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Room for improvement? The impact of compulsory professional development for teachers in England's Further Education sector.

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Abstract

After years of neglect, the New Labour government has identified the Further Education (FE) sector in England as being the crucial means to achieve two policies at the centre of their project; social justice through widening participation in education and enhancing the skills of the nation's workforce to compete in a globalised economy. This has led to FE and the staff who work there being more and more closely scrutinised and directed by the government, and from September 2007 teachers in FE colleges in England are required to participate annually in at least 30 hours of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in order to maintain their qualified status. This and many of the other government initiatives are associated with restrictive and impoverished notions of professionalism, but the sanctioning of CPD chosen and recorded by the staff themselves, rather than their employers, may allow room for a more meaningful and autonomous professionalism to evolve.

Introduction

Often referred to as the "Cinderella Service" (Randle & Brady 1997) the English Further Education (FE) sector has attracted much attention from the New Labour government of Tony Blair and now Gordon Brown. A heterogeneous section of the English education system with over four million students, FE in England sits between schools and universities and is where the great majority of vocational training and adult education takes place, as well as academic study between the ages of 16 and 18. So difficult is it to generalise about FE that Gleeson *et al* (2005: 447) have said that "[i]n essence, FE is unified by being different". The New Labour government's interests in this sector arise from FE being identified as the vehicle to carry two related policies; creating social justice through widening participation in education, and boosting the national economy through improving the skills of the workforce.

"Benign neglect" is how Lucas (2004a: 35) described the complacency of previous post-war governments towards FE in England, but over the past decade FE colleges and their staff have been increasingly scrutinised and the government has invented a professionalism for them. This process has coalesced around the introduction of professional standards (FENTO 1999; LLUK 2006) and most recently around the implementation of a compulsory annual period of continuing professional development (CPD) for all new teachers in English FE colleges (DfES 2007).

This paper looks at the background to this initiative and its implications for what Lucas (2004a: 38) has called the “impoverished professional culture among FE college teachers” and will consider how government has intervened in CPD. Although this intervention has been shaped by restrictive notions of professionalism, there may remain space for staff to independently develop their practice in a meaningful rather than a mechanistic way.

Trorey makes the useful distinction between “*institutional development*” aimed at improving a whole organisation, often described as “*staff development*” and the more individual “*professional development*” involving “pedagogic knowledge and subject expertise” (2002: 2; her emphasis). Though there is elision between the two, I am primarily concerned with the latter.

Clow concluded an article on FE in 2001 by stating:

“As it stands at the moment FE teachers are unlikely to agree a definition of their professionalism without external support.”

(p 417)

Professional standards and mandatory CPD may be considered as “external support”, but what professionalism they imply is contentious. Gleeson *et al* (2005: 446) have highlighted how the FE teacher is considered “as either the recipient of external policy reform or as an empowered agent of professional change” and they cite Bathmaker (2001) who has described how FE practitioners are discussed as “devils” whose poor practice needs to be closely controlled or as “dupes” who have carelessly submitted to a new managerialist regime. Professionalism in general “is a construct born of methodological reduction, rhetorical inflation and universalist excess” (Stronach *et al* 2004: 109). But these binaries illustrate in particular how fraught discussions of professionalism have become in FE.

In considering what professional development and professionalism in FE mean though, it is important to recognise how politicised the topic has become. As such, to echo Gleeson *et al* (2005), FE in England is a case study of a government attempting to create a new professional accountability measured against its own political (and economic) criteria and similar processes can be seen elsewhere in the English public sector (Stronach *et al* 2002).

CPD in FE before New Labour

New Labour’s policies on CPD find their roots in those of the previous Conservative government. In the late 1980s and early 1990s staff development was funded centrally by the Department of Education and Science (DES) through

Local Education Authorities (LEAs) controlled by local councils, which had to apply national criteria around the in-service training of teachers. As Lucas has identified, (2004b: 73) this represented a first attempt to regulate professional development. It was limited though, and staff in colleges did not even have to be teacher-qualified until after 2001. In 1991, for example only 55.62% of staff were trained (2004b: 75).

FE colleges in England controversially left the control of LEAs when they were incorporated by an act of parliament in 1993 in order to, it was argued, give their managements greater autonomy. The government set up the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) to finance and manage FE provision, all of which led to what Hillier has described as a “frenzy of activity” and “cut-throat competition” between colleges (Hillier 2006: 28). Over the next five years around 20,000 full-time staff were to leave the sector, coinciding with a 33% rise in the number of students (Betts 1999 cited in Lucas 2004b: 80). Gleeson *et al* (2005: 447) argue that incorporation “radically altered democratic accountability in favour of government, business and corporate interests”, though Hyland & Merrill (2003: 76-77) found that the old LEA-run FE colleges were considered by some as paternalistic and hierarchical.

Nevertheless, with regard to CPD, this process was important for two reasons; the first is indicated by Gleeson and Shain (1999). They mapped a divergence between the goals of the FE institutions and those of the staff working within them by describing the evolution of managerialism. Student recruitment, retention and achievement figures became the new pole star, and the direction of FE colleges was inexorably moved towards these measurable outcomes at the expense of teachers’ professional autonomy in, for example, the selection or assessment of students. A break from the past was made.

“Traditionally, staff and managers aspired to a common set of educational values, encompassing the notion of professional expertise and some discretion in design, delivery and assessment of provision ...[which is] being replaced by a new type of manager primarily concerned with resource management, particularly financial resources.”

(Randle and Brady 1997: 232)

Again, it may be pertinent to recall Hyland and Merrill’s data relating to how colleges were considered prior to incorporation in 1993 mentioned above, so the sharing of values may be over-stated. Nevertheless, this breakdown of what common values and common definition of professionalism existed was a feature of what Randle and Brady have referred to as the rise of managerialism in the public sector.

Avis (2002: 75) refers to managerialism as “a central plank in the PCET [Post-Compulsory Education and Training] settlement in which there is an attempt to construct a social block around managerial interests.” These interests are

granted hegemony over those of teachers or pedagogy. The consequence was that CPD was ignored by many colleges, and what staff development existed was inconsistent and tied to the short-term goals of the institution (Brooks 2002: 38-39). As described by Brooks, an official discourse of professionalism was being constructed around compliance with local and national initiatives, rather than the independent expertise or autonomy of the individual teacher.

The second reason for the importance of incorporation of colleges in England to CPD was the haemorrhaging of staff from the colleges, mentioned above, and their replacement by part-time teachers, often employed through agencies rather than directly by the FE college. The proportion of these part-time staff in FE was 66% in 1999, a figure which masks a discrepancy from 1% to 92% within individual colleges (based on research quoted in Lucas 2004b: 80). As early as 1996 the FEFC Chief Inspector reported that:

“...part-time staff (who in some colleges do as much as 50 per cent of the teaching) ...rarely engage in curriculum development, student support, and guidance activities, extra curriculum provision, formal staff appraisal and in-service training.”

(FEFC 1996: 6 quoted in Lucas 2004b: 81)

So when Tony Blair was elected under the banner of New Labour in May 1997, professional development in FE, by either of Trorey's definitions, was confused and under-funded mirroring the state of the English FE sector as a whole. There was already a distinction between the interests of professional staff and those who led colleges as a result of the encroachment of managerialism, and FE was subject to frequent national initiatives and objectives, features that are even more apparent today.

The Learning Age

This article does not seek to analyse the links between raising skills, economic growth and personal well-being, though they are certainly open to question (Rikowski 2001). Nevertheless, for New Labour these links are sacramental. All social formations, and education in particular, they argue, must conform to the new economic stringencies of globalisation which require a highly skilled workforce to cope with constant technological development. Without this, Britain will fall behind its competitors. This neo-liberal agenda that underpins Blair's educational policy in England was initiated under the Thatcher government and has been referred to as 'TINA', "there is no alternative" to the market (see Hayes 2003 and Hutton 1996), even if New Labour's ideas were given the ideological banner of "The Third Way". This nebulous term suggests a route between social democracy and the market, and Anthony Giddens, the foremost intellectual champion of Third Way politics, has said they "are not a continuation of neo-liberalism but are an alternative political philosophy", (Giddens 2000: 32-33

quoted in Callinicos 2001: 3). However, their focus on economic competitiveness and the introduction of market mechanisms into education through, for example, the Private Finance Initiative make any such distinctions in government policy seem rather fine.

In any case, the consequence of FE finding itself at the nexus of the government's social and economic policies has been a stampede of initiatives and policies that attempt to draw more people into education, and to standardise and control what they learn there.

"Anyone who was involved in managing further education in the late 1990s will be familiar with the sudden rush of reports, [government-produced] Green and White Papers that characterized the change of government in 1997."

(Hillier 2006: 30)

Their sheer quantity prevents analysis of them all, or even just those that relate to CPD, but some of the most significant are considered below. Within these documents can be seen:

"...the shift, in anthropological ethics, from professionalism to audit, [which] is yet another instance of the swing of the liberal pendulum from a romantic primacy of the ethical to a utilitarian primacy of the economic."

(Pels 2000: 148 quoted in Stronach *et al* 2004: 111)

David Blunkett, the first secretary of state for Education after the New Labour election victory wrote in the forward to the 1998 Green Paper:

"Learning is the key to prosperity - for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century. This is why the Government has put learning at the heart of its ambition." (DfEE 1998:1)

Three years after that Green Paper in 2001, Blunkett's announcement of an extra £65m for FE and Sixth Form College lecturer's pay included this warning:

"But we can't achieve our aim of raising standards [in post-16 education and training] without consistently high quality teaching in all our further education and sixth form colleges. (DfES 2001)

Four years on there were similar messages from the government. "Further Education is the engine room for skills and social justice in this country," claimed Bill Rammell in 2005, when he was British minister of state for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning, "FE's moment has come." (LSC 2005: 1) Linking prosperity and education, especially vocational education, explains the

continuing concern for FE and with controlling teaching and learning within the sector; because, ministers argue, the economic and social interests of the country depend upon it. Tony Blair himself wrote the forward to the 2006 Government White Paper and he re-states the vision of education relating to economic development in the clearest terms.

Our economic future depends on our productivity as a nation. That requires a labour force with skills to match the best in the world. [...] The colleges and training providers that make up the Further Education sector are central to achieving that ambition. [...] But at present, Further Education is not achieving its full potential as the powerhouse of a high skills economy.” (DfES 2006)

This was the document that introduced the mandatory 30 hours of CPD for all staff in FE. However, before going on to consider this policy and its antecedents more carefully, that the government has had to bring in so many different initiatives, all broadly aimed at the same target, is worth consideration.

There is, it would seem, a significant gap between what is planned by government ministers and civil servants in London and what actually happens in college classrooms. Silver (1999), cited in Peeke (2000: 4) bemoans that change in FE comes about by decree. Policies reach colleges detached from any rationale and reduced to their financial imperative, so decisions at an institutional level are often taken solely on the basis of funding. However, perhaps these decrees do not bring about as much change as the government would like, or they would not need so many. Certainly there is some evidence that few people, including senior managers read policy documents (Orr 2005), which may help create some space for teachers to develop their knowledge or practice independently, which I will return to later.

CPD in FE

Well before the 2006 White Paper CPD had been an explicit feature of government policy. The Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) standards published in 1999 as a statutory basis for teacher training qualifications in England, included a requirement to “engage in continuing professional development” (p23). Under the banner of *Success for All* (2002), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published *Equipping our Teachers for the Future* (2004), making this commitment to CPD.

“We need to recognise that a teacher’s training is not complete when initial training ends. We want all teachers to commit to lifelong professional development, so that their skills are always up-to-date as the needs of

learners change.” (DfES 2004: 4)

There has been therefore a move from a general encouragement to a specific obligation to participate in CPD.

Justified or not, this mandatory 30 hours will bring FE broadly into line with English school teachers’ five in-service training days, of which more later, and many other groups of workers that require CPD for members to remain “within good standing” such as architects, lawyers and radiographers (Betts 2005:5). Yet, there is a significant difference with many of these other groups.

Grundy and Robison (2004: 147) identify two drivers of professional development, “systemic and personal”. In England, as we have seen, the systemic is to the fore as the impetus for change has not come from practitioners, as is the case for many other professions who create and regulate their own standards. For FE in England, it has been imposed from the outside which could itself deny the autonomy that definitions of professionalism include (Eraut 1994). What professionalism means remains a disputed though significant factor here.

Professionalism and Teachers in FE

“Few professionals talk as much about being professional as those whose professional stature is in doubt.”

(Katz 1969: 71)

Katz was referring to nurses, but the same could be said of FE teachers for whom, at governmental level at least, professionalism has been a focus.

The centrality of FE to New Labour’s policies have meant that the quality of teaching there matters to the government. However, the teaching that the government refers to has become identified with a particular and impoverished notion of professionalism. The FENTO Standards for teachers in FE, mentioned above, set out what was expected of teachers (FENTO 1999) in twenty pages of statements of competency that left little room for autonomy or professional discretion. From 2001 these standards became the basis for all initial teacher training qualifications in FE and for the first time there was a statutory obligation for staff in FE to become teacher-qualified within two years of taking up a post (DfES 2000). In doing this, an official and restricted definition of professionalism was created by tying it to criteria written by a government body in the form of competencies (see Lucas 2004a and Bathmaker 2000).

More recently the government set up the Institute for Learning (IfL) as “the professional body for teachers and trainers and student teachers in the learning

and skills sector” to support “the professional needs of ... members...to raise the status of practitioners across the sector” (IfL 2007), and they have a central role in the implementation of CPD in FE, as we shall see below by sampling and validating it.

The job of the IfL is complicated, though, by what has been referred to as the “dual professionalism” of FE teachers (IfL 2006). Otherwise expressed, this means that most teachers have entered FE having been established professionals in previous careers, and many maintain that professional allegiance and give it priority (Robson 1998). This is because, as Robson *et al* (2004: 187) argue, it is that previous experience that gives them the credibility required for their new teaching or training role. This is something recognised in the *New overarching standards for teachers, tutors and trainers in the lifelong learning sector* published by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK 2006), the government body that superseded FENTO. These statutory standards have replaced the FENTO standards and once again set out what is expected of qualified teachers in the sector. Though simplified and condensed, and thus improved, they still contain around twenty pages of statements of competency and include a commitment to “[u]nderstanding and keeping up to date with current knowledge in respect of own specialist area.” (LLUK 2006: 8)

However, this very identity with their former profession may prevent some from considering themselves as professional *teachers*. Indeed, reluctance to identify themselves as teachers may explain the government’s imposition of standards that state precisely not just the values that are expected of teachers in FE, but also their practice. Assessment of students, for example, must involve “using feedback as a tool for learning and progression”, (LLUK 2006: 12). Teachers must commit to “[u]sing a range of learning resources to support learners” (p. 5).

Such detail and even the length of the LLUK standards are in contrast to the equivalent single page of broad statements that cover Higher Education (HEA 2006), or even the much simpler General Teaching Council (GTC 2006) statement of standards relating to school-teachers. FE teachers are given a very much shorter leash by the government.

So, an ideological position on widening participation in education and the need for a skilled workforce to compete economically has led to a political emphasis on FE in England and to repeated efforts to direct what takes place there, partly through imposing a definition of professionalism which is more restricted and prescriptive than in other sectors of education. Such is the background to the new mandatory annual period of CPD expected of staff in FE from September 2007, and more recently a non-mandatory CPD framework for teacher-trainers in FE.

Furlong *et al* observe:

“The three concepts of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility central to a traditional notion of professionalism are often seen as inter-related. It is because professionals face complex and unpredictable situations that they need a specialised body of knowledge; if they are to apply that knowledge, it is argued that they need the autonomy to make their own judgements. Given that they have autonomy, it is essential that they act with responsibility—collectively they need to develop appropriate professional values.”

(2000: 5 quoted in Robson *et al* 2004: 184)

LLUK held consultation events in the lead up to the publication of their standards, but for teachers in FE in England there has been no collective development of professional values. Similarly, CPD has not come out of an expressed need for “a specialised body of knowledge”. Such knowledge, which is codified in the LLUK standards, is specified and obligatory, however benign or necessary it may be.

The IfL have researched views on CPD amongst their members, though very few responded, and found enthusiasm, which is perhaps not surprising given their members were at that time self-selecting and had to demonstrate their own professionalism through a lengthy written application. However, even these people reported barriers to participation in CPD as:

“lack of time, resources, funding and support/guidance; not seen by colleagues as necessary and a potential problem for some groups of part-time staff.” (Betts 2005:3)

LLUK carried out their own research into CPD in FE in 2006 and summarized some of their findings as follows:

“The key findings of the desk research included: a shortage of opportunities for industrial and professional updating; a predominance of generic professional development; a lack of finance allocated to staff development; lack of a coherent approach to updating vocational staff; training in developing teaching skills linked to the trainees’ subject/vocational areas is underdeveloped.”

(LLUK 2006b)

The government has not announced extra funding for the new mandatory requirement for CPD, and so for many this imposition may simply constitute another initiative, and another mechanistic encumbrance to be complied with, expediently at best.

The experience of CPD for school teachers in England may also be informative here. The 1988 Education Reform Act created five compulsory in-service training

days, but Bolam and McMahon (2004) argue this indirectly led to the demise of LEA teachers' centres, and a substantial rise in the number of commercial training organisations and private educational consultants. Any staff development was to be largely financed by individual schools, which, due to stretched budgets meant less choice, and generally more central state direction to staff development. Professional development has focused on new government policy initiatives.

Paradoxically, the creation of mandatory training days with their emphasis on CPD has, Bolam and McMahon argue, led to a narrowing of the CPD available. The same may be possible in FE. Significantly, however, staff must record their own 30 hours of CPD so maintaining the room for autonomously choosing their own meaningful professional development mentioned above. Therein lies the potential benefit in the policy.

The wide-ranging Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) research project which investigated FE in England over several years concluded in 2005 that FE is "shaped by complex cultural relationships. Improving learning depends upon recognising this complexity." It recommends that:

"[t]he most effective way to improve learning in FE is to change learning cultures, by increasing positive synergies and reducing dysfunctional tensions." (Hodkinson 2005: 1)

The TLC group found that "[c]urrent policy and managerial approaches are damaging learning in FE" and that there is "too much focus on measured outcomes". They suggest that "national management of FE should concentrate on creating greater professional autonomy and expertise" (Hodkinson 2005: 1).

The new CPD initiative may provide an opportunity for staff in FE to develop their own practice free from "measured outcomes", and so there is cause for some optimism.

A related area is reflective practice which, though ill-defined, remains part of the new LLUK standards, and the work of Schön in particular has become doxa in FE, even if some interpretations have strayed back to the very technical rationalism that Schön himself criticised (see Harkin 2005: 172-175 for a discussion of reflective practice in FE). However, even the blindest definition of reflective practice stresses the need to think about practice and this along with the thirty-hour requirement may allow teachers to independently and genuinely develop aspects of their practice, providing further cause for optimism.

Conclusion

In defence of meaningful professional development in education Cullingford issued this call:

“In place of the battle between institutional needs and professional development must come the creative tension of their symbiosis.”
(2002: 234)

Given the rise of managerialism in FE with its targets and restricted notion of professionalism this may be asking a lot, and in some cases too much. “[A] framework turned into prison bars” is how Ollin (2002: 136) vividly described the danger of a debased, state-controlled notion of professionalism, and that danger pertains in relation to the new policy on CPD.

FE and professional development in particular have become increasingly politicised and centrally controlled under the Blair government. Neither “dupe” nor “devil”, teachers in FE may seek meaningful professional development, and still find themselves corralled into sessions on the latest government or institutional initiative. However, if this policy is for once enabling the development of teachers, rather than regulating their productivity, it may be worth the risk of engaging with it. Gleeson *et al* (2005: 457) have said of FE teachers:

“their professional narratives become inseparable from a critical discourse of public accountability, fashioning more authentic forms of authority and voice linked to local conditions of democratic governance.”

Such a grand vision seems influenced by Habermas and, to quote Ranson (2003: 461) such a “discursive practice of accountability is not merely confined to organizational procedure, but defines the reasonableness of communication that must inform any just civil society”. The impact of compulsory CPD in FE is likely to be rather more limited, though positive.

The work of Stronach *et al* (2004) in relation to nurses and school teachers may be instructive here, especially in what they term “ecologies of practice” which:

“refer to the sorts of individual and collective experiences, beliefs and practices that professionals accumulate in learning and performing their roles.”

(p109)

These ecologies, they state, exist in tension with the “economy of performance” (p109) which is characterised by the notions of effectiveness, audit and performance indicators, evident throughout FE in England, and which “are eventually demotivational in their effects” (p131). Meaningful development of practice, since it cannot be coerced, grows organically from within these ecologies.

Stronach *et al* also talk of “risk” (p131) in relation to professionalism, and the government’s insistence on wedding FE to the nation’s economic performance

may run counter to the professional interests of many FE teachers. The sanctioned time given to CPD in FE colleges may not lead to the kind of inclusive and engaged notion of professionalism that Gleeson *et al* hope for. Nevertheless, the CPD is to be chosen and recorded by the FE teachers themselves. This may allow room for these individual practitioners to consider, plan and discuss their own development and so allow “ecologies of practice” to grow and thrive and within them their professionalism, however they choose to define that.

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