‘Meeting standards: teacher training in the learning and skills sector’. Whither the agency of teacher educators?

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Introduction
There has been a paradigm shift in the world of post compulsory and adult teacher education in England during the last few years. The formal (written) curriculum, rather in the same manner as its school cousin, has been factorised to a set of standards and constructed as a programme of strictly controlled and managed teacher training, with an emphasis on assessment, measurement and accountability. Such trends are part of the audit culture in the further education (FE) or learning and skills sector which falls under the ambit of Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), a sector skills council which has itself delegated responsibility for monitoring standards to Standards Verification UK (SVUK).

The intention of this paper is neither to review nor evaluate the effectiveness of the recently introduced changes rather our aim is to explore how such changes have impacted upon the capacity for teacher educators to exert agency. We do this informed by empirical research in some colleges that have had to deal with the curricular practicalities of implementing the changes. The key question we pose is how far the march of ‘progress’ encapsulated in a succession of NVQ lookalike standards (including those defined by the Training and Development Lead Body [TDLB], by the Further Education National Training Organisation [FENTO] and more recently by LLUK) as well as the installation of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) as the regime for inspection, has caused teacher educators to change their practices.

Until relatively recently teacher educators were able to design and devise their own curricula and teaching programmes with minimum interference from government. The FENTO standards (FENTO, 1999) were introduced across the FE sector in order to: a) inform the design of accredited awards for FE teachers; b) provide standards to inform professional development activity; and c) to assist institution based activities such as recruitment, appraisal and the identification of training needs (FENTO, 1999, pp. 1). Much has been written about the policy context in which these changes have taken place, of the processes of policy construction and of the implications of policy changes (Ainley, 2000; Avis, 2005; Coffield et al., 2007; Malcolm and Zukas, 2002). Although there is an overarching concern with quality improvement in the policy rhetoric this is never explored in any depth; as a consequence it has been translated into a focus on the readily measurable and technical aspects of educational practices and related to funding, target setting and accountability.
Policy background

The changes that have taken place in terms of the control and regulation of teacher education programmes are part of a wider agenda in the sector as a whole. Such changes have followed in the wake of the 1988 Education Reform Act that, in the school sector, spelt the end of teacher control over the curriculum (Dale, 1989), and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act that removed colleges from local authority control. This was achieved through the ‘incorporation’ (privatisation) of FE colleges. As has been noted elsewhere this allowed for increased regulation and intensification of workloads (Esland, 1996).

In the intervening years we have seen increased surveillance and policing of the FE sector through regimes of inspection and review which are modelled upon those operating within the school system. Judged from a policy perspective it would seem logical to apply the same prescription and medicine to the FE sector, despite the fact that the context in which the FE sector operates is very different from the school sector. Here staff are employed to teach on a wide variety of courses and programmes at many different levels, with students whose ages range from 14 to well beyond retirement.

The discourse of mangerialism which has ostensibly served to increase ‘productivity’ and ‘efficiency’ has also, because of the associated workload pressures, reduced the opportunities for lecturers to question what they are required to undertake. There has been a shift in the underpinning philosophy and rationale of these programmes away from a conception of teacher professionalism that stresses teacher autonomy, service to the community and students, towards an outcome-orientated model of professional practice. While some teachers become fully compliant ‘designer teachers’ (Sachs, 2001, pp.156) whose identifications are role or task specific rather than person specific (Colley et al., 2007), others either refuse to comply or they operate more strategically disguising their commitment to democratic values and identifications (Shain and Gleeson, 1999).

While it was right to insist that new entrants into the teaching profession received some formalised education and training (DfES, 2004; 2006), doubt has been cast on the form the training has taken and about the deeper implications that may follow. A central tenet of teacher education programmes has been the assumption that there is a shared and common pedagogy and that this should be associated with a strong and enduring professional identity. This contrasts with the approach taken by those responsible for monitoring and curriculum planning and for the new professional standards in the FE sector. Here pedagogy comprises a set of principles and assumptions about disciplinary knowledge that is subject based and focused on a set of standards. In the case of trainee teachers, the programme is expected to check their subject knowledge and provide them with a skill-set that will enable them to ‘meet the needs’ of their learners (Nasta, 2007). Such a view of pedagogical practice is contestable for a number of reasons. Chief amongst them is the assumption that pedagogy can be commodified in a manner that is external to both context and practice. This contrasts with the view that pedagogical practices are very much inhered in what individuals do, both constructing and limiting the potential for action (see Lawy and Bloomer, 2003).

The research context

A substantial recent research project based in further education was the Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) in FE project (James and Biesta, 2007) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). That project made use of Bourdieusian notions of field and habitus to explore conceptualisations of tutors’ work in communities of practice.
Such an approach does not start with the assumption that the professional identity of teachers or lecturers should be tied into a set of reified and objectified identifications, rather it seeks to explore practice in relation to the different communities in which practitioners operate (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Commenting on this difference Avis (2005) asserts:

the importance of learning communities [is] characterized by cooperation, collaboration and partnership. These communities are marked by high levels of trust in which participants are prepared to acknowledge, share and learn from mistakes. (Avis, 2005, pp.214 emphasis added)

Colley et al. (2007) show how the professionalism of lecturers is both creative and fluid. Indeed, the process of professionalization or re-professionalization, where lecturers reconfigure their professional identities, can lead to ‘conduct unbecoming – i.e. movement from full participation to marginalization or exclusion’ (Colley et al., 2007, pp.178). Some teachers/lecturers are able to manage their transitions into the performance management culture of FE and even retain their ‘old’ professional identifications. However, there are dangers in reconfiguring the notion of professionalism as an outcome to be achieved through registration with the Institute for Learning (IfL) particularly where it becomes tied exclusively to continuing professional development (CPD) related to subject specialist teaching and learning. Perhaps conscious of these tensions the IfL has been careful not to reference students as trainees (which is the discourse that pervades much of the literature, certainly that which emanates from Ofsted and LLUK) and has been careful to describe its role as ‘the professional body for teachers, trainers, tutors and student teachers in the Learning and Skills sector’ (IfL, 2008). The fundamental issue, of course, concerns the nature of subjectivity. Usher et al. (1997) offer one answer:

How are subjects made? By dividing practices – the subject is objectified by a process of division either within himself (sic) or from others (Rabinow, 1984, pp.8). The process of division is accomplished by modes of classification and categorisation employed as much by academic disciplines in the name of understanding as by administrations for the purposes of disposal. And by confessional practices – whereby subjects are active accomplices in their own self-formation. (Usher, et al., 1997, pp.57)

Teachers, it is argued, sanction themselves through inscription into the very processes that they seek to control. Indeed as Foucault (see Rabinow, 1984) notes, practices are not governed externally but come from subjects themselves, self administered through the process of ‘governmentality’.

This brings us to the role of teacher educators, many of whom have been placed in an invidious position, aware that they are engaging with and even complicit in sanctioning activities and practices that represent an affront to their professional values and identities. For these individuals, the shift towards targeted skills training, action planning and mapping has been achieved at the expense of analytic and critical skills development. Is the role of a teacher educator primarily to assist those on teacher education programmes to become literate and numerate, or is it to help teachers and lecturers develop a professional identity shared across disciplinary boundaries and communities?

Methods and methodology

The research that prompted the reflections in this paper comprises a continuing study of facets of the new teacher education programmes. The study is located in the South West region of England and funded by the SWitch Centre of Excellence in Teacher Training
Twenty-eight interviews were undertaken in the early months of 2008; the research team collected rich qualitative data from ten trainees, from nine teacher educators who fulfil roles as tutors and mentors in programmes and also from nine managers, some working in FE colleges and some in other community organisations.

Our underlying assumption is that the agency and ultimately the practices of teacher educators (the programme tutors) have been affected in different ways by the outcome-orientation of the standards and the inspection regime (see Furlong et al., 2000). In this paper we draw upon two exemplar cases: one features a male with many years experience of teaching and managing the teacher education programmes within his college and the second features a female who has only recently moved into that role in her own college.

Andrew Cave

Andrew Cave is a manager whose background was as an English teacher and as a teacher educator. His current role is as Quality Manager in a large city tertiary college catering for academic and post-compulsory education where he has worked for about 25 years. Although his current role is demanding, Andrew has endeavoured to maintain a continuing commitment to teaching on the teacher education programme within his college. Recognising the limitation and possibilities of teacher education, his account is very much grounded in the practicalities of the here and now.

Andrew focused upon what he saw as some important differences between school and FE teacher contracts and conditions of service. He was particularly critical of the way in which the FE workforce is casualised and explained how this militates against a fully professional workforce:

> Every faculty head in this college is expected to have a buffer of about between sixteen and twenty-five percent of part-time staff. I do not see any greater job security for any of those staff. I do not see lessening of a need to train those staff. I do not see any convenient way in which you could match up their very sporadic part-timetable, timetables with the sporadic timetables of the tutors or … the sporadic timetables of the mentors. It's not like a school..

Elaborating on this he continued:

> … as we know two-thirds of colleges between 1992 and 1998 went into the red. This college didn’t fortunately because we have very tight management, but the way we have tight management is we insist that every faculty has this horrible human buffer, of staff who are expendable. The very staff who actually become less expendable need to get trained and come onto our courses.

For Andrew issues within the teacher education sector could be solved quite easily if the government targeted more resources into the sector and allowed the experienced professionals to do their jobs rather than insisting that they work under generalised and inappropriate systems and structures. Citing the example of a teacher who has substantial prior experience and who has worked extensively in the sector he explains:

> When they get onto their teacher education course the expectation that they need the same as if they were a twenty-three year old from university going in to do languages teaching in a school and therefore did need a mentor, that, that kind of expectation is, is, is unrealistic because they've already had their subject mentoring into their subject (…).
As we have indicated, Andrew has managed to retain a very strong commitment to the teacher education programme with which he was had a long association. Over the years he has not sought deliberately to ignore expectations and new policy initiatives rather he has always attempted to incorporate each new initiative in a way that conforms to his view of what a good teacher education programme should be. What is evident, however, is that his ability to continue to do this has been called into question, not only because he has relinquished control of the programme to another manager but also because the new standards and the inspection regime that accompanies them have imposed a set of new restrictions and ‘formal’ expectations on those involved in the programme.

Emily Newby

Emily’s introduction into the world of teacher education has been short and sharp. She was appointed to the post in August 2007 and yet, within her first year in post, she has led the programme through a full Ofsted inspection. Emily told us that she originally completed a degree in chemistry and trained as a primary school teacher, later switching to secondary school teaching. Of her arrival into FE, she explained that she initially worked as a volunteer in the college, teaching basic skills, before taking up a post as a Skills for Life lecturer. She applied for the post of co-ordinator for the teacher education programme without any detailed knowledge of it but explained that she shared a staff room with colleagues involved in the programme:

I sort of picked up some bits of it by osmosis by the fact I’d been in the same room. I’ve seen how some of the things operate. … I’d sort of got a broad picture of the teacher training.

One of the crucial differences between Emily and Andrew is that she did not begin her career with any pre-conceptions about what the role would entail or about what she was expected to do. For Emily it was a new experience to work with external bodies and manage a highly valued programme within the college. It has been a significant advantage that her life skills specialism is in an area of increasing importance within the new teacher specifications. This has afforded new opportunities for exploration in her teaching:

I was looking to introduce them [PGCE students] to the idea of what the curriculum, the core curriculum is so that is something they could actually use in terms of their teaching ...

Although Emily was not unhappy with the focus on the minimum core she agreed that there was far too much repetition in the standards.

While there was no sense in the account given by Emily that there could or should be a different way of engaging with the standards or more broadly with the curriculum, she was absolutely committed to providing her students with the best possible provision. She made use of the structures and systems at her disposal to improve the quality. When asked to explain her views about learning Emily articulated a view based on a view of learning as acquisition, albeit one that is founded on practice, as opposed to one that sees learning as a social iterative and tentative process:

… it’s a very active thing my class, so they are actively learning… I’m very concerned about understanding although I’m not sure if I’m sort of a big picture person or a leading through the stages…. there are uses for both within thinking about learning….. I’m not sure whether you’d have the same model for all situations, though … […] I do like people to be hands-on with things [and] have variety, you know, a variety of methods that people can take information in by. I suppose that’s been drummed in to me in terms of Skills for Life, particularly if you have people with
A founding principle of Emily’s approach to pedagogy, therefore, is one that emphasises activity and performance.

Conclusions

Although there are some significant differences in the accounts of professional practice constructed by Andrew and Emily, there are also many similarities and shared concerns. Both are professional in their orientation and committed to providing a practice-orientated provision and are wholeheartedly committed to maintaining the quality of their own professional practice as they understand it and the quality of the programmes of teacher education with which they are associated.

The question for teacher educators such as Andrew, whose value structure and philosophy was framed in the 1970s, is whether he can or is prepared to continue to challenge or ignore practices that he regards as not authentic. Will he be tempted to comply strategically or will he find another way of managing his situation? The questions and issues facing Emily are rather different, since her involvement in teacher education has increased her opportunities and capacity for self-expression, engagement and agency (see also Biesta and Tedder, 2007). A critical issue is how her engagement is likely to be manifested in the future and whether in ten or twenty years we will be asking the same or similar questions about the potential loss of agency of the next generation of teacher educators.

References


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