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Improving Teaching and Learning in Further Education: Towards a Genealogy

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Introduction

Lifelong learning is now central to Europe's employment strategy and policies for social inclusion. One of six 'key messages' in the European Commission's *Communication on lifelong learning* (EC, 2001) is the need for 'innovative pedagogy', yet it has little to say about new approaches to teaching and learning. This has been a particular problem for post-school education in the last 25 years, as young people across Europe have disengaged from further education (FE) in large numbers (Evans and Niemeyer, 2004). There is a need for pedagogies which are effective both in equipping young people for worthwhile employment and in developing them as lifelong learners. Yet, in comparison with compulsory schooling and higher education, there is little research on further education, and even less on its pedagogical theories and practices.

In the UK, there has been a recent spate of interest in improving teaching and learning in FE that almost borders on a moral panic. Following decades of reforms to FE provision, during which time its pedagogy was largely taken as a given, there is today greater recognition across a wide spectrum of opinion that it is the improvement of pedagogy that drives – or should do – the quality of vocational education and training (VET), not the provision itself. This dawning of awareness is not, however, without its problems: not least because policy-makers know little about FE practice on the ground and, as a consequence, remain wedded to a restricted discourse of audit, inspection and market-driven reform. Although the report from the Tomlinson Committee of Enquiry into 14-19 Education (2005) perceived the rationalisation of provision as predominantly one of curriculum and qualification reform, it made no reference to changing cultures of teaching and learning which, we will argue, are key drivers for VET reform. Nonetheless, the Tomlinson Report was rejected by the government in their recent White Paper on 14-19 Education and Skills (DfES, 2005).

In this paper, we begin by identifying two dominant and competing paradigms of pedagogy in FE. After outlining our research project on transforming learning cultures in FE and its methodology, we review the transformation of teaching and learning in FE over the last 50 years. This genealogical review focuses on changing discourses about improving teaching and learning in the sector, and analyses in detail the shifting balance and tensions between the two dominant paradigms at one key moment when pedagogy itself took centre-stage in these debates. Although this paper draws upon case studies of English FE, it offers a more generalisable theoretical approach and research agenda relevant in different European contexts. It demonstrates the significance of specific traditions of vocational education and training, and their assumptions about pedagogy, to the endeavour of improving teaching and learning for the future. It also suggests that, whatever the national context, a cultural

perspective on learning may offer a deeper understanding of what we already do, and how it might be transformed for the better. We will return to explore this broader applicability in our conclusions.

Dominant pedagogies in English FE

Two dominant pedagogical paradigms have defined FE in England: one cognitivist, one constructionist. The first concentrates on learning in vocational education and training (VET) as an induction model of skill socialisation and acquisition favoured by traditional educationists. This discourse operates as a restricted code (Bernstein, 1990), bound up in a 'banking' model of learning (Freire, 1971) where the goal is to prepare trainees 'ready-made' for the workplace. This is the 'doxa' of FE pedagogy – the taken-for-granted relations of order that link the real world and the thought world, and so must be adhered to (Bourdieu, 1986: 471). Official accounts – especially in prescriptive national training standards, and audit/inspection regimes – promote this view, and emphasise technicist aspects of teaching.

The second has fed on a more liberal ideology of emancipatory student-centred learning, through which practitioners have oriented to FE's role in absorbing successive cohorts of prevocational and socially excluded young people, anticipating their eventual entry into the labour market. This elaborated code of learning (Bernstein, 1990) has long co-existed alongside the 'banking' model, suggesting that there may not be so many differences between them. However, in practice these profane and sacred versions (Bernstein, 1971) are not readily reconciled – and attempts to do so in FE have revealed the tensions between them. This paper tells the story of the struggle between these two paradigms, and why we need to look beyond each in order to establish more sustainable learning cultures in the sector.

Despite their differences, both dominant paradigms are united in their treatment of learning as an *acquisitional* process, overlooking its social and cultural nature. A different view of learning – as a process of *social participation* – has been taken in the project *Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education* (TLC), and we continue with a brief outline of our project and its methodology.

An outline of the TLC project and methods

The TLC project began in 2001 and ends in 2005. It sits within the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) *Teaching and Learning Research Programme* (TLRP). Whilst a subsequent phase of the TLRP has funded further projects in the area of post-compulsory education, the TLC project remains unique for being the only substantial independent research project to examine learning and teaching in further education colleges in England. The aims of the project may be succinctly expressed as to: (a) deepen understanding of the complexities of learning; (b) identify, implement and evaluate strategies for the improvement of learning opportunities; (c) set in place an enhanced and lasting capacity among practitioners for enquiry into FE practice.

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. This treats learning as a situated process of social participation rather than cognitive acquisition (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). While such a perspective has now been well-explored in workplace and other less formal contexts, ours is the first major project to investigate institutional education contexts in this way. Thus, our working assumption, now confirmed through data collection and analysis (Hodkinson et al, 2004), was that all of the following dimensions would contribute to learning, and have to be examined in relation to each other:

- The positions, dispositions and actions of the students
- The positions, dispositions and actions of the tutors
- The location and resources of the site, which are not neutral, but enable some approaches and attitudes, and constrain or prevent others
- The syllabus or course specification, the assessment and qualification specifications and requirements
- The time tutors and students spend together, their interrelationships, and the range of other learning sites students are engaged with
- Issues of college management and procedures, together with funding and inspection body procedures and regulations, and government policy
- Wider vocational and academic cultures, of which any course or site is part
- Wider social and cultural values and practices, for example around issues of social class, gender and ethnicity, the nature of employment opportunities, social and family life, and the perceived status of FE as a sector.

In order to examine the relationships between these dimensions, each of which is complex in its own right, we focussed initially on 16 learning sites, divided between four partner FE colleges¹. The sites were selected through negotiation with the colleges, to illustrate some of the great diversity of FE learning, whilst, of course, not claiming to be representative of it. Changes since the project commenced extended the list to 19 sites in total (see Hodgkinson and James, 2003). One tutor in each site worked with us as part of the research team, as a 'participating tutor'. In addition, the team was made up of four college-based research fellows, five university-based research fellows and five Directors (a total of 30 people). Data were collected over a three year period, in a variety of ways: repeated semi-structured interviews with a sample of students and with the tutors; regular site observations and tutor shadowing; a repeated questionnaire survey of all students in each site; and diaries or log books kept by each participating tutor. We also interviewed college managers, as and when relevant.

Understanding transformation through radical doubt

As we noted above, a central aim of our research was to investigate how learning cultures might be transformed in ways that improve teaching and learning, and much of the later work of the project has been devoted to analysing the impact of different interventions on the cultures of individual learning sites (James, 2005). However, as we conducted this work, it became apparent that such local and immediate transformations could not be interpreted without analysing their relationship to the overall trajectory of FE itself, both in the wider field of education, and in the global 'field of power' (Bourdieu, 1989a).

The theoretical framework that we have used to guide our analysis offers us powerful reasons for standing back from particular sites to view the long-term transformation of FE as a whole. From Bourdieu, through to the work of Foucault and Larrain, we have taken a stance of 'radical doubt' (Bourdieu, 1992) as a way of looking beyond taken-for-granted ways of acting, thinking, and being, to ask challenging questions about the changing social relations and working knowledge that have underpinned FE. The concept of ideology (Larrain, 1979)

¹ We chose the term 'learning site' for two principal reasons. Firstly, our knowledge of the English Further Education sector gave us reason to avoid using terms like 'classroom', 'lesson' or 'course' as if they would apply to a cross-section of the diverse work of the sector. Secondly, we wished to avoid any assumption that the spatial and temporal organisation of college provision would always equate with the 'where' of learning. A simple illustration of this might be where a student attends several scheduled classes each week, but still does most of their learning at home.

helps us to understand how these social relations have been obscured, as the appearance of pedagogy refracts relations of power through the legitimating prism of ‘common sense’. This analysis is central to understanding change in FE, since change requires control, and hegemonic (rather than forcible) control is achieved through ideologies constructed within the sector itself. This poses two questions: to what extent are relations of power refracted so that they take the form of apparently benevolent ideas about improving teaching and learning? And can practices of improving teaching and learning also be understood as constructing unequal relations of power in FE?

There are a number of well-researched historical studies (e.g. Avis et al, 1996, Ainley & Bailey, 1997, Green and Lucas, 1999, Hyland and Merrill, 2003, Stanton & Bailey, and others) which have charted structural, political and institutional changes in English FE, from its earliest origins in the craft guilds, ‘whisky money’² and the mechanics institutes, through to industrial, professional and local education authority (LEA) control and, more recently, to the rise of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and (in 1992) incorporation (the removal of FE colleges from LEAs and their reconstitution as marketised businesses). Such histories are essential to understanding the state – and status – of FE in England today, and we will draw upon them. However, rarely do such histories openly engage with issues of learning theory and pedagogy. Insofar as they do, they tend to assume that pedagogy is a non-historical ‘universal’ science of teaching separated from policy, and then focus on moments when they encounter each other.

Curzon (1997) is a good example of this: “Problems related to difficulties in retrieving and reinstating learned information are fundamentally the same for students in Bolton, Berlin or Beijing.” Curzon then recognises the effect of the “cultural and social overlay” on this – curiously citing Margaret Mead in support of this construction. Learning *process* is separated from a reductionist notion of learning *culture*. Armitage et al (1999) set up a similar epistemological structure through their use of idealism. In their view, teachers should adopt one of three main value-systems that will give them a fundamental pedagogy, which they can apply to differing social and policy contexts. Exceptions to this separation of learning from society are the few texts that interpret pedagogy as the mediation of political pressures on FE e.g. Ainley & Bailey, (1990). The FEU (1992) is an interesting, if less knowing, example as they traced how the pedagogy of ‘student centred learning’ was originally developed for a “dysfunctional” group in a radical context. They show how, when the MSC inherited responsibility for this “dysfunctional” group, it set about denaturing the pedagogy so that it was retained in form, but not in content. The focus of this paper provides a more nuanced approach, turning a radical and reflexive doubt upon a key research question for the TLC project and for the TLRP: how can teaching and learning be improved in FE?

In order to deconstruct this question, we do not propose to replicate these existing histories. Rather, we wish to work towards constructing a genealogy (Foucault, 1991) of improving teaching and learning in FE, tracing its initial emergence as a ‘problem’, through a series of key moments in policy discourse and practice at which its meaning has been contested and transformed. The ‘tools for thinking’ offered by our theoretical approach suggest that we need to ask some deeper questions:

- Why has improving teaching and learning in FE been construed as a ‘problem’? By whom? And in whose interests?

2 This refers to a period in which the taxation raised against whisky sales was used to fund FE.

- How has that problem been constructed, and how has its meaning endured, been contested, or changed over time?
- What prefigured notions of ‘best practice’ have been constructed by colleges, practitioners, agencies, inspection bodies, employers and government over time? And with what outcomes?
- What key developments in policy, pedagogy and practice in FE have intervened to restrict or transform its course?
- How can we map the social space through which transformations in FE take place?

The research questions that concern us in this paper relate to the silence surrounding these issues, and what such silence tells us about the epistemologies of power and control underpinning FE practice. As Coffield notes:

In all the plans to put learners first, to invest in learning, to widen participation, to set targets, to develop skills, to open access, to raise standards, and to develop a national framework of qualifications, there is no mention of a theory (or theories) of learning to drive the whole project. It is as though there existed in the UK such a widespread understanding of, and agreement about, the processes of learning and teaching that comment was thought superfluous. The omission is serious and, if not corrected, could prove fatal to the enterprise. (Coffield, 2000: 18)

This was a constant source of frustration for tutors who participated in the TLC project, as the following typical comments show:

We won't be able to improve teaching and learning until there is continuity in the college. The constant changes in staffing, courses and policy get in the way of good teaching. Restless colleges, like a form of institutional ADHD [*attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*], do not make good learners.

What hinders good teaching and learning is that the college is designed around the delivery of easy management and profits. We need a fundamentally different architecture – based on the actual process of teaching and learning.

However, in addressing such issues, we are not suggesting that the paucity of conversations about teaching and learning in FE indicates an ‘absence’ of pedagogy, but rather that its presence may be so ‘doxic’ – taken-for-granted and pervasive – that it has become virtually invisible and unchallengeable.

In order to develop the genealogy, we searched two types of literature: texts that present histories and sociologies of FE; and policy documents and reports of research about FE, especially those with an apparent focus on teaching and learning, from the last 50 years. For the purposes of this paper, we concentrate mainly on analysing the latter. Our task was constrained not only by the limited time and resources available, but also by the difficulty of tracing documents produced within FE itself, preventing comprehensive coverage. To our dismay, colleagues with long experience in the sector recounted personal memories of collections of research reports and policy documents being dumped in dustbins or skips as the structures of FE changed. We were, however, able to locate the most significant – though still partial – archive of reports from the Further Education Unit (FEU), which oversaw policy and teacher training in the sector from 1977. This was replaced by the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) in 1995, and subsequently the Learning and Skills

Development Agency (LSDA) in November 2000.³ As we reviewed these texts, we were struck by how few of them discussed pedagogy in any detail, although so many of them suggested that teaching and learning needed to be improved.

Telling tales of transforming FE

In pre-war FE, although there was little discussion of teaching and learning, this did not mean that it lacked underpinning theory. It provided the narrow vocational training that employers needed for a privileged fraction of the working class, the white male labour aristocracy in craft occupations. The curriculum was determined centrally by examining boards dominated by employers, and FE had no direct ownership of its own curriculum. The role of the teacher was to deliver centrally-determined syllabi by means of didactic lectures and demonstrations. In its voluntarism and entrepreneurialism, FE appeared unsystematic, but in fact it can be seen as highly systematic in its responsiveness to employers. In this respect, both its purpose and its pedagogy were highly synergistic: FE 'did what it said on the tin', and there was no spur to discuss learning theory (Gleeson and Mardle 1980).

There is broad agreement in academic studies that FE in England has passed through a series of phases since World War II, although throughout this time it has been continually plagued by the problem of its voluntaristic nature. Stanton and Bailey (2004) summarise three key periods in its evolution: the thirty years post-war in which a series of attempts to legislate for individual and employer participation in VET came to nought; a brief interlude from the mid-1970s to mid-`80s, in which curriculum reform through specific delivery arrangements took centre stage, in response to the collapse of the youth labour market and the mass entry of young people into FE; and, since the end of the `80s, a decisive shift by government to control VET through the regulation of qualifications, tied to audit-dominated funding and inspection regimes.

Against this background, we found some remarkable continuities in references to improving teaching and learning. In 50 years of literature, there were repeated appeals about the *need* to improve teaching and learning, but extremely few texts that addressed *how* this should be done. The Crowther Report (1959) is a prime example. This was a major research-based report, prompted principally by a projected demographic 'bulge', to advise the government on post-compulsory education. In addressing the question of educational 'failure', it refers to:

[the] student's age on leaving school, the type of school he [*sic*] has attended, the conditions under which he has taken the course... the nature of his home background as shown by his father's occupation, his general vigour as shown by his participation in games, and the difficulty he found in certain subjects in the course. (Crowther, 1959: 362).

The question of how 'he' was taught is not on this agenda. Nor does it appear in the report's analysis of principal defects in FE: the school-to-college transition; insufficient time for apprentices to complete courses; the need for more breadth in course content; and the small proportion of teachers who were full-time (20%) or trained (25%). But Crowther did have things to say about how FE should change in order to address these problems and make improvements to teaching and learning possible. The Report advocated above all that teaching should become more closely allied to 'other forms of social work'.

3 We would like to thank [Ms Chris Bradford, the Education Librarian in Warwick University who traced the Oxford Archive of FEU texts](#) [~~Madeleine — can you also put an acknowledgement in for your librarian at Warwick who tracked the archive's existence down for us?~~], and the librarians at the Educational Studies Library Oxford University for generously facilitating unfettered access to the archival stacks of material.

As we reviewed academic, practitioner-oriented and policy documents, we found at least 24 ‘tales’ about transforming FE which called forth the need to improve teaching and learning. Given the lack of connection – at least overtly – to discussions of learning theory and pedagogy in many of these tales, three strands of these discourses seemed to offer an initial framework for analysing them. We reviewed if and how each text addressed the following categories:

- *Drivers* for change: the reasons *why* teaching and learning need to be improved
- *Lever*s for change: the *mechanisms* suggested for spurring improvements to teaching and learning
- *Pedagogical change* itself: arguments about *how* teaching and learning can or should be improved

Drivers for improving teaching and learning

Like the Crowther Report, the large majority of texts we looked at were dominated by discourses about why teaching and learning in FE needed to be improved. These are therefore teleological tales: pedagogy is implicitly dependent on the wider purposes that FE is supposed to serve, and the problem of ‘improving teaching and learning’ is ritually invoked as the solution to a range of external problems.

Some focus on moral and social responses to the ‘problem of youth’. They appeal to issues such as the breakdown of the family; the loss of moral compass in the face of new sexual freedoms; the pending crisis of leisure time, the collapse of the youth labour market, and the fear of ‘job’ culture (at different times, this centres variously on young men, pregnant teenagers, rebellious black youth, the ‘underclass’); the re-discovery of poverty and social inclusion agendas; and the need for emotional literacy. The Crowther report is a prime example of this, driven by concern for the breakdown of the family and by the pending crisis of leisure time – what would the youth do with so much spare time, and no family discipline? Ethel Venables (1968), writing 10 years later, presents a surprisingly similar picture. Her view of the ‘problem’ of teenagers is that “they live in the present and largely outside their homes, which provide little comfort other than a roof”.

Others focus instead on issues about the nature of appropriate VET. There are debates about the essence of a ‘good apprenticeship’; standards and quality in VET; the introduction of new technology and increased skill demands of work; responses to changes in the labour market, especially the shift from manufacturing to services; demographic change, linked to labour market supply and demand (are there too few or too many young people to meet demand, and are they adequately skilled); the need for liberal studies, general education or citizenship classes to ensure the maintenance of democracy and prevent social anomie. Unwin (undated inaugural lecture) is very critical of both the conditions of the teachers of apprentices, and of the conditions of the workplace for the apprentices. She argues that if the purpose of VET is to train apprentices, then the conditions of both sets of workers will need to be improved in order to achieve the learning. NATFHE (the main teacher union in FE) (1983) attacks the MSC for their lack of clarity about the purpose of FE. By pursuing contradictory aims, the MSC will never deliver on its learning agenda.

A third set of tales are more specifically about the economics of FE. Some of these are concerned with ways in which FE can positively influence national economic growth. They include discourses, for example, about upskilling the workforce to meet the needs of business and ensure a healthy national economy in the context of increasing global competition; leading the economy into new growth sectors and realising the economic potential of FE in its

own right as a commodified service; but they also overlap with the previous clusters of tales, particularly around using education to avoid welfare expenditure on young people. As an example, the FEU (1991) addresses the development of 'flexible colleges' in response to the ever more fluid needs of the labour market. Interestingly, 'flexible colleges' were devised as a *pedagogic* structure, not an *organisational* one. The shift to 'learning by doing' and competency based assessments was to be universalised in FE, as a response to the shifting sands of the labour market. Other tales are concerned with minimising the cost of FE itself to the national economy: the effective marketing of FE; the funding of the sector, accountability and audit; minimising resources through various forms of 'self-directed' learning; new managerialism and the de-professionalisation/re-professionalisation of FE teachers' work. The Audit Office commissioned a study to improve value for money in FE (Bourne 2001) and as part of this, delved some way into 'teacherly' practices like recommending that assignments should be re-designed so as to ensure there was a lower student dropout (wasted resources). The purpose of FE is defined in terms of maximum output for minimum resources, and the pedagogy follows from this. Pursaill (1989) provides another example, commending the progress of the industrial Lead Bodies in developing qualifications (NVQs) that will lead to the "abolition of time-serving". However, in his text he has to marry his enthusiasm for minimal cost industrial training with the recognition that minimal cost may also mean minimal learning.

These exhortations to improve teaching and learning therefore entail two conflicting assumptions that plague the sector: first, FE should provide effective responses to all of the country's major social, industrial and economic needs; and second, it should do so with ever-decreasing resources. Pedagogy is little more than the 'pharmakos' here (Girard, 1977), the scapegoat paraded through these tales but simultaneously expelled from them for the symbolic cleansing and survival of the nation.

Levers for improving teaching and learning

Little as most of these tales have to say about *how* teaching and learning might be improved, they promote various mechanisms or levers for improving teaching and learning, in which certain notions of pedagogy are implicit. These range from debates about liberal studies, competence-based learning, ICT-based learning, key skills, and the diagnosis of learning styles, to the creeping commodification of FE and proposals for its privatisation through GATS. The current GATS negotiations on education services are about which countries will offer up which parts of their education provision to the international market of providers under the terms of international free trade⁴. GATS is presented as a lever that will 'modernise' the delivery of FE, but its profound effects on the pedagogy of FE remain implicit and silent. But here we are also interested in unofficial discourses about FE, and how these debates have been expressed among teaching professionals themselves. We have been able to access versions of these unwritten tales through the intensive participation of FE teachers – including some with long careers in the sector – in the TLC project. One such colleague suggested a very different set of levers for improving teaching and learning in FE had dominated⁵:

⁴ Very few people in the UK education community seem to have any idea that these negotiations are currently proceeding and nor, therefore, is there much awareness of the extent to which current changes in FE can be directly attributed to the construction of the 'commodity' of FE, ready for others to deliver to us, or for us to deliver to others, under market conditions. The effect of a fully commodified service will be profound (including the full privatisation of FE, as commodification requires private ownership and the investment of capital for the explicit purpose of making a gain that is commensurate with the average international rate of profit across all sectors.

⁵ We could reference different elements of this account to a number of academic texts which raise similar points, but the material we use here reflects the practice-based knowledge of an experienced professional.

Subject traditions or communities of practice

This is the discourse of teachers who may be regarded as subject specialists – whether academic or vocational. The improving teaching and learning starts from the assumption that the teacher's role is to induct students into the field. Improving learning would centre on selective recruitment of 'better' students; improving teaching would require better resources, industry-standard equipment and more opportunities for subject-specific updating.

Management models of improving teaching and learning

The guiding notion of this (systems-thinking) discourse is that improving the quality of (predictable) outputs can be achieved through controlling inputs. The discourse of improving teaching and learning adopts the language of 'student-centred', and techniques of identifying needs, competency assessment and the individual learning plans that are supposed to guide individuals through the system to the achieved end. This also includes mechanisms for policing the teachers in FE themselves, by means of prescriptive and technicist national standards, inspection, and audit.

Pedagogic approaches from teacher education

There are three main discourses here: the psychologically derived discourse is the dominant, current doxa, based for example on experiential learning models. The humanistically derived discourse develops out of Rogerian ideas of student-centred learning. The critical discourse centres on emancipatory and transformative learning. A general assumption of all three is that improving teaching depends on the successful acquisition and practice of particular theories about how learning happens in the mind of individuals. Improved learning depends on preventing inappropriate interventions so as to allow the natural process of learning to happen.

Temporal dimensions

This discourse is framed by time, using assumptions that, at a particular point in time, standards in A levels/ university entrance/literacy etc. have fallen. Additionally, or alternatively, students 'today' have greater personal problems; the resource unit has declined to an unsustainable level; teachers are given too little time. Any or all of these things presents, at that time, a particular problem with improving teaching and learning, which must be addressed in a quite specific, problem solving way.

The status of courses

This is the discourse that works from the assumption that different 'standards' of course require different types of teaching and learning. Courses are divided into five or so categories: academic, vocational education, specific training, basic skills, life-skills. Different pedagogic approaches are assumed to flow from each of these.

Staff allegiances and clustering

Different groups of staff cluster together, and this constructs different teaching communities, who approach teaching and learning in different ways. Thus, 'craft' teachers share their staff rooms and leisure time with technicians rather than with other teachers. They see support staff as part of their community of practice, and this generates a particular stance in relation to students, teaching styles and learning. Similarly, 'vocational' teachers associate little with 'academic' teachers and each develop a discourse around what students 'need', and what teachers can or should deliver.

Within all of these discourses, we can detect strains of both the dominant pedagogical approaches we identified in the early part of this paper, and some of the tensions between them. We turn now to look at some particular moments in the genealogy of improving teaching and learning in FE, when pedagogical change (or continuity) has been both visible and significant, with a detailed analysis of one such moment.

Critical moments in improving teaching and learning

In the next phase of our work on the genealogy of 'improving teaching and learning', we will analyse some of the critical turning points over the last 50 years. These are the moments when ideas of pedagogy, and ideas about improving teaching and learning, took a new direction. Some that we would like to analyse include:

- The introduction of 'The Liberal Element' / Liberal Studies in apprentice courses.
- The arrival of audit and inspection regimes with their imposition of standardised methods of teaching and evaluating quality + the linking between funding regimes and performance in audit.
- The move to competency-based assessments as with National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) – reducing teaching to the assessment of competency, wherever and however that was 'learned'.
- The re-professionalisation of FE teachers: the requirement that they all be trained; the reduction in professional standing and power of teachers (e.g. through the introduction of the FENTO teacher training competency standards); and bringing more non-teachers into the learning site.
- The move to resource-based teaching, legitimated through discourses of active, differentiated and accessible learning.
- The full commodification of FE: the construction of 'owners'; markets (GATS); the alienable commodity; and controlled labour processes.

Within the space available here, however, we confine ourselves to examining one such key moment in detail, and we have chosen to focus on one in which there was notably open and visible debate about pedagogy and learning. As we have already noted, the mid-1970's marked a major turning point in the history of FE, as the curriculum and pedagogy came under intense scrutiny and development. Traditional FE was characterised as inflexible, irrelevant, elitist, and unresponsive to the needs of young people in less advantaged situations than typical craft apprentices (Silver, 1988). The didactic nature of its pedagogy was sharply criticised:

...the present position with respect to vocational courses in FE is that there still exists a widespread and strong adherence to the practice of traditional teaching approaches...where learning is largely teacher-directed and the learning outcomes are predominantly teacher-controlled and in which the primary role of the teacher is that of a disseminator of information. (Heathcote et al, 1982: 111)

The call for improving teaching and learning specifically in relation to the world of work was most famously expressed at this time by James Callaghan in his Great Debate speech at Ruskin College in 1976, followed by the Green Paper of 1977 (refs). Although these were directed primarily at schooling, the same concerns created a key moment in the genealogy of FE pedagogy.

The *drivers* for these changes were predominantly external. The collapse of the youth labour market in tandem with the 1973 global recession led to huge numbers of non-traditional

students entering FE as a way of avoiding unemployment, rather than making positive educational or career choices. At the same time, employers were pressurising FE to respond to the post-Fordist shift in industrial organisation; and there were political imperatives to rationalise the plethora of pre-vocational courses that had sprung up.

The prime *lever* for change was the introduction of new curricula, in particular a framework for one-year pre-vocational provision:

The overriding aim of the curriculum developer is to bring about *an organised improvement in the quality of teaching and learning*. (Heathcote et al, 1982: 44, emphasis added)

This focused attention, research and development centrally on pedagogy in FE. For the first time, counterposed to the dominant view of learning as didactic transmission and acquisition of cognitive knowledge and practical skills, we see a constructivist view that is still about acquisition, but which is learner-centred, has a social aspect, and is concerned with empowering the learner.

The Further Education Curriculum Research and Development Unit (FECRDU) was set up at Coombe Lodge FE Staff College by the FEU, and in 1979, it published a document which had a major influence on this process: *A Basis for Choice (ABC)*. This document (and a subsequent series developing its approach) outlined a framework for vocational preparation provision. Its stated intention was to make FE respond inclusively to its new population: the 50% of 16-19 year-olds with mainly negative experiences of compulsory schooling, no prospects in the labour market, and little vocational focus. It explicitly argued that FE should serve a range of purposes – moral, social, political, economic and environmental. This was framed in a powerful rhetoric of social justice and empowerment of learners:

- To help them develop informed career choices
- To challenge the academic-vocational divide
- To integrate a ‘core’ of general education into vocational education

It proposed explicit prescriptions for changes in curriculum content, pedagogical strategies and teacher roles. Content was to be defined in terms of processes rather than specified skills and knowledge, and outcomes in terms of a core of ‘transferable skills’ i.e. attitudes, values, personal qualities, ‘knowing about the world of work’ and basic skills. New pedagogical approaches emphasised experiential learning, discovery rather than didactic exposition, and the development of new and more ‘equalised’ forms of teacher-student relationships, with the assumption that these would develop desirable characteristics in students. Group activities supported by individual tutorial work, and negotiated learning outcomes, were privileged.

ABC advocated cross-college integration of subjects that blurred subject-discipline boundaries and required teachers to work in inter-disciplinary teams. It argued for greater autonomy for teachers to practice the ‘art’ of teaching, i.e. to relate methods to content flexibly based on diagnosis of student needs; and for students to be engaged in participatory rather than passive learning, which utilised their actual interests, experiences and motivations. It also recommended the recording of non-measurable achievements as a form of assessment. Such pedagogical changes were not only being introduced in the development of pre-vocational provision, but also across mainstream vocational provision in FE at the same time. While this shift appeared to challenge the ownership of FE’s curriculum by industry *via* central examining authorities, and devolve its control to colleges and teachers to an unprecedented degree, in fact it meant that awarding bodies and industrial interests were for the first time

intervening directly not just into the *content* of learning but into *learning processes and situations* themselves (Russell, 1981).

This created tensions and contestation. The focus of *ABC* was on ‘preparation for working life’, without preparation for work and – crucially – without available work. Colleges were trying to implement a democratic curriculum framework which could empower young people and equip them with lifeskills to cope with unemployment. However, most funding for the ‘new cohort’ entering FE was controlled by the Manpower Services Commission, a government agency outside the structures of FE itself, whose requirements demanded that the curriculum focus on job-specific skills for labour market entry.

Moreover, the policies envisioned by the FEU brought together elements from contrasting pedagogies. Much of it drew on critical and emancipatory pedagogies which advocate recognition of students as ‘people-in-the-world’ and a social purpose for FE (Zukas and Malcolm, 2000) to mitigate the effects of economic crisis on the most disadvantaged youth. At the same time, its focus on pedagogical innovation still assumes that diagnostic precision of individual learners’ needs and teaching techniques will intrinsically foster democratic relations in the learning site and positive outcomes for the students. For radical critics of *ABC*, this epitomised the invasion of ‘sacred’ stories of FE by the ‘profane’. It assumed falsely that educational interventions can solve structural social and economic problems, and that there was a correspondence between the needs of industry and those of students; and through its informal assessment regime of profiling and recording achievement, it sought to colonise students’ consciousness and reform their personhood in terms of qualities desirable to employers (Avis, 1983).

With particular relevance to the concerns of the TLC project, Moore (1984) identified key flaws in the new vocational and pre-vocational curricula: the essentialist attribution of intrinsic ideology and values to particular types of teaching methods; and especially the assumption that non-traditional, non-didactic approaches to teaching and learning (such as those advocated by *ABC*) are inherently radical and in the interests of working class youth. This fundamentally leaves *culture* out of the equation, although it is in *the explicit management of the culture of learning situations* that they are rendered more or less empowering or democratic. In its approach of utilising young people’s own experiences in learning, the pedagogy promoted by *ABC* appropriates those experiences while denying their material basis at the same time.

Conclusions

There is more work to be done to analyse similar ‘moments’ in the genealogy of improving teaching and learning in FE, and to explore how the balance and tensions of the two dominant pedagogies – student-centred and market-centred – have shifted over time. However, the findings of the TLC project (Hodkinson, 2004) suggest that a decisive transformation coincides with the most recent historical period of incorporation. The audit culture imposed since 1992 has ensured the dominance of the ‘banking’ model, and the acquisitional view of learning has been strengthened. The balance between the two paradigms has altered significantly as a result. The ‘sacred’ story of emancipatory, student-centred learning is in retreat, and no longer has a structural location within FE. Witness to this is the fact that so many of the tutors in the TLC project committed to this approach have either quit their jobs (or taken steps to do so) or been made redundant during the life of the project (see Colley et al, 2005), mirroring high turnover in the profession nationally. The profane story has not only invaded the sacred story, but in fact replaced it: the language of retention and achievement targets, and of students as ‘funding units’, has become the sacred story, the *doxa* which cannot

be challenged. A third perspective on teaching and learning – that of learning as a cultural process of participation – has been, for the most part, entirely missing.

It may be true that, fundamentally, the structures and purposes of FE have not changed since the mid-1970s. It is still dominated by the needs of employers, and it still houses the same disadvantaged cohorts of students. However, the broader evidence from the project indicate that the ideologies and practices of teaching and learning that are possible in the culture of FE today are much more restricted – and so too, therefore, are the possibilities for improving teaching and learning. Worse than this, our findings suggest that, in many cases, the effects of FE’s employment focus, national policy and institutional management on learning sites not only fail to improve, but actually *damage* teaching and learning (Hodkinson, 2005). In contrast with the ‘levers’ that have been used in transforming FE to date, our project advanced four very different levers for improving teaching and learning in FE: the interests, needs and wishes of students themselves; existing tutor professionalism, and recognition and support for that; a focus on pedagogies and their contextual nature; and taking a cultural view of learning. A key driver should be concern for social justice.

What, then, is the broader relevance of this case study of English FE for different contexts of VET across Europe? The genealogy towards which we are working confirms important lessons from previous work in the TLRP in a range of VET and workplace learning contexts (Fuller et al, 2005), and from some European studies of VET (Evans and Niemeyer, 2004): that effective improvement of teaching and learning can be assisted by taking a cultural perspective; and in particular, that the participation of learners in particular, local learning sites (or communities of practice) can be fully understood only through analysing their transformation in relation to broader and longer-term transformations of the associated field of practice and in relation to deeper social structures.

We are mindful of Bourdieu’s insight on the inadequacy of seeing transformation and conservation, change and not-change, as a simple dualism. Noting the particular resistance of education to attempts at challenging the inequalities it reproduces, he points to a third possibility, that of transformation *in order to conserve*:

One perceives the futility of the abstract debates which arise from the opposition of permanence and change, structure and history, reproduction and the ‘production of society’. The real basis of such debates is the refusal to acknowledge that social contradictions and struggles are not all, or always, in contradiction with the perpetuation of the established order. (Bourdieu, 1986: 164)

We therefore suggest that the transformations of English FE ever since the 1970s, including the period around radical curriculum change analysed above, indicate the need to interrogate change in other national and systemic contexts for such conservative implications. Our analysis poses a series of questions that should be asked, including:

- who owns the curriculum?
- what are the drivers – both overt and covert – which invoke the need to improve teaching and learning?
- what levers are advanced as mechanisms to prompt the improvement of teaching and learning?
- what – if any – pedagogical changes are proposed, and what learning theories underpin them?
- what social, vocational and economic needs is the improvement of teaching and learning supposed to meet?

Whatever the national context, we conclude that a cultural perspective on learning may well offer a deeper understanding of what we already have in VET, and how it might be transformed for the better.

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References

For the full list of references, please contact the authors by e-mail. A version of this paper complete with references will be posted on Education-line.

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