Unbecoming teachers: towards a more dynamic notion of professional participation

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Abstract

This paper considers teacher professionalism from a neglected perspective. It analyses assumptions about the <u>dynamics</u> of professional participation implicit within competing academic and policy constructs of professionalism, including the currently iconic concept of 'communities of practice'. All entail notions of becoming and being a professional. However, data from the project 'Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education' (TLC) reveal significant instances of 'unbecoming': a majority of the tutors participating in the project were heading out of further education (FE) teaching. This illuminates a broader problem of exodus from the sector, in a political context which privileges economic goals and targets at every level, and in which the current climate of performativity increasingly impacts upon pedagogical relationships – contextual conditions which are also highly relevant to schooling and higher education.   Drawing on exemplar case studies of two tutors, and on the theorization of learning cultures emerging from the TLC project, we develop a Bourdieusian analysis of these dynamics in terms of the interaction of habitus and fields, and we critique 'communities of practice'. Paying particular attention to policy-driven changes in and to the field of FE, and to the cross-field effects in FE of policies in other sectors of education and beyond, we argue for a more dynamic notion of professional participation. This might underpin 'principles of procedure' for improving teaching and learning, and policies to support diverse forms of teacher professionalism throughout the education system.

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Introduction

What is it to be a professional? This is a deeply contested question, in the current policy climate of education, dominated as it is by performativity (Avis, 2005; Ball, 2005). Official constructs of professionalism in teaching have been analysed and critiqued from a variety of academic perspectives, which we review in the first part of this paper. However, in doing so, we seek to focus attention on a neglected aspect of these much-rehearsed debates: the dynamics of professional participation that they assume.

While a great deal has been written about <u>becoming</u> or <u>being</u> a professional, competing versions of professionalism almost invariably entail – as do 'common sense' understandings – an implicit assumption that professional status is permanent once it has been attained. In the further education sector, where our own research has been located, this assumption is codified in a policy emphasis on the universal requirement for teacher qualification based on technicized national standards (Avis, 2005; FENTO, 1999). We do not suggest that such approaches construct professionalism as a purely static category. Rather, in exploring the ways in which various discourses construct its dynamics, we have found them to be inadequate for describing the experiences of a number of Further Education (FE) tutors who participated with us in 'Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education' (TLC) (a four-year, national research project within the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme).

There has in fact been rather a lot of diverse 'movement' amongst the FE professionals with whom we have worked. Of the 24 tutors who participated in the project, only about a third remain committed to teaching in the sector. Three left FE to move into sixth form provision, two have become full-time managers and are no longer teaching, five have either quit their jobs or been made redundant, and five give accounts of themselves as marginalized, and are making serious efforts to leave FE (some have already reduced their hours to part-time).

This evidence sheds light on a much bigger picture of exodus among FE professionals in England. While high turnover in the sector is obscured by the lack of national statistics, a survey by the Association of Colleges in 2001 reported an annual turnover of 10%-11% among lecturing staff (Hansard, 2001). A recent government-commissioned review of FE notes the related problem of casualisation and an ageing workforce (Foster, 2005). It is likely that the effects of these shifts are masked to an extent by rationalization in an increasingly competitive market – every one of the four colleges collaborating in TLC either underwent a merger or faced a severe financial cutback during the life of the project, which reduced staffing levels.

Teachers in general occupy a more recent and tenuous place in the hierarchy of professionalisms (Brehony, 2005), and this is all the more true of teachers in FE, an education sector widely perceived to have a 'lower profile' than others (Foster, 2005). A requirement for professional teaching qualifications has only been introduced in FE in the last few years, which contributes to its low status (Robson, 1998b). Indeed, many of the TLC participants and their colleagues described themselves as 'accidental tutors', still associating their identities most closely with their former industrial or

public service occupations. It is not surprising, then, that current policies to improve teaching and learning in FE focus strongly on efforts to professionalize the sector through the Further Education National Training Organization (FENTO) standards. At the same time, the TLC's evidence of exodus from the profession calls into question the effectiveness of that strategy, and suggests the need for a deeper understanding of professional engagement. Moreover, we suggest that such an understanding is relevant not only in the FE sector itself, but also in schooling and in higher education, where similar pressures from policies driven by economic rationales are having an impact on professional roles and identities.

We begin by reviewing competing constructs of professionalism, and exploring the dynamics of professional participation that they convey. We pay particular attention to the concept of 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which has become 'iconic' (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004a) in recent investigations of professional learning. Two case studies of 'unbecoming tutors' are then narrated and used to critique these different dynamics. We draw on a Bourdieusian analysis which focuses on the interaction of tutors' habitus with changes in and to the field of FE (cf. Grenfell and James, 2004), and the 'cross-field' effects of different policy initiatives (Rawolle, 2005). We conclude by relating this analysis to the TLC project's development of a cultural theory of learning, and of principles of procedure for improving teaching and learning in FE. While the paper draws on the specific sector of FE, we would argue that its implications for our understanding of the dynamics of professional participation have wider relevance for education policy as a whole.

Constructs of professionalism

Early organizational studies made a distinction between task-oriented or functional models of professionalism, more person-oriented models inspired by the humanistic turn in psychology, and models which combined elements of both (Mayo, 1962). Evetts (2005) terms the first model 'occupational professionalism', focused on specialist expertise and conformity to external standards and principles. Originally viewed as a mitigation of bureaucratic hierarchy, this form of professionalism came to be criticised as an ideological vehicle for the vested interests of professionals. However, it has regained credibility in recent years through its association with client-centred occupational values. This model is focused on the identity of the practitioner herself, more emotional aspects of professionalism as a vocational calling, and particular ethical obligations attached to specific roles (Cribb, 2005). It is supposed to engender both competence and trust, but with minimal external rules or controls (Evetts, 2005). At the same time, however, the logic of the market and of corporatism combine to create 'organizational professionalism': an ideal type opposed to that of 'occupational professionalism'. This discourse acts as a form of managerial control which promises autonomy through accountability, but in fact promotes occupational change and the intervention of micro-level control over professional practice (Fournier, 1999).

Some authors explicitly seek to make visible the antagonistic struggles that inform the day-to-day construction of professionalism by practitioners, in the face of this audit culture (Avis, 2005). Ball's (2005) elegiac account of the fight for the 'soul of the teacher' is perhaps the most eloquent expression of a third model that we might term 'agonistic professionalism'. To the technicism of 'organizational' professionalism, Ball counterposes his own construct of 'authentic' professionalism. Crucially, it is not only founded on emotional relationships with self, students and

colleagues, but also on critical engagement in political dialogue and action, which fundamentally conflict with technicist régimes. In a similar vein, an Australian study of the intensification of teachers' work argued that the 'last straw' for many is not overwork, but the untenable conflicts of managerialist demands with their own deeply held professional ethos of caring for their students:

> …it was becoming apparent to many teachers that they could no longer continue to act on the basis of the professional ideology in which they trained. Teachers, generally, perceived this as a grave loss, both to themselves and their students. (Easthope & Easthope, 2000, p.56)

The schoolteachers interviewed by Stronach *et al.* (2002) echo these bereavements, as do the female FE teachers in studies by Robson (1998a) and Leathwood (2005).

As a profession, FE teachers are not only marginal to the hierarchy of professions, but also lack a well-bounded, unifying culture (Robson, 1998b; Viskovic & Robson, 2001). Moreover, issues of pedagogy and professional autonomy have been an 'absent presence' in this sector (Goodrham & Hodkinson, 2004). Official discourses about FE teachers, including discourses about their training and development, construct a particularly fixed notion of the idealised professionalism they should embrace: one which individualizes and reifies both teachers and learners as objects of technical intervention (Avis *et al.*, 2002). By contrast, a recurrent theme among FE researchers has been that professionalism entails fluid, creative responses to de-professionalization and bureaucratic re-professionalization. These responses often consist of strategic or subversive compliance to redeem the tutor-student relationship, based on educational rather than managerial values (Shain & Gleeson, 1999; Ashcroft & James, 1999; Bathmaker, 2001). This turns our attention to a neglected question: what assumptions about the <u>dynamics</u> of professional participation underpin these different perspectives?

The dynamics of professional participation

Beck (2002) points to Bernstein's Durkheimian distinction between 'outward' and 'profane' concepts of pedagogical identities, and those which are 'inward' and 'sacred'. Stronach *et al.* (2002) argue a similar dynamic, by characterising functional accounts as 'outside-in' stories, since they construct appropriately professional practice as performing to a set of externally determined principles and standards; and more affective, person-oriented accounts as 'inside-out' stories. According to this analysis, Ball's (2005) agonistic or 'authentic' professionalism could be seen as 'outside-inside-out'. Such a dynamic, however, focuses on how teachers relate to internal and/or external imperatives and obligations in their practice, rather than on forms of movement in professional participation itself. Here we are particularly interested in the dynamics of movement towards, within, or away from belonging to a profession and participating in its associated community of practice, and each of the constructs we have considered above suggests different metaphors for such movement.

Some functional accounts can appear predominantly static, since they refer to the meeting of externalized criteria. We suggest that they do nevertheless entail a dynamic, and that this could be expressed through a celestial metaphor of arrival, of 'Assumption' into the professional body (itself elevated above occupations of lower status). While this attainment may represent a form of stasis, it is held in tension by

the virtual (and infernal) possibility of a fall from grace threatened by 'unprofessional' breaches of the heteronomous ideal. 'Conduct unbecoming' here – in its military sense – contains a powerful threat of exclusion, not only for the original breach, but for its repercussions on the profession itself. This is reflected in the unfailing presence, across a wide range of professional codes of practice, of the imperative that one should not bring the profession into disrepute in any way (see, for example, General Teaching Council for England, 2004, p.4).

The dynamic of accounts which focus on the identity, rather than functions, of professionals might best be described through a metaphor of 'shuttling' between dualities. They focus on the movement between deprofessionalization and reprofessionalization (Ozga, 1988; Apple & Jungck, 1990; Whitty, 2000), between 'the taking and the making of professionalism' (Gleeson *et al.*, 2005), or between 'economies of performance' and 'ecologies of practice' (Stronach *et al.*, 2002). Here, the dynamics of professionalism are portrayed not as a state of arrival, but as an eternal wandering, beset by trials of the spirit and political sandstorms that threaten erasure of known features, and possibly extinction. In this discourse, 'conduct unbecoming' might signal the pessimistic interpretation of occupational professionalism: prioritising one's professional targets and position over and above devotion to one's students' needs.

A third metaphor, identified in discourses of FE, is one of fluidity. Professional identities may be seen as flexible and sometimes scattered (as for Stronach *et al.*, 2002), certainly as changing and dependent on context (Cribb, 2005). The struggle to escape the bars of the iron cage can be seen as finding ways to flow around or slip through them, by means of strategic compliance – 'going with the flow', but at the same time bending the rules that create this flow (Fuller & Unwin, 2002). 'Conduct unbecoming' here is a form of resistance – although the streetwise watchword must be that one should transgress discreetly, and the crime is in 'getting caught'.

As we noted earlier, the concept of 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) has recently become prominent as a key element in new theoretical perspectives that regard learning as a process of social participation rather than cognitive acquisition. The original concept focuses on the movement of entering a profession, and 'engages directly with the mutual constitution of identity and community' through the development of membership and belonging (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003, p.5). We continue by interrogating the potential that it may offer for analysing the dynamics of professional participation, before moving on to our case stories.

The dynamics of 'communities of practice'

The original notion of 'community of practice' was used for understanding the learning of newcomers to an occupation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Novices enter a community of practice – such as a teaching department in a school or college – initially through 'legitimate peripheral participation'. That is to say, the community welcomes them as belonging, but their activities in the practical work of the community are initially limited to tasks that do not overstretch or overburden them. Gradually, as their practice becomes more wide-ranging and expert, they eventually move to full participation and membership. Lave and Wenger (1991) advance two related definitions of a community of practice: on the one hand, it constitutes a set of social relations between persons, activities and the world; on the other, it is an

intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, and therefore for the existence of knowledgeable practitioners as full participants (Fuller *et al.*, 2005). It is this aspect of the community of practice – the notion that it provides a necessary condition for the status and practice of experienced professionals – in which we are interested.

As researchers of workplace learning have developed the conceptual framework of communities of practice, they have argued for the extension of its dynamics in three ways. First, there is a need to account for evidence that communities of practice are difficult to enter or even excluding for newcomers who do not 'fit in' with the strongly established culture and ways of being (Colley *et al.*, 2003; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004b; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005).

Second, if a community of practice is a set of relations, then boundary issues are important to explore. Who has the power to set boundaries on a community of practice? What possibilities do learners (or experienced members) have for crossing into other, overlapping or tangential communities of practice (Fuller *et al.*, 2005)?

Third, entrants to a community of practice may be far from tabula rasa novices, but bring with them an existing habitus: previous biographies, knowledges, practices and values, all shared with others elsewhere. These may impact (sometimes negatively) on the dynamics of the community of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004b).

All of these analyses continue to focus on movement into a community of practice, or initial exclusion barring entry to it, despite the fact that Wenger (1998) indicates the possibility of multiple trajectories of participation, including 'outbound' and well as 'inbound' movements. Indeed, criticisms of inherently benign assumptions about communities of practice (Eraut, 2002) highlight the fact that it is hard to imagine what 'conduct unbecoming' – i.e. movement from full participation to marginalization or exclusion – might look like. Before we narrate the 'conduct unbecoming' of two of the FE teachers who participated in TLC, we first present a brief account of the project and its methodology.

An outline of the TLC project and methods

'Transforming learning cultures in Further Education' was a four-year longitudinal study ending in 2005. It is the only large-scale, independent research project to examine teaching and learning in FE colleges in England. We deliberately adopted a cultural perspective, because we believed teaching and learning, and the relationships between them, to be inherently complex and relational, rather than simple. Thus, our working assumption, now confirmed through data collection and analysis, was that many dimensions would contribute to learning and have to be examined in relation to each other: the personal dispositions and social positions of tutors and students; the conditions of each learning site, course and college; national policies; global contexts; and deep-rooted social structures.

More detail on the project methodology can be found elsewhere (Hodkinson & James, 2003; Hodkinson *et al.*, 2005a), but we outline some key aspects here so that the reader can make sense of how our case studies were constructed. In order to examine the relationships between these dimensions, each of which is complex in its own right, we focussed on 17 diverse learning sites, negotiated with four partner colleges. One teacher in each site worked with us as a 'participating tutor'. The project team itself comprised both HE- and FE-based part-time researchers. Data were collected over a three year period, through: repeated semi-structured interviews with a sample of students and with the tutors; interviews with relevant managers;

regular site observations and tutor shadowing; repeat questionnaires to all students in each site; and journal kept by participating tutors.

The analysis was conducted in a series of narrative stages: first to construct an in-depth account of each learning site; then to identify and explore a series of cross-site themes that deepened our understanding of particular sites and their cultures; and finally to immerse ourselves heuristically (Moustakas, 1990) in the data from the tutors' interviews and journal extracts, to construct accounts of their changing identities and biographies.

We have selected data from two of the tutors to present in detail in this paper, although our analysis is also informed by the experiences of other participants. (Pseudonyms are used here to maintain the anonymity of the tutors.) We have deliberately chosen teachers of general education subjects rather than vocational programmes. While many of the TLC tutors entered teaching in a more gradual fashion through their previous occupations, these two made a clear commitment to becoming teachers when they first entered FE. This allows us to focus more sharply on the dynamics of their professional participation <u>as teachers</u>. Although Avis (in press) has claimed that a focus on individual case studies and learning cultures in the TLC's work weakens our ability to engage in a radical critique of FE systems and policies, we contend here that studies of 'the dynamics of education life and micro-political activities' (Angus, 2004, p.23) can provide a powerful basis for such a critique.

Florence Denning

Florence Denning taught languages, with AS/A2 Level[1] French as her main subject, in an FE college in a large provincial city. She had an exceptionally long connection with the college, having studied A Levels, done her teacher training placement, and subsequently taught there for 20 years. Within a period of less than two years during the TLC project, however, the college not only underwent restructuring and changes in management personnel, but encountered a severe financial crisis. 70 teaching posts had to be cut, and Florence – a deeply committed teacher – decided to take voluntary redundancy. How did this come to happen?

When we first interviewed Florence, she expressed two central and interlinked stories about her own identity. She was a person with strong and radical political beliefs, who had spent much of her life as an activist, both inside and outside the college. At the same time, she was passionate about teaching, and committed a great deal of time and energy to her work and to her students. Both these strands of identity shaped her practice as a professional.

Florence had been a political activist around the socialist, feminist and anti-racist movements from her early teenage years. Her first professional experiences were teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Africa and to Asian women in England. Her commitment to the emancipatory ethos and pedagogy prevalent in this field was reinforced by her 'host teacher' (who taught EFL) in the college work placements of the PGCE course she subsequently took. Later, as an FE teacher, Florence was active in the local trade union, and fought against worsened employment conditions for teaching staff after colleges' incorporation in 1992. Although resistance to new contracts eventually collapsed, Florence and a handful of

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[1] 'AS' and 'A2' refer, respectively, to the first and second part of traditional academic qualifications at Level 3, designed to prepare students for entry to higher education, and often referred to as 'the gold standard' of post-16 qualifications.

other tutors at that college insisted on remaining on 'the Silver Book' (i.e. former national terms and conditions). This isolated her, with feelings of 'bad blood' among colleagues. By the time she was studying for an MA in Education 10 years later, radical movements had also ebbed in society at large. Studying the political context of lifelong learning, she realised that this had contributed to her personal and professional sense of isolation. By now she also had a small child, and was concerned to ensure she devoted adequate time to her role as a mother.

This situation combined with the marginalization of her pedagogical practice within the college. Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) formed part of the general academic programme on which the college prided itself. However, it occupied a backwater within this provision. Florence and her team had no direct line manager, student numbers were small, and an OFSTED inspection had chosen not to include the provision in its remit. Moreover, MFL are marginal subjects within the entire UK education system. They are no longer a required element of the National Curriculum for GCSE (terminal public examination courses) in schools, less than 11% of young people continued to study MFL post-16 even when they were compulsory in school, and their numbers have fallen further over the last 5 years (CILT, 2005). The economic dominance of the US has made English the global language of business. In addition, British culture is particularly insular, generating indifference to the acquisition of foreign languages.

This marginal position in the college was an ambiguous one for Florence. Although it brought frustrations, it also offered a form of protection. She talked about being in a fragmented group of teachers who formed 'a kind of plankton', 'below the radar'[2]. Out of the gaze of management, the margins offered a space in which she enjoyed relative autonomy to teach according to her own professional principles, and to undertake engaged pastoral work with students. This sense of protection was strengthened by her long-standing and excellent reputation as a teacher among college managers.

Florence's emancipatory pedagogy also isolated her from the professional practices of her colleagues. Ever since teaching EFL, she had been committed to teaching in the 'target language' – conducting lessons as much as possible in the language being learned – as a <u>socially inclusive</u> strategy. It provided disadvantaged students with experience of immersion in French that they could not gain on family holidays or exchanges. Such methods are, however, extremely labour-intensive for the tutor. Each section of the lesson must be carefully staged for students to follow. Group interaction and other aspects of the learning culture must be carefully managed to create a supportive context for students to take the risk of speaking a foreign language without fear of humiliation. While target language teaching has gone in and out of popularity with policy-makers, and despite Florence's efforts to debate this approach in the languages team, her colleagues never adopted it. This caused particular frictions with one tutor who co-taught some of her groups.

At the end of Florence's first year with the TLC project, her college was plunged into a deep financial crisis. Changes to the methods of auditing college activity resulted in a huge funding shortage, and substantial cuts in staffing. This followed swiftly after major changes in the college's senior and middle management, and new college policies to maximize class sizes, increase tutors' total contact hours,

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[2] This sense of being 'below the radar' figured in several of the learning sites at different times, and it speaks not only of the scale of operations but also of the impossibility of the sheer diversity of practices and definitions of 'learning work' in FE colleges being represented with validity in quality, audit and assessment regimes.

and cut courses that did not 'pay for themselves'. Teaching hours for A Level French were to be cut by a third, and it was proposed that courses might only be offered for 3 hours per week as an evening course. Florence felt this would make it impossible to teach in the target language, or to offer her students the pastoral support they needed. Moreover, to be unable to practice a pedagogy which cohered with her sense of social justice posed a threat to her personal and professional identity. She also felt tired of waging constant battles. Consequently, she chose to take an opportunity of voluntary severance of her contract and quit teaching in FE. The decision was extremely painful – in both research interviews where she discussed it, including one six months later, she broke down in tears. The college no longer advertises an A2 French course, and AS French is offered only as an evening class, not within the full-time academic programme.

Florence took up part-time work in an adult education institution, where she hoped to find a more amenable environment. However, that too was in the throes of financial crisis thanks to changes in government funding policies, and it closed some time later. By the end of the project, she was combining a small amount of school supply teaching with casual employment at the local university, and her role outside employment as a mother. She eventually gained more teaching at this and another university, although her partner was concerned that she was now 'working twice as hard for half the money'.

Ruth Merchant

Another of our participating tutors, Ruth Merchant, also works in a large FE college in a different provincial city. Her subject is English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The period of her association with the project has shown us a series of shifts in professional identity and position, a changing relationship to the college, and how all these things are strongly framed by a shifting political context.

When we first met Ruth in 2001, she had recently been promoted to leading part of the college's ESOL provision, having already worked in the field for some eight years. Together with changes to the ESOL and Basic Skills curriculum, changes in government policy on immigration, refugees and asylum seekers produced a series of new demands, so Ruth found herself spending more time assisting individual students in their struggles with bureaucratic and legal structures. This confirmed her view that there were contradictions and injustices in such structures, and she experienced a rapidly rising level of stress as the texture of her work changed.

This became amplified in the following academic year, exacerbated by a merging of two previously separate parts of the college, and resulting conflict between two ESOL teams, each deeply committed to different pedagogical approaches. Ruth found herself in the role of mediator in hostilities which sometimes became sharply personal. She declared she was 'stressed, worried, fed up…frustrated, angry, dissatisfied', and was seriously considering leaving her job. She also said that the stress of her job was having an adverse effect on her health. However, with time, and having shared her frustrations with colleagues (especially within the local TLC project meetings), Ruth came to the view that a central problem was that she was trying to carry out a full-time job within a half-time post, and that she had not been sufficiently assertive in getting this situation noticed by colleagues and her line manager. With time, this view superseded her earlier view that she was somehow personally incapable of doing the whole of her job.

Participation in the TLC project appeared to have been a key factor in Ruth finding a means to change her relationship to her work. The project had helped her to 'look at things in a different light' and she added that as she thought about what to write in her reflexive journal, the process 'changed my thought processes about my own work…and that's partly to do with being viewed as a professional…[that is,] now there's this government-sponsored project [TLC] interested in what I say'. In particular, she found that the project 'space' helped her to decide what problems could or could not be tackled, and she found the opportunities to 'unload' quite cathartic.

Subsequently, Ruth took her experiences and reflection upon them to a wider audience, addressing a national conference of ESOL managers. She had also 'settled' into a much more confident sense of professional self-worth and autonomy, and whilst she had always relished team work, she appeared more fully integrated with the immediate college structures than when we first came to know her. She was more secure and certain of her own professional role and its purposes, and was more overtly politicized. However, we would also argue that she had become less dependent on the immediate community of practice in the college for a professional identity. Furthermore, it is too simplistic to see the colleagues around her as if they simply represent an established set of practices within which she is more or less central or peripheral. The 'community of practice' had for a time provided Ruth with an unrealistic set of demands. It was her capacity to question these arrangements that triggered an improvement in her professional situation.

At one stage Ruth told us about a turning point or pivotal moment in her life. A chance remark from an influential colleague had worried her greatly – the colleague had suggested that there were two kinds of ESOL teachers. The first became personally involved with the students, whilst the second was 'more professional', keeping a distance and concentrating on doing a very good job. For a time, this remark confirmed for Ruth that she was not a true professional. However (and partly through being required by the TLC project to reflect on the nature of high quality learning in different parts of the college), she ended up completely rejecting the colleague's view. For Ruth, high quality learning experiences are those that make a real and positive impact on the lives of her students, and furthermore, this matters to her far more than examination results or student retention. Ruth's own shifting notions of professionalism – her professional participation – depended on external viewpoints, i.e. beyond the immediate reference group, drawing on influences from a wider 'community of practice' that, in the conventionally isolated pockets of a college of FE, are not normally available. In terms of professional learning, this is perhaps a reminder of the power and original richness of the idea of 'double loop learning' and its associated, damning critique of technical rationalism (e.g. Schön, 1983).

Ruth had discovered her own kind of 'distance' – not from her students, but from the micro- (and to some extent, macro-) politics of the college, so that these things actually defined her less than they once did. She avoided becoming involved in a bitter dispute about terms and conditions that was occupying the energies of many of her colleagues, instead putting her energies into challenging the categorizations and re-categorizations applied to the asylum-seekers and refugees amongst her students. The introduction of new 'eligibility rules' had caused some students to be taken off courses they had already begun, which led to distress for both students and staff. Ruth was pivotal in keeping in touch with these individuals and trying to protect them and their tutors from stress, until a way could be found of offering at least some of them provision. She felt that the difficulties faced had helped to produce a stronger staff team. Ruth's 'distance' included operating by her own values, with reference to

her responsibility as a fellow human being, rather than following a job specification or operationalising the government's new rules as they applied to the college's work. Her own sense of professionalism, then, transcends the immediate, ostensible conditions. This may also be understood as a variant of 'underground working', insofar as it survives by 'going underground' (see James & Diment, 2003).

A further manifestation of 'distance' is Ruth's ESOL training work and her involvement in 'Reflect ESOL'[3]. This, she claims, is 'a lot more exciting than my job at college'. She has begun speaking at conferences and running events for other ESOL teachers. This gives her a place in which to develop and promote her view of the core purposes of working with the particular client group. She is exploring whether it could become part of the work of the college, though is aware that it does not conform easily to conventional targets.

As our direct contact with the ESOL learning site was drawing to a close, we noted a series of changes in group size, staffing and organization, all of which reflected a tightened financial situation. We also learnt that there was a major funding deficit in the faculty that now housed ESOL work, and that this put all such work in the college into jeopardy. However, whilst she is concerned and does what she can to fight this situation, Ruth is not simply crushed by it, as she may once have been.

Ruth's story implies that we should beware of the potential for (a) unidirectionality and (b) oversimplicity, in the application of the notion of a 'community of practice' to professional existence. Put crudely, the segment we see of Ruth's career as a teacher in FE, whilst only a relatively short period, suggests something more dynamic and variable. It was external reference points and critical spaces (the TLC project, the Reflect ESOL movement) that consolidated Ruth's new security, confidence and sense of professional identity. Such external reference points and critical spaces are not always in harmony with the immediate community of practice.

Conduct unbecoming – or conscientious objection?

In many respects, these stories are quite different. Ruth is a more recent entrant to FE teaching, and her sense of professional identity over time certainly reflects some 'shuttling' between confidence and self-doubt, between striving for legitimacy as an FE teacher, and seeing her scope for action within that sector dependent upon going well beyond its formal bounds. She has chosen, for the time being at least, a more marginal space in which to operate with 'a foot in both camps'. Florence, on the other hand, has been an established and respected teacher in FE throughout her working life, but has gradually seen her space for ethical practice narrowed and then closed down, to the extent that she felt her only course of action was to remove herself from the sector. Her difficulties are compounded by the fact that other spaces of

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[3] *Reflect ESOL* is based on principles derived from the work of Paolo Freire. Perhaps the most central of these is that no educational action is neutral – it is either oppressive or liberatory. *Reflect ESOL* advocates an approach to literacy that refuses narrower, technicist notions of skills and purpose. For a concise introduction, see both http://www.nrdc.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=568 and http://www.nrdc.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=569

emancipatory practice that she tried to inhabit – such as adult education – were also being closed down at the same time.

However, their stories also share significant similarities. Both women see their students – perhaps more so than some fellow teachers – as forming part of the communities with which they identify. They are not unique in this respect within the TLC project (see, for example, Colley, 2006), but they stand out from others' findings about the common exclusion of students from FE teachers' sense of community (Robson, 1998a; Avis *et al.*, 2002). Both resist and refuse roles and identities imposed officially within the sector, and draw on moral and political beliefs, learning cultures and practices located elsewhere (in the case of Ruth) or in other times (for Florence) as a basis for their future actions. Their learning resonates with what Fenwick (2001) terms 'important learning': critical awareness of their workplace context and understanding of their own engagement in the production of knowledge that 'counts' within different communities. How adequate, then, are the implicit dynamics of dominant constructs of professionalism, which we considered earlier, for explaining this evidence?

Superficially, Florence's case might seem to support the functional account, with its dynamics of arrival held in tension by the threat of fall due to unprofessional behaviour. Indeed, in her narrative, college-wide acknowledgement of her impeccable professional expertise was crucial not only to the maintenance of her socially inclusive practice of target language teaching, but also to her stance of resistance to managerial control. However, for both her and Ruth, the dynamics of professional participation have been transformed radically by policy and institutional changes. In Florence's case, one result is the replacement of an entire layer of managers who knew and respected her 'track record'. These changes threaten these teachers' own construction of ethical professional practice, and in particular, the solidarity expressed through that practice with less advantaged students. Their perception in these circumstances is that compliance with accountability targets, focused on cost-effectiveness and narrow versions of retention and achievement, would demand <u>unprofessional</u> behaviour and bring their professional practice into disrepute. Their refusal to engage in this 'conduct unbecoming' could rather be seen as a form of <u>conscientious objection</u>, which asserts their independent ethical agency above policy-driven and institutional constructions of their role agency (Cribb, 2005). This repositions them – both actively and passively – as heading in an outward direction in relation to the field of FE.

Academic accounts of professional being and vocation, and of the professional 'agonistes', with their dynamics of shuttling between the sacred and profane, offer a similarly poor illumination of these narratives. Such accounts suggest that the constant threat of 'conduct unbecoming' is that professionals will deprioritise student needs in order to meet metric targets. However, in the cases of Florence and Ruth, an 'unbecoming' results from their commitment to students' needs, interpreted in holistic breadth, and their resistance to other priorities. They were active contributors to the construction of their professional dynamic, which can be seen not only as passive exclusions, but also as agentic exits.

Perhaps closest to these experiences are those accounts of professional dynamics which emphasise their fluidity; yet we cannot say, especially in the case of Florence, that optimistic readings of such fluidity are entirely adequate. For those positioned in the professional hierarchy with less cultural and social capital (as here, in FE, in MFL or in ESOL), room for manoeuvre is greatly restricted. This has

implications for the possibilities of resistance available to professionals with lower status, such as FE teachers.

Gender also appears to be an issue in this regard (although a detailed focus on this would require another paper). Among tutors in our project moving outwards or leaving FE, women felt their position became untenable because they could no longer maintain a particular pedagogical relationship with their students, which in turn related closely to their beliefs about the social purpose of education, and their own sense of identity. By contrast, there was a tendency for male tutors to account for their departure (or wish for departure) in more instrumental terms of perceived disjuncture between increasingly restricted or irrelevant practices, and what they perceived to be the authentic demands of employment related to their subject.

Not all fluidity or flexibility in response to fixity, then, is inherently empowering, particularly when a discourse of flexibility is central to the fixed ideal of the 'good lecturer' within the new managerialist régimes. Leathwood (2005) interprets different possibilities in her study of women working in FE: identities may be 'fluid, shifting and constructed through difference and exclusions' (p.391), as they are continually mediated by other identities, and by inequalities of gender, class and racialization. Responses to the fixity of audit may be to bend the rules, but may also include bending before them – fluid identities may be forced to run in structured channels.

Numerous feminist studies have shown how this results in self-work that impacts upon women professionals' identities in highly complex and contradictory ways, through reactions of both appropriation and resistance (Fenwick, 1998, 2002). Audit and managerialism 'are practices written on bodies', and as such are inextricably linked to gender differences (Hey & Bradford, 2004, p.693). Women teachers have to negotiate conflicting images of authenticity/autonomy (which themselves are often masculinised) and middle-class, feminised ideals of the caring professional as the 'good mother' (Shain, 2000; Reay, 2001; Walkerdine, 2003). Committed to 'making a difference', they are often all too aware of their own inability to assimilate fully into the dominant communities and practices of educational institutions, and the difficulties of combating exclusion from a position of (at least partial) exclusion themselves (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Wyn *et al.*, 2000). Here too, we see the difficulty of treading a fine line between 'conduct unbecoming' and 'conscientious objection', between institutional and individual ethics and agency, compounded by the effects of gendered (and classed and racialized) social structures.

While the most dynamic existing model of professional participation we have identified is that of communities of practice and situated learning, even with later extensions of this theory reviewed above, it is unable to offer an adequate model for the unbecomings we consider here. These present evidence not of newcomers, but of established practitioners being marginalized or excluded; of boundaries that shift and impose their own disciplinary re-positioning of practitioners within or beyond different fields; and of tutors failing, despite best efforts driven by their own dispositions and beliefs, to make an impact on the practice of other professionals. Florence's situation in particular can be read as the <u>absence</u> of anything resembling a 'community of practice' in recent years, perhaps signalling a more widespread issue in the fragmented FE sector (Viskovic & Roberts, 2001). Given these conditions, it is hard to see how the 'community of practice' can represent the basis of professional knowledge and the <u>sine qua non</u> for knowledgeable practitioners. How, then, might we re-frame the dynamics of professional participation more adequately? We

conclude by addressing these questions through reference to Bourdieu's theorization of 'field', and the cultural theory of learning that the TLC project has developed.

Towards a more dynamic notion of professional participation

We noted early in this paper that the professionalism of FE teachers faces a triple jeopardy: teaching per se is of low status in the hierarchy of professions; FE is of low status in the hierarchy of education sectors; and many FE teachers are also positioned marginally by their 'accidental' entry into the profession, and continued identification with their former occupations. This is problematic for current policy attempts to improve teaching and learning in FE that focus on a particular construct of teacher professionalism, driven by qualifications and standards, as the prime determinant of learning. Drawing on Bernstein, Beck and Young (2005) point to the domination of professional qualifications in the 'generic mode', in which trainability and the silencing of critical awareness are the central pedagogical objectives (we would include the FENTO model here). While such policies assume a functional approach and the dynamics of professional 'arrival', our data and that of other research we have reviewed demonstrate that professional participation is differently positioned and fought for depending on the context and the actors, and that different dynamics arise according to the playing-out of these processes. It is a core finding of the TLC project that while the tutor undoubtedly plays an important role in the construction of the learning culture, their influence is by no means paramount. It is necessary also to look at their habitus and agency in relation to the field(s) in which they are positioned.

The elaboration of a cultural theory of learning by the TLC project (Hodkinson *et al.*, forthcoming) identifies and addresses two key weaknesses in theories of situated learning and communities of practice: first, that they maintain dualisms (mind-body, individual-social, agency-structure) which obstruct a more holistic understanding of learning and participation; and second, that they fail to account for the operation of practices at different scales – individual, interpersonal, institutional, global, and structural – on teaching and learning. While learning sites (such as AS/A2 French or ESOL programmes) tend to have clear boundaries, the factors which influence the learning culture of each site do not.

These factors also operate at a range of different scales, at micro-, meso- and macro-levels. As we have seen, Ruth's increasingly tangential participation in FE teaching – still attached to it, but heading in an outward direction – was dynamically affected by her individual dispositions; her relations with students and other tutors; the positioning of ESOL programmes within and across the college; changing UK government regulations for immigrants and the funding of their educational opportunities; social structures of class and race; and global factors that have created mass migration to the advanced capitalist countries. Similarly, Florence's outward trajectory was influenced by her personal/political biography; her colleagues' rejection of her teaching methods; the history of the college and conflicts within it; government policies to reinforce demands for cost-effectiveness of individual courses and to withdraw languages as a compulsory part of the post-14 National Curriculum; the socially and economically disadvantaged nature of FE's student cohort; the economic instrumentalism of FE; the insularity of British culture; and the dominance of English as the international language in a context of US dominance of the world economy.

Field theory in general, and Bourdieu's concept of field in particular, has provided us with tools for thinking about these issues of scale in a relational way that

focuses not on individual objects/categories or their properties, but on the dynamic distribution of position and power (Hodkinson *et al.*, forthcoming). For Bourdieu (1998), this implies tension and struggle in a 'game' with tacit rules about which social practices may or may not be deployed. All players participate and, in doing so, invest in the game. But they may not see beyond the apparent social practices of the field to discern its underlying function of maintaining and reproducing power relations. As Angus (2004) notes, even efforts at resistance may result, unintentionally, in compliance with the 'reshaping and re-norming' of education by policies associated with globalization. Insofar as Ruth and Florence have achieved a deeper understanding of changes in/to the field of FE, and of other overlapping fields (e.g. education in general, national economic policies, migration), and of the over-arching, global field of power (Bourdieu, 1989), they both position themselves and become positioned differently. Florence refuses to play the game any longer, while Ruth operates more at the side-lines. These are active forms of resistance that illuminate possibilities of 'authentic professionalism' (Ball, 2005) and education as a site of struggle (Avis, 2005), but also indicate that such practices may be as much about relocating the struggle for authentic practice elsewhere.

These moves, however, are not simply a question of agency alone. Transformations in teaching and learning are directly related to the positioning of learning cultures in and by the field, as a consequence of changes at different levels in *and* to the field (Hodkinson *et al.*, forthcoming; cf. Grenfell & James, 2004). Often, changes at one level represent the unintended consequences of changes at a different level and/or in an overlapping field. These may be particularly sharp, since the field of (further) education policy suffers reduced autonomy in relation to other, more powerful fields (Lingard *et al.*, 2005). For example, we see here the virtual eradication of the offer of A Level French for FE students due to policy changes affecting both the school curriculum and funding for colleges, or the restriction of access to ESOL courses due to political pressures on government to minimize immigration and change regulations for refugees and asylum-seekers. The findings of the TLC project as a whole suggest that numerous such policies are damaging teaching and learning across the FE sector (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2005b).

Finally, we would argue that there is an urgent and practical dimension to the understanding of the dynamics of professional existence and survival within FE, with crucial implications for policy in the sector. Inadequate models of professional trajectories support inadequate conceptions of teaching, learning, and the issues pertaining to their improvement. In attempting to engage with those entrenched in current modernising agendas, and to contribute to the pragmatic goals of the TLRP, the TLC project's response is that a focus on principles of procedure (following Stenhouse, 1977) would be preferable to the existing micro-management of prescribed outcomes (Hodkinson, 2005). Given the project's findings that key drivers for improving teaching and learning are student agency, tutor professionality, improved pedagogy, and enhancing learning cultures, a number of the principles of procedure we propose are concerned with the conditions of professional participation:

- reinstating the professional autonomy of teachers
- creating time and space for them to reflect individually and collectively on their work and develop their professionality
- rewarding expert judgement-making and the positive management of learning cultures
- and valuing diverse forms of professional practice arising from differences in tutor dispositions and working contexts.

These have implications at various levels for national, regional, and local policies: the funding of colleges, stability in the sector, inspection regimes, and college management priorities.

If such principles were to be realized in action, which would indeed require a willingness to transform the currently dominant culture of FE, there might at least be less chance that teachers like Ruth and Florence will be lost to the sector; and that their functional expertise, as well as their vocational commitment and their political engagement, could be directed more fully to the improvement of teaching, learning and the lifechances of their students. Both 'conduct unbecoming' and 'conscientious objection' might then be far more distant possibilities on teachers' horizons for action.

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