Agents of change? Tutors managing learner identities in lifelong learning

Mary Hamilton, Lancaster University

Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

This paper deals with an aspect of lifelong learning that has come to the fore over the last 10 years of New Labour government policy, that of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. In England (the focus of this paper) and Northern Ireland this has become known as Skills for Life. In Scotland, the policy has developed differently as Adult Literacies (see McDonald, 2005). The paper assesses the achievements and disappointments of this policy initiative. It looks particularly at tutors’ experiences of mediating between policy demands and student aspirations, and the degree to which they can be seen as active agents of change. I have developed these arguments in more detail elsewhere (see Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). In particular, I have explored the central role of policy and pedagogical artefacts in organizing the relationships and identities of tutors and students (Hamilton, 2001; Hamilton, forthcoming a) and the implications of the Skills for Life experience for our understanding of transitions (Hamilton, forthcoming b).

Until 1997 when the OECD released the findings of the International Literacy Survey, adult literacy and numeracy had been under funded and fragmentary fields in the UK, staffed by a part-time and volunteer workforce (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). The Moser review was set up in the wake of these findings (Moser, 1999) and in 2001 the Skills for Life strategy was launched with 3.7 billion pounds of funding allocated over the next 3 years and a further 2 billion to 2010. For tutors and researchers who had struggled for years on a shoestring this turn of events seemed unbelievable and was greeted with high hopes. The New Labour government argued the case for Skills for Life not just on the basis of economic prosperity, but in terms of social inclusion and a vision of lifelong learning for all that seemed expansive and accommodating to the needs of diverse groups of potential adult learners. Many people who had been waiting for this moment pooled their expertise to transform the field.

Over the next few years a whole new infrastructure was set up including a specialised qualification structure and professional standards, core curricula defining levels and elements of knowledge in literacy, numeracy, in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and, more recently, ICT. These were aligned with performance in school-based subjects and calibrated to the international survey league tables. New forms of diagnostic, formative and summative assessment defined what students and teachers can demonstrate as subject knowledge. A national multiple choice test was introduced and became the recognised standard of achievement, set at Level 2 of the curriculum (equivalent to GCSE). A high profile media publicity campaign targeted specific groups of potential learners identified in the strategy document, aiming to encourage reluctant adults to recognise their need for help with literacy and numeracy and to beat their ‘Gremlins’. Yearly participation and achievement targets were set and tied to funding, along with an inspection framework that monitors teacher performance at many levels. This has created what has been termed a 'high stakes' target culture (Goldstein, 2006).

The effect of this co-ordinated and rapid set of changes has been to fix the slippery and
diverse pedagogical field of adult language, literacy and numeracy and make it tractable as a part of New Labour’s larger social policy vision. The ‘fix’ can be clearly seen in the fact that the field itself has (for the time being) taken on the name of the policy: the abbreviation Skills for Life is currently a standard shorthand used to describe courses, tutors and learners in literacy numeracy, ESOL and ICT and the terms are used throughout publicity, training and teaching materials. The tight integration of targets, funding, audit, inspection and professional training with the curriculum framework strongly promotes an official version of what needs to be taught and tugs the field into alignment with the goals of vocational training and school oriented education.

Ten years on, the reality of what Skills for Life has meant for adult learners and for teachers in the field is becoming clear. A growing body of data has documented the development of Skills for Life and the wider reforms of the Learning Skills Sector within which it is embedded (Hodgson et al., 2007; Barton et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2007; Appleby and Bathmaker, 2006) The numbers of learners involved has increased substantially from 300,000 in 1996 to more than 1.5 million in 2007. However, quantitative data from policy evaluation studies demonstrate how the ambitious Level 2 targets have resulted in substantial ‘mission drift’ by skewing recruitment in favour of younger students already in full-time education or training and in favor of those with higher starting levels and easily identifiable vocational goals, who are able to move more easily and quickly through the national test (see Bathmaker, 2007 and the House of Commons Public Audit committee, 2005).

The data from learners shows them to be largely positive about their experience once they enter programmes – though many do not achieve qualifications and dropout is high (According to the official statistics analysed in Bathmaker, 2007, in 2003/4, 60% completed their course whilst 35% achieved the qualification they were aiming for). Tutors, on the other hand, report high levels of frustration and discomfort with their roles, especially those who have long experience in the field and contributed to the more open informal and flexible practice of an earlier era. In a multitude of interviews, tutors talk about the difficulties they face in carrying out their roles with professional integrity (see Appleby and Bathmaker, 2006; Edward et al., 2007; Gleeson and James, 2007). A number of factors recur in these accounts and I discuss these below, arguing that it is the particular conjunction of these factors that seems to produce the problems tutors feel and to constrain their agency in the field as they struggle to mediate and shield learners from the contradictions and unintended effects of the policy environment.

Firstly, the diversity of learners covered by the Skills for Life strategy is immense and makes the standardized infrastructure hard to manage for many tutors (see Cookson et al., 2007). The inclusion of literacy, numeracy, ESOL and ICT as related but distinguishable specialisms is an additional challenge. Many staff have welcomed the better co-ordination of provision and the new teaching resources linked to the curriculum that have resulted from the new policy. However, the materials produced within Skills for Life and referenced to the curriculum elements materials are inevitably designed for an ‘ideal learner’ seen to be someone in the age range of 16-25 years following a vocational course in an FE College. Tutors working with ‘non-standard’ learners in community-based programmes, workplaces, homeless and rehabilitation centres need to adapt materials with little or no time allocated for this. So do tutors working with basic skills embedded in vocational areas unfamiliar to them. Since the competences identified for adults in the current curriculum are derived from, and designed to fit seamlessly with, the school curriculum, rather than being based on research with adults, they are not necessarily linked to the everyday practices, aspirations and diverse experiences of adult learners.
There isn’t enough time to do it all so you have to focus on the things they’re going to be assessed on and that might not necessarily be very appropriate and the materials are often weighted towards young people e.g. a topic like camping or choosing somebody famous to write about. Some of it is very, very hard work (tutor, NRDC Evaluation data)

Working closely with students on a day-to-day basis, tutors are constantly confronted with these issues and - as a good teacher - it is part of their role to solve them.

The process of squeezing students aspirations into the tick-boxes of funding bodies, finding a balance between standardization and responding to diversity, is a demanding one that many tutors engage with despite their misgivings, in order to enable people to access and progress through programmes. Everyday paperwork is a crucial link, entangling tutors in a range of interlocking processes of sorting and sifting learners. *Skills for Life* standardises learner identity through the use of artefacts such as diagnostic tests and (ironically) Individual Learning Plans which are used to translate learners’ goals into ‘SMART’ targets, indexed to curriculum elements. Tutors mediate these processes acting as brokers, advocates, gatekeepers. They transmit curriculum goals, organise the time and pace of learning within review periods (Burgess, 2008). They manage and induct reluctant learners. They prepare students for multiple choice literacy tests and then administer the tests themselves - failing or passing students on the basis of specific testing performances, selecting and sorting both bodies and their achievements, selecting and filtering the relevant learning from the irrelevant. They do all this within the context of the high stakes audit and target culture outlined above and with a sense that the paperwork is somehow a distraction from the ‘real work’ of teaching.

Whilst the authors of the *Skills for Life* framework and curriculum do not see them as templates to be mechanistically applied, the fact is that working terms and conditions and opportunities for training, affect tutors’ room for manoeuvre and their ability to adapt the framework to local circumstances. Although it is possible to adapt reductive frameworks to alternative or more holistic approaches to teaching and learning, only very experienced and committed teachers are able to articulate a personally held vision of their work with the official discourse in order to achieve what they would see as an authentic pedagogy (see Webb, 2006). The status of *Skills for Life* tutors in many cases as sessional or part-time, and a lack of appropriate opportunities for professional development constrain the possibilities for such skilled adaptation. Contractual issues set up contradictory conditions for their work:

these issues do put a lot of pressure on tutors again because for example part time tutors who are paid on an hourly basis have to do the paper work in their spare time (tutor, NRDC Evaluation data)

Contracts are uncertain and fractional. Access to professional development opportunities have increased through *Skills for Life*. However, the time commitment is considerable and it is still difficult for staff to access these especially if they are employed part-time or their employers are unwilling to cover their teaching.

they often say sorry, I’d love to attend but I can’t because I’ll either lose my pay or I’ll have to cancel the class, there’s no cover (tutor, NRDC Evaluation data)

The new teaching standards require teachers to demonstrate ‘personal skills’ equivalent to Level 3 and 4 in literacy and/or numeracy. They are thus subject to the same regime as the learners they teach. This requirement is a barrier to experienced volunteers who do not have the formal qualifications and cannot invest time and resources to gain them. It also
impacts on vocational tutors who have their own subject specialisms but who may not have the motivation to take further qualifications and are being de-skilled by the insistence that they demonstrate and teach basic skills as part of their work (see Gleeson and James, 2007).

The funding conditions under which teachers work, in a highly unstable but micro managed environment impacts strongly on the tutors’ sense of agency and control. Tutors find certain behaviors are rewarded and required in order to survive financially, even if this does not coincide with what they judge to be good practice or in the interests of the learners they are serving. The tutor interviewed by Amy Burgess in her research sums up her experience in this way:

I’ve been a practicing basic skills tutor for 15 years. I’ve been through all the training imaginable and I’m now at the position that what is expected of me is impossible. However you interpret directives from the ‘industry’...and what’s being thrown at us from all angles, it does not seem to meet the needs of the student, OFSTED and government funding. No matter what I do, it doesn’t meet all of them at the same time (Burgess, 2005, pp.11).

A final factor affecting tutor agency is the availability of networks and consultative spaces in the current environment of policy and practice and the extent to which these have changed in recent years. The fact that most tutors are still part-time, are dispersed across many different institutional contexts, and have uneven access to professional development opportunities means that it remains difficult to consolidate a sense of professional group identity and policy involvement. There is a lack of formal networks and associations through which practitioners could make representative contributions to new developments. Public spaces for deliberative, reflexive communication amongst interested parties are still scarce (and, some have argued have reduced under New Labour, except at the level of micro-decision-making) and the speed of policy change makes it hard to respond to, even when consultation (typically of a highly structured kind) is offered. The result of this is a widespread feeling among practitioners that policy is something that happens to them, initiated from some far away place, and that the gap between policy and the consequence in practice is wide and unperceived by policy-makers themselves (Edwards et al., 2007).

In summary, over time, the lifelong learning agenda which was initially part of the Skills for Life strategy has dropped away. It has been overtaken by a narrower vision, that of literacy and numeracy and language as vocational skills. Lifelong learning has proved to be too expensive, too slow and too open to learner direction to be sustained under the conditions of the policy regime described above. Tutors mediating between everyday practice and this ‘command and control’ policy environment are left to manage diverse student identities within local contexts where recurrent tensions surface.

The Skills for Life strategy has normalised a standardised learner identity and has recast the professional identity of the teacher as technical expert, whose job it is to apply formulaic methods of translation between learner diversity and a standardised curriculum, managing learner identities in ways that are acceptable to funding and auditing bodies. This analysis is consistent with that found by recent research exploring the effects of policy on learning and inclusion in the Learning Skills sector more generally. For example, Finlay et al., 2007 document the effects of continual change and the heavy demands of performativity as teachers try to navigate the ‘waves of policy’. (Hodgson et al., 2007). Extensive interviews with Further Education practitioners carried out during the Transforming Learning Cultures project, show convincingly that
The shift from 'old' public management, based on municipal bureau professionalism, to 'new' public management – driven by market competition and public choice – embraces a quite different concept of public service: one that is managed, brokered and mediated by professionals in highly competitive and contested market situations......Rather than occupying the position of trusted public servant, practitioners have come to be regarded as licensed deliverers of nationally produced materials, targets and provision (Gleeson and James, 2007, pp.452).

The result is that while the Skills for Life strategy may have expanded provision and public awareness of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, it has done so at the expense of both tutor and learner agency in the pedagogical process, reducing the space for professional judgment, negotiation and decision-making. Nonetheless, tutors are still – inevitably – enrolled as active agents in change, through the mediating role they play in managing student identities and progress minute by minute through the lifelong learning infrastructure. This constrained agency is experienced by some tutors, especially those new to the field, more in terms of paperwork overload and contradictory demands than as a reduction in professional autonomy. Many experienced tutors, however, recognise the reduction in agency acutely and interpret it as a real ethical undermining of their role which traditionally has been characterized by large amounts of 'gift-time' a pride in making the most of resources in a marginalized field and a bedrock commitment to social justice and the human rights of learners.

References


Hamilton M (2001) 'Privileged literacies: policy, institutional process and the life of the
Hamilton M (forthcoming a) 'Putting words in their mouths: the alignment of identities with system goals through the use of individual learning plans', British Educational Research Journal.


This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008