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A guide to alienation in further education teaching

Kevin Orr

In consequence of the rationalisation of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. Neither objectively nor in relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of this process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not.

The Hungarian philosopher and socialist George Lukacs (1974: 89) wrote this passage ninety years ago and it is prophetic of much present-day white-collar work and of teaching in FE in particular. Though the features Lukacs describes exist elsewhere in education, the acute intensification of centralised control over FE teaching means idiosyncrasies are even less tolerated as practice becomes more closely controlled within a system that many teachers experience as 'pre-existing' and '[functioning] independently'. The Government and institutions precisely prescribe not only the appropriate outcomes of teaching, but even what constitutes 'good' classroom practice. Lukacs was describing alienation in the passage above and this notion can help us to understand the situation of teachers in FE today.

Raymond Williams (1983: 36) traced the term alienation back through philosophy and religion to a 'feeling of a division between man and society' and it commonly refers to a state of mind or angst. However, for Marx this division is not just a psychological dislocation, even if that is how it may be experienced; instead alienation is rooted in the economic exchanges of capitalism, which distort human relationships and limit human agency. According to Marx human consciousness was adaptive because it was determined by the material situation of existence, but he argued that humans' fundamental nature lies in our ability to consciously shape the world through our labour. Marx (1976: 284) famously wrote that:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many an architect to shame in the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existing ideally.

This consciousness of what we do, of our labour, allows humans to have a history that we can learn from, building on successes or avoiding previous failures. Working on the world as we find it also alters humans in two ways; firstly and directly through the consciousness required for a particular task or activity; and secondly indirectly through collectively shaping the world people transform the circumstances that then shape consciousness.

However, in the first chapter of Capital Marx describes how in capitalist society workers must sell their labour in order to earn a living and so do not own or control the product of their labour. It becomes the property of the capitalist, and thus it becomes alienated from the worker. The primary meaning of the labour consists of providing income, not in the product of the labour itself. So, in this materialist definition alienation above all entails a loss of control, specifically a loss of control over labour, and labour is fundamental to what defines human nature. Marx (1975: 353) refers to this as 'the objectification of the human essence' which he explains in this allegory:

[T]he dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value, and not the beauty and peculiar nature of the minerals: he lacks a mineralogical sense.

Marx identified four aspects in the alienation of humans (Marx 1975: 326-328), which may be recognisable to many working in education:

- a. People are alienated from the world because they do not control the product of their labour.
- b. People are alienated from themselves through not

controlling their own process of labour.

c. People are alienated from their 'species-being', from their essential humanity. This is a consequence of the first two because purposeful labour is central to what makes us human.

d. People are alienated from each other because society's economic processes distort all human relations through the division of labour and its concordant differences in social status, and through the commodification of every aspect of life.

These are most obvious in manufacturing where workers produce tangible goods which are then sold as commodities. How do these processes relate to teachers? A society as complex and textured as modern Britain cannot simply be explained by the functioning of production and exchange, so any developed understanding of society, and therefore of alienation must look beyond the bare economic determinants that underpin society.

[T]he crucial issue for any established society is the successful reproduction of such individuals whose 'own ends' do not negate the potentialities of the prevailing system of production. (Meszaros 1975: 289)

Even those who do not have a direct relationship to the means of production, such as FE teachers, are still shaped by society's fundamental economic relations. The ideological domination of ideas relating to capitalist economic relations is not the result of indoctrination or coercion, but comes about because most people, most of the time 'go along with' society as it is run; because the way that society is run, and the values that underpin it, have become internalised. These dominant ideas have assumed what Gramsci termed 'hegemony'.

Yet education in general and FE in particular are often considered means of escaping or alleviating society's social failings by widening opportunities and expanding aspirations. Education is considered as inherently useful, and a moral good existing above any political machinations, which was why Tony Blair's famous appeal to education was so effective. Teachers' belief in the value of education is not ersatz or naive; indeed those most committed to decent education will be those most prepared to defend it, and they are often the best teachers too. However, education reflects society more than it alone can transform society. FE teachers can find themselves in a double bind of alienation where they may seek to escape or alleviate society's ills and inequalities, and yet they find themselves subject to exactly the pressures that they had sought to avoid or assuage. The kind of restrictive, instrumentalist education that Blair extolled was not what they had in mind.

The constraint on teachers' autonomy and individuality is clearest in the banal detail of the LLUK Standards document which includes (p4) a commit-

ment to: '[u]sing a range of learning resources to support learners'; and (p5) the requirement to '[s]tructure and present information clearly and effectively'. Lukacs (1974: 97-98) can help to explain the consequences of this lack of control in FE. He refers to 'the contemplative nature of man under capitalism' where:

man's activity does not go beyond the correct calculation of the possible outcomes of the sequence of events (the 'laws' which he finds 'ready-made'), and beyond the adroit evasion of 'accidents' by means of protective devices and preventive measures (which are based in their turn on the recognition and application of similar laws).

FE teachers may feel able to do little more than efficiently apply the standards and procedures they are given without even considering the adoption of new ones. As the logic of the system is internalised the limits of aspiration are defined as teachers confine themselves to 'contemplating' (in Lukacs' term) how their part of the educational system is organised, but do not, in normal circumstances, engage in altering that system. Competencies or learning outcomes may be accepted, and effort is confined to how they can best be achieved. Moreover, the experience of alienation does not necessarily unify teachers, instead it may atomise them because relationships with each other are distorted by the necessity to meet the reified standards of the system. Teachers may remain at their desk at lunchtime and work long hours alone at home in the evenings, for example.

Although alienation is a consequence of an objective situation, how it is experienced is subjective and differs from one group of teachers to the next and from one individual to the next. That subjective experience will be mediated by individual history and temperament, as well as most crucially, social relationships, but what is perhaps most remarkable is how well teachers in FE sustain not just themselves, but their commitment to their ethics and their students. So, when teachers present a topic in an unorthodox way, or exceed the dull objectives of awarding bodies, or collaborate with colleagues in the union, or even just have a collective moan, they are resisting alienation by asserting their own agency. That matters, because each such act provides a glimpse beyond the current stifling strictures that alienate teachers and students alike.

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