to distinguish from one another, as they both appear committed to the achievement of learners:

> They are worlds apart; their felt realties are utterly at odds with each other. And yet, it is not always clear which frame is dominant, whose purposes are being served, whether we are the victims of those whose interests are quite other than those we would applaud, or whether we are part of something which is likely to turn out to be fulfilling and worthy of our support. (Fielding 2007, p.398)

This distinction between a genuinely learner-centred approach and one which claims learner-centredness whilst prioritising the needs and functions of the institution will be discussed later in the paper in the light of the findings from the research. But Fielding's argument is closely linked to moral philosophy and the ethics of education, and ethics are deeply related to time and to the (good or bad) uses to which time is put (Chanter, 2001; Postone, 1993). At this point, then, it is important to articulate the particular significance of time to our argument, and to offer a conceptual framework within which to consider the research findings.

Conceptualising time

The theoretical lens most commonly used to analyse data about the work of FE teachers is that of professionalism. This typically focuses analysis on the tensions between technicist prescription of teachers' practice through the imposition of managerial targets and teachers' own educational values, pedagogical practices and ethical commitment to learners. Valuable as this has proved as an avenue for research, here we bring a complementary theoretical orientation to bear, using social theories of time - a neglected aspect of such analyses (Ylijoki and Mäntylä, 2003). This allows us to illuminate change in teachers' work from a different perspective, giving a fine-grained insight into social mechanisms that produce such tensions.

The only existing study of time in the work of FE teachers is by Avis, Bathmaker and Parsons (2001). In that study, teachers were asked to complete a week-long time-log diary (including the weekend) recording the amounts of time they spent on various work activities, such as administration, teaching preparation, whole class teaching, individual tutorials and so on. The most common form of analysis for time-log diaries was used, that is, quantifying the amounts of time devoted to each activity. The findings revealed that the labour process of teaching in FE was intensifying, and that teachers were consistently working longer than their contractual hours in the evenings and at weekends. This approach to identifying increasing productivity within paid working time, as well as unpaid working time, is important, since it evidences growing exploitation of the FE workforce. However, it represents just one element of a much more complex social theory of time that might be usefully applied to this context.

Another rare study of time pressures on academics, albeit in higher education (HE), acknowledges some aspects of time as socially constructed, emphasising the importance of temporal orders as a cultural resource (Ylijoki and Mäntylä, 2003). In organisations, these serve to synchronise and coordinate individuals' activities through 'explicit schedules, implicit rhythms and cycles of behaviour as well as cultural norms about time in organizations...' (p.57). However, time can also act as a

constraint, imposing disciplinary demands, increased speed of activity, intensified productivity, and producing severe tensions in academic work. These can create physiological as well as psychological strains, often experienced by academics as 'temporal prisons' (p.75). Moreover, this raises a moral aspect – judgments about whether time is put to good use or bad use; as well as issues of social power – who controls the use of practitioners' time, and for whose benefit (Postone, 1993). Such a study goes beyond the notion of a time 'budget' to explore more complex social and cultural experiences of time.

Both analyses, however, point to the dualism of time in capitalist society that has been highlighted by feminist and Marxist theories: that of 'clock time' and 'process time' (Davies, 1994), or in Marxist terms, 'abstract time' and 'concrete time' (Postone 1993; see Colley *et al.*, 2013, for a full review of these theories). On the one hand, clock time is used to measure and delimit the time available for particular activities. In particular, it enables the calculation of productivity and therefore of profitability in the workplace. On the other hand, process time is used to indicate the *actual* length of time an activity will take, which may not be predictable or even easily measurable. It is especially important to analyse process time in caring occupations, including teaching, where not only do tasks take as long as necessary to meet the service user's needs, but also the emotional and mental labour involved may well extend far beyond the conduct of the discrete task itself.

Some previous studies have focused on competition between time orders (Colley *et al.,* 2013): on situations in which 'clock time' is used within new managerialist regimes to intensify productivity whilst refusing to acknowledge the realities of 'process time'. The task of educating or caring within tightly specified time-limits inevitably spills over into unacknowledged personal, unpaid time. This then appears as a disregard by service funders and institutional managers for the actual needs of students, as they insist that more work is done for the same or less money. Value (in financial terms) holds sway over values (in ethical and professional terms). Here, however, we consider the ways in which FE policy and cultures have changed in recent years to place *more* emphasis on process time, in particular the additional support needs of 'second-chance learners' who form much of their cohort. We shall argue that clock and process time orders are now being brought into sharper tension by FE policy discourses which claim to be 'learner-centred'. We go on to describe the research, and present findings about how trainee and newly qualified FE teachers experienced the consequences of this shift.

The research project

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from a wider study which documented the workplace experiences of trainee teachers during their year studying for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)[2] and their first year as new teachers. It analysed the policies and practices which were impacting on these experiences. Rooted in an interpretive paradigm, this ethnographic study did not follow a formal research design but was driven by trainees' everyday encounters

whilst on placement and emergent themes were generated by the process of data synthesis.

The research sample was formed of two successive cohorts of trainees (40 in total) following a one year pre-service PGCE programme. This opportunity sample had a heterogeneous spread, facilitated by the programme recruitment strategy which resulted in cohorts with a range of subject expertise and work experience but with no prior experience of teaching. Trainees were on placement in college settings and taught on a range of academic courses (up to Level 4) and vocational courses (up to Level 3). In addition to this core sample, a purposive sample of three students who had gained employment in colleges at the end of their PGCE year agreed to participate further in the research by contributing experiences encountered during their first year of teaching.

In line with the ethnographic principles which underpinned the study, the research data were generated from a range of naturally occurring sources (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) including informal conversations, reflective diaries, lesson observations and group discussions. This naturalistic approach to data gathering avoided the artificiality of more formal research methods and allowed for a continuous generation of data which could not have been achieved with episodic data collection methods. Such an approach does, however, require the researcher to be alert to serendipitous encounters and act upon them so that potentially valuable data is not filtered out (McBirnie, 2008). The data were gathered and analysed by one of the authors of this paper who was a tutor on the PGCE programme. In this dual role of researcher and tutor it was important to consider that, in deciding to sign a consent form, trainees may make their decision partly based on a relationship involving influence or power (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). For this reason it was stressed to trainees that participation in the research was unrelated to any assessment procedures and that there was no obligation to participate.

As the study progressed it became clear that a complex set of both internal and external influences were impacting on the development of teachers and their practices: in particular, college cultures focusing on the attainment of targets, teacher accountability and prescriptive teaching practices. One of the emergent themes arising from the data was that of time pressures experienced by teachers working within such cultures: a key focus of the research study, therefore, became one of analysing the sources of such time pressures, and building on the very small amount of relevant existing literature. The findings are presented with an integrated literature review which allows for an interaction of theory with data in order to present an applied interpretation set against a wider social context. Although we are limited within the remit of a journal article in the amount of data we can present, and we have focused on a small number of respondents, the quotes used represent experiences that were common across much of the sample. Each quote identifies the status of the respondent as either a trainee or new teacher and summaries of class discussions are presented in the form of field notes.

Curriculum, assessment and time

Education and training in the post compulsory sector has traditionally focused on particular end points which are formally assessed, whether it be a completed assignment or an examination. However, as discussed at the start of this paper, the

advent of Curriculum 2000 ushered in a 're-take' culture which has obscured such end points and generated a continuous cycle of assessment. During the course of the research, trainees and teachers of vocational subjects, which are assessed by a series of coursework assignments, commented on the intensified marking workload generated by multiple revisions of assignments. One newly qualified teacher found that marking was generated in a continuous loop as students made multiple attempts at assignment submissions:

> The structure of the vocational curriculum and assessment based work added extra pressure to an already overloaded working staff. From work handed in, perhaps a third were passed whilst the remainder were returned for additional work to be completed to get to the designated 'pass' stage. Continued support was provided for learners with some having three or four attempts to achieve a suitable pass standard. (Elizabeth, new teacher)

This teacher commented that the multiple submissions not only made a significant impact on teacher time in terms of support for resubmissions, but also added considerably to marking time. The expectation that multiple submissions of assignments are acceptable is an example of the second-chance mentality which leads to some students playing the system (Poon Scott, 2011). The quote from Elizabeth alludes to the 'continued support' which was necessary to secure a pass for students. The continuous nature of such support is cyclical in nature, in contrast to a linear mode of scheduled time, which has a distinct beginning and end. Once a procedure is completed, it must be repeated again and again, its repetitions thus accelerating the pace of scheduled time (Ylijoki and Mantyla, 2003). Process time, which would be needed to ensure that learners themselves had sufficient grasp of the curriculum, is over-ridden by clock time, creating pressure to 'get students through', whilst also intensifying the exploitation of teachers' time by extending their unpaid working time. Moreover, we can see here how national and institutional policies that are focused on achievement targets in the interests of government and colleges distort the use of time, and shift it away from pedagogical values centred on the needs and best interests of learners.

Such cyclical modes of assessment have resulted in the need for teachers to dedicate increasing amounts of time to additional support and marking. However, scheduled time in the college day has not expanded to accommodate this additional effort, and the data indicate that work time extends into lunch times, evenings and weekends. Effectively, the boundaries between work time and personal time are being further eroded.

> Many trainees commented on an imbalance between work time and personal time and the need for them to work well into evenings in order to meet curriculum and college demands. One trainee commented that her health had been affected by the stress caused by this imbalance and felt that her performance in the classroom had been negatively affected as she struggled to meet the demands of planning, teaching and marking. Of particular concern was the fact that she felt her time management skills were at fault when she was, in fact, juggling a timetable comprised of both A Level and vocational classes, each with multiple assessment points which created an almost continuous marking schedule which created additional time demands. (Field notes, class discussion)

The periods of time which fall outside formal teaching hours have traditionally been used for planning, marking, research or what might be termed 'thinking time'. However, by prescribing how teachers should be using their time outside formal timetabled hours, organisations are invading this thinking space and, without the temporal spaces which provide valuable thinking time, teachers can find themselves constrained by organisational expectations and student demands – effectively a time trap. Here, the process time that is squeezed out by the pressures of target-focused control of time is that needed by teachers themselves to reflect on their own practice; and also to think critically about the context of their work and how to respond to these pressures, both in their own interests, and in those of the learners.

Elizabeth, employed on a part-time hourly paid contract, felt the effects of time pressures keenly:

> The turn-around time for marking was tight but manageable (if as a part time teacher you worked on your supposed 'days off'). Being an hourly paid contractual worker, the amount of extra time needed to cope with my marking resulted in the actual hourly pay received being halved when you calculated the time spent on marking away from the workplace. I feel this reached an unacceptable level and greatly encroached on family time both during the week and at the weekend. (Elizabeth, new teacher)

The tight 'turn-around time' alluded to by Elizabeth is an indicator of the constraints created by a modular approach to education which, with its attendant continuous cycle of assessment has resulted in a 'just-in-time' approach to education: The 'just in time' nature of many qualifications (Colley *et al.,* 2013) means that they must be achieved in shorter periods of time:

> Trainees commented that the modular structure of AS/A2 qualifications found them preparing new September entry students for exams which were to be taken in January: the specification had to be covered 'just in time' for the examination to be taken. This put time pressure on both students and teachers as there was only one term to cover the module topics. The focus then moved to preparation for June exams, and, following the issue of results in March, a further effort towards re-sit exams followed. Trainees commented that there was little respite from the continual preparation for exams. (Field notes, class discussion)

This continual cycle of assessment is not restricted to A Levels, however, but also to vocational subjects which are assessed by written assignments and which also have to be completed by strict deadlines:

> The amount of assignments to hand in by learners further added to the pressure for both teachers and learners alike with students having to do a 'last minute rush' to complete on time which I feel resulted in a lower standard of work being handed in. (Elizabeth, new teacher)

The concept of 'just-in-time' which originated on the production lines of factory floors is an interesting one when applied in an educational context. In a manufacturing context, stock supplies were ordered 'just in time' to be used to manufacture products, the idea being to avoid unnecessary stockpiling and keep costs to a

minimum. Applied as an analogy to education some interesting parallels are revealed:

> Trainee teachers reported that they found themselves teaching to the exam (or assignment) because of tight time constraints with the result that lesson content was restricted to the knowledge necessary to pass the exam or meet specified criteria in assignments (Field notes, class discussion).

Effectively, in this scenario a 'minimal stock level' of knowledge is being imparted from teacher to student which can prove very limiting and, as the quote above from Elizabeth illustrates, there is an inevitable impact on the quality of work produced.

Meeting the learning needs of vocational students

The focus on assignment work in vocational programmes of study was both a surprise and a cause for concern for some trainees who observed that such a focus left no time for wider learning activities, particularly those exploring future career opportunities related to the vocational area under study. Where trainees expected to find careers exploration embedded within vocational courses, they found that this was more usually considered by colleges to be the role of external careers advisors and to be conducted out of class time. However, trainees reported that many students had requested specialist careers guidance provided in the context of their vocational area. In response to this request, one trainee hoped to invite professionals working in the vocational area to give talks to the students, but was told that time restrictions related to assignment deadlines would preclude this:

> To arrange the careers talk I first spoke to the class teacher to arrange a suitable time for the talk; however it emerged that there were not any appropriate opportunities due to time constraints. (Maria, trainee)

Maria felt that there would be benefits to bringing careers education into the classroom:

> Firstly, it would have helped to ensure that all students were receiving careers guidance and secondly the classroom situation may have created a discussion forum of ideas (Maria, trainee)

What surprised another trainee was not the fact that students were unsure about the *nature* of certain job roles but the fact that they were unaware of the *existence* of these roles:

> I delivered a lesson to the Level 1 class on professions...Some students said they had never heard of some of these professions before and asked for more information on them. (Angela, trainee)

It was clear to these trainees that students both needed and wanted more information on possible careers but that little or no course time was assigned to the subject. They felt that careers exploration should be at the heart of vocational

courses so that students were able to place their studies in the context of future possible work roles.

These trainees' comments regarding career discussion resonate with the work of Winters *et al.* (2009), undertaken in the Netherlands, which highlights the importance of developing career competences in students based on career reflection, career shaping and networking. They suggest that career dialogues between students and teachers can develop the competences which help students to identify their strengths and make appropriate career choices, but that this can only happen in a 'meaningful learning environment' (p.249), one which extends beyond the mere provision of careers advice. Where training is provided to teachers in the fostering of such career dialogues a positive effect on the career learning of students has been noted (Winters *et al.*, 2012). As well as requiring staff training, careers dialogues would also require significant periods of time assigned to them, but this would be difficult to achieve where timetabled sessions are focused predominantly on assessment activities.

The irony in our data is that career dialogues, which could be described as a truly learner-centred activity related to long term success and achievement, are seemingly displaced by learner activities centred on the short term attainment of qualifications and achievement of externally imposed targets – and arguably more college-centred than learner-centred. This is not to suggest that gaining qualifications is not important, but more that a balance may have been lost between types of learner activity and the programme time allotted to them. Increasing amounts of time spent on assessment-based activity appears to have resulted in the displacement of activities such as career exploration and workplace visits, and it is outside the power of teachers to address this imbalance as they are bound by the dictates of awarding body specifications and college targets. Here we see again that issues of time are related not only to time-budgeting of teachers' contractual and non-contractual hours, but to the conflict of clock time and process time, and to the control of time-use, in the learners' own experience.

The impact on teacher time

It is suggested then, that a number of factors related to curriculum and assessment are impacting on teacher time: assessment has moved from a linear to a cyclical mode, locking teachers into a continuously repeated three-step cycle of: support, assess, feed back. As teacher time becomes more focused on examinations and assignments, whether first or re-sit attempts, this puts pressure on scheduled time, leaving little time for other learning activities and resulting in a just-in-time approach to teaching and learning. This approach has been fostered by the modular nature of qualifications, whether assessed by examination or assignment, which have encouraged a re-sit culture and a second-chance mentality in students. However, scheduled time is finite and as teachers struggle to meet just-in-time targets, scheduled time inevitably spills over into personal time.

It is useful at this point to consider how the nature of teaching as a profession gives rise to this 'spillage'. Traditionally, wage labour has been tied to clock, or linear time (Davies, 1994). However, teaching involves a considerable amount of emotional labour as teachers struggle to meet the needs of challenging learners (Jephcote *et al.,* 2008) and this frequently extends beyond clock time. Essentially, the time needed to meet the needs of learners cannot be quantified in terms of the clock, but is determined by the time taken by the process of meeting those needs: that is, process time (Davies, 1994). Placed in the context of the findings presented above, clock time is allocated to modules and their assessment but, where students fail to meet achievement targets, resubmission opportunities demand a teacher process time which extends well beyond the allotted clock time.

It is important to note that the trainee teachers and new teachers who participated in the study were dedicated to providing the necessary levels of support (or process time) to help develop their students' learning. Indeed they often alluded to their initial motivation to enter the teaching profession as being 'to make a difference'. However, they expressed dismay at the extent to which colleges demanded that this be focused on a continuous cycle of assessment support which detracted from actual teaching and learning time, and which resulted in a serious encroachment on teachers' personal time. The college management justification for such an expectation was often made in terms of learner-centredness: the teacher must do all they can to ensure that learners achieve. This is a difficult premise for teachers to resist, as they share a commitment to learner-centredness, but not necessarily for the same purpose as the college. This reminds us of Fielding's (2007) observation, discussed earlier, that although there are similarities between what he terms the 'high-performance' and 'person-centred' organisations, since they are both committed to the achievement of learners, the way in which they pursue this commitment is very different, and it is not always clear whose interests are being served. Effectively, the trainees in this study had a 'person-centred' commitment, but found themselves within 'high-performance' organisations whose orientation was geared more firmly towards the attainment of the college's target grades. This emphasises wider aspects of an analysis using social theories of time. Not only does it resonate with the findings of Avis *et al.* (2001) on time budgeting and the exploitation of teachers' unpaid time. It also raises important questions about the *uses* to which teachers' and students' time is put (and which uses are deemed inadmissible); about who controls that use, and in whose interests; and about non-pedagogical values which appear to be driving both the allocation and the use of time.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests, then, that viewing these experiences through the lens of a social theory of time, with a focus on the social control of time, on the purposes to which it is put, and on the values and power relations involved, reveals that there may also be disparities in interpretation of the term 'learner-centredness'. It is to this subject that the paper now turns.

Interpretations of learner-centredness

As discussed above, learner-centredness is a term which has come to mean different things to different people, and is certainly applied more widely than its humanistic roots would suggest. As a concept inextricably linked to the social and moral values of pedagogical approaches, it is central to understanding specifically

the contestation of time-use and its values discussed above. In this section we consider how dualist notions of learner-centredness may have developed, with teachers adopting an interpretation based on pedagogy, and college management systems operating according to an interpretation based on achievement targets. The trainee teachers and new teachers in this study interpreted learner-centredness as a pedagogical approach which placed the students and their needs at the heart of their practice; but they acknowledged that the amount of scheduled time available to them was often insufficient to meet the needs of students:

> Classrooms filled with 20-30 students do mean that there is less teacher-student time unless tutorials are booked (Angela, Trainee)

Teachers often gave willingly of their lunchtimes to offer support to students and often alluded to the 'finding ' or 'making' of time in order to effect this:

> A key element of my own practice is making time for students and providing as much close support as possible (Tom, new teacher)

The making of time to meet learner needs is reminiscent of the 'unconditional personal support' alluded to by James and Diment (2003, p.415) who found workplace tutors going beyond the allocated hours and formal boundaries of their role in order to meet the learning needs of students, even though such dedication had both emotional and material costs to tutors. This extra support was given to address shortfalls in learning which resulted from 'the separation of learning and assessment [*that*] has become part of common-sense thinking and for many people, including many practitioners, now goes without saying' (James and Diment, 2003, p. 418). The 'separation' to which James and Diment allude is in relation to NVQ work-based assessment. However, it could be argued that such a separation is not only apparent in workplace learning but is also fostered in colleges by placing a focus on outcomes and targets, with the result that assessment has priority over learning, effectively becoming 'assessment as learning' (Torrance, 2007).

For many of the trainees in this study their motivation for providing extra support was firmly focused on the holistic success of the student rather than the specific targets of the college, as illustrated by Tom's comment below:

> Regardless of college targets and national benchmarks, a teacher's job is to help students succeed. (Tom, new teacher)

The pressure on colleges to meet league table and grade targets is passed down to teachers and, as a result, when students fail to meet exam or assignment target grades, colleges often expect teachers to provide additional support sessions and revision sessions, regardless of how this might impact on teachers' personal time; an example of prioritising the functional over the personal, and privileging organisational capital over holistic learner development (Fielding, 2007), rather than of genuinely 'putting the care-receiver's interests first' (Davies 1994, p.279). However, the provision of additional support presented some problems for trainees, as discussed below.

'Learner centred' or 'results-centred'?

A particular concern expressed by teachers in this study was that, where teachers were expected to provide extra support for retake exams and assignments, students were not always willing to accept it:

> The students and I had allocated a time that we all agreed that we could make for one-to-one tuition. However, only one student out of the three turned up. (Angela, trainee)

Moreover, trainees and teachers reported that in some cases the extra support was needed as a result of limited effort on the part of students: where multiple submissions of assignments were made in order to achieve a pass, a tension was created between those students who submitted only once and those who made multiple submissions, the former category expressing the view that those who did not make the effort to reach the standard on initial submission seemed to be rewarded with more teacher support:

> Those students who worked within the set guidelines felt increasingly penalised for working well, many becoming resentful and feeling 'what was the incentive to work hard?'. (Elizabeth, new teacher)

When brokering the tension between students who submit only once and those who make multiple submissions, teachers may also engage in emotional labour which adds further to process time demands:

> Many staff admitted that they felt 'worn down' by the added pressures placed upon them. (Elizabeth, new teacher)

It is clear from these quotes that teachers are dedicating support time to students which leaves fewer hours for planning and marking, key elements of practice which then encroach on personal time: many students commented that they spent most evenings and weekends planning or marking. However, the willingness of the teacher to provide extra support is not always matched by a student willingness to accept it and, without this, the extra time given by teachers is superfluous. As one trainee commented:

> What more can be done when the learner does not want to learn? (Caroline, trainee)

This apparent reluctance to reciprocate teacher effort can be very frustrating for trainees and can conflict with their motivation for entering the teaching profession. One trainee felt particular frustration at the extent to which the additional support expected was supposedly in the name of learner-centredness:

> The assignments are being handed in but the submission of many is not sufficient, and they are being returned to learners for subsequent work. This is adding extra pressure on my time. Feedback is being made via email but this is a time-consuming exercise. Anything to get the learners through – talk about learner-centred! (John, trainee)

This comment reflects the feeling of frustration experienced by many trainees who gave their personal time, but felt that this time and effort was not reciprocated by students. They expressed concern that the true spirit of learner-centredness was

being lost, with some students becoming more dependent on teacher support rather than developing themselves as independent and self-motivated learners. The trainees and NQTs in this study acknowledged that the process time required to support students exceeded that of the clock time formally allocated to it. However, they drew a distinction between the additional hours which they gave willingly to student support for learning and the additional hours demanded by colleges to be focused on target-driven cyclical assessment. They felt that the latter demand exceeded what was reasonable in terms of teacher process time and detracted from a focus on teaching and learning: effectively it was a corruption of the use-value of process time, and they felt trapped in a continuous spiral of assessment activity which failed to acknowledge the finiteness of both scheduled and personal time.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to analyse the temporal effects of supposedly learner-centred assessment policy on the working practices of trainee and newly qualified teachers. Although this study has focused on the experiences of these early career teachers, the data have been generated by their interactions with more experienced teaching staff and indicate that temporal pressures are not restricted to these trainee and new teachers alone, but also to more experienced members of teaching staff who often alluded to time constraints during their conversations with trainees. In summary, three key points emerge from the research.

First, assessment policy combined with a target-driven interpretation of learner-centredness is placing additional pressures on teacher time and compounding those already caused by managerialist and competitive college cultures. Vocational as well as academic courses are increasingly focused on the attainment of target grades, sometimes at the expense of meeting the wider learning needs of students, and teachers have become locked into a cyclical mode of assessment which results in spiralling time pressures: scheduled time remains static but process time does not, with the result that process time far exceeds clock time. When teachers' work spills over from scheduled time into personal time, such spillage results in temporal imbalance and exerts a negative impact on teachers' personal and professional lives. This both supports the findings of Avis *et al.* (2001), and also offers new empirical evidence of how this exploitation of teachers' unpaid time has intensified over the last decade. In addition, using a more complex social theory of time points us to critical consideration of the *use* of teaching time, the *values* attached to that use, and the power relations involved in its *control*.

Second, as this theory focuses on the use and values to which time is dedicated, this draws our attention to the fact that college demands on teacher time are often made in the name of learner-centredness. However, the evidence suggests that a dual interpretation of learner-centredness is at play: teachers regard it as a pedagogical approach focused on developing independent learners, and colleges interpret it as an approach focused on targets and outcomes. We suggest that the concept of learner-centredness may have been subverted and misappropriated by colleges and policy-makers, and is now being applied as an accountability lever to prise more time out of teachers in the belief that this will raise achievement targets. It also suppresses the use of time for teaching and learning about the related labour market that students will be entering and for offering them career education and guidance.

Effectively, this form of 'learner-centredness' might more accurately be termed 'college-centredness'.

Third, trainee and new teacher comments suggest that the amount of time which they are devoting to the support of learners is not always matched by the effort expended by learners: learner-centredness as a pedagogical approach implies a focus on developing independent, self-motivated learners, but the continuous provision of assessment support for students seems to have an opposite effect. Moreover, many trainees commented that the time given by them was not always reciprocated by students. This was a source of frustration not only for trainees and new teachers but also for those students who commented that minimal effort from some fellow students seemed to be rewarded with an increased allotment of teacher support time, a situation which could give rise to resentment and accusations of unfair practice. Here, we see that while teachers' time-use can be controlled by colleges in a strongly disciplinary fashion, students' time-use cannot be controlled in the same way. The target-driven values of colleges therefore create a counter-productive result in humanistic terms of 'learner-centredness'. Power relations mean that teachers are then held to account for students' time-use – something that neither they nor the college can control, whilst target-driven time use makes it all the more difficult to engage learners fully.

This article has highlighted the importance of time in the enactment of curriculum and assessment policy – a nexus we believe is far more broadly relevant beyond the FE sector and beyond England. We know that education has always been framed by timetables and punctuated by bells (Foucault, 1991): it is not the temporal framework *per se* which is problematic, but the expectations of what should be fitted into it, informed by what values, and controlled by which social groups. These are deeply ethical issues about the use to which educators' time should be put. It has been argued that the effort in pursuing achievement involves hidden work on the part of teachers and that the hard work of achievement falls as much on the shoulders of tutors as students (Torrance, 2007). However some of the data from trainees in this study suggests that the hard work is falling not *as much* on the shoulders of tutors as before, but *more so*.

Time is a finite resource, yet the findings presented here suggest that the failure on the part of colleges to recognise this is causing serious asynchronicity between teachers' professional and personal time. As workload increases and teachers are unable to balance working and personal demands, there is a risk that they will be lost to the profession: indeed, one of the new teachers who contributed to this study made a decision to leave FE teaching after only one year, as she felt that the pressures in the sector were far too great and were having a seriously negative impact on her personal time. The source of frustration and demotivation for many of the trainees and new teachers in this study was not restricted to the amount of time demanded from them but also, and perhaps most importantly, to the disproportionate allotment of time to cyclical assessment activity which detracted from the amount of time available for wider activities related to teaching and learning. These issues point to a disjuncture between the pedagogical values of humanistic learner-centredness and the economic value prioritised by government and institutions; and to contestation about which of these purposes decide the use to which teachers' and learners' time is put.

When trainees begin their pre-service PGCE year, they often state that they wish to 'make a difference', and their motivation to join the profession is rooted in a transformative notion of education, one which might be termed 'learner-centred'. However, a holistic understanding of both learners and teachers as persons is being sacrificed to a notion of 'learner-centredness' interpreted in fact as institutional 'high-performance' (cf. Fielding, 2007). This paper argues that unless these interpretations are reconciled, and the imbalances of scheduled and personal time, process time and clock time, are addressed, there is a serious risk that talented teachers may be lost to the profession even before their careers have taken root.

Notes

1.   A Levels (Advanced Levels) are Level 3 qualifications taken in the UK, usually by 17 and 18 year-olds. They may provide access to university, to apprenticeships, or to employment.

2.   The pre-service PGCE is a university-based teacher training programme which includes work placements in FE settings

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