Spaces of learning: the challenges of policy frameworks for the personal and professional identities of adult educators in England; thoughts from a field in transition

Teresa Cairns, Education Research Centre, University of Brighton, UK.

Paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

Introduction
There has been a growth in research about the Skills for Life (SfL) strategy since its inception, with ‘a burgeoning body of literature’ (Hodgson et al, 2007: 215), focussed on analysis and assessment of the impact of government policy in practice across the Learning and Skills (LS) sector (Edward and Coffield, 2007), a consideration of teachers’ attitudes towards major reform in the sector (Cara et al, 2008), or the impact on learner outcomes as evidence to government for a ‘refresh’ of the SfL strategy (Warner and Vorhaus, 2008). While such research has been illuminating of the developing sophistication and use of government policy levers in the delivery of education targets over the last decade, and offers important evidence of the effect of major policy shifts upon interlinked communities of practice in the sector, ‘the significance of individual dispositions and biography’ (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003) has been relatively neglected.

Policy Context
Sir Claus Moser’s 1999 report, ‘A Fresh Start’, investigated the issue of poor basic skills amongst adults in England and proposed a National Strategy to address the problem. The resulting SfL strategy, intended to be ‘rolled out’ over a decade to 2010, includes: a new teaching and learning infrastructure for adult basic skills; National standards and Core curricula; National qualifications for learners and for teachers; specific targets for the numbers of learners engaged in basic skills learning opportunities and for achievement of the new national qualifications. Regulation of ‘licensed practitioners’ will be accomplished through a new qualifications framework for teaching in the LS sector and a mandatory requirement for LS staff to have a teaching qualification, with the introduction of a licentiate qualification for initial training: Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS), while Associate Teacher Learning and Skills (ATLS) status is available to those ‘with teaching roles [that] carry significantly less than the full range of teaching responsibilities’ (DIUS 2007).
In addition to the new training qualifications there is, from 2008, a legal requirement on practitioners to participate in 30 hours pro-rata of professional development annually. Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), a sector skills council, now has responsibility for publication of current statements of standards to be achieved by teachers in the LS sector, while quality assurance has been delegated to the Standards Verification Authority (SVUK), now responsible for the standards that underpin any programme of training that lead to the new officially-sanctioned awards. Alongside this push towards a more rational framework for training, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) has a renewed remit, broadened from inspection of school teacher training to include training of teachers in the LS Sector. These developments mean that a coherent body of professional knowledge is being constructed and the boundaries of the sector tightened. The instrumentalism in official discourse around tutor training (Tedder and Lawy, 2008) is part of the move towards the creation of a ‘unified policy space’ for the LS sector (Hamilton, 2007: 257)

**Some thoughts on identity**

Much recent work on practitioner identities and communities of practice in the post-compulsory education sector (Avis et al, 2002; Hodges, 1998; Viskovic and Robson, 2001; Zukas and Malcolm, 2002) have been underpinned by the social theory of learning explored in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and later elaborated by Wenger (1998). Wenger (1998) explored how our identities are produced through participation in practice, through membership of communities and argued that our learning changes who we are within the context of these communities, which are integral to our daily lives. Wenger elaborated notions of identity as ‘a becoming’, as lived and negotiated experience, rather than a fixed category or label, and of a community of practice as created by sustained pursuit of shared enterprises. Zukas and Malcolm (2002) understand the construction of teachers’ identities in post-compulsory education as a process of participation, rather than acquisition, and the pedagogic identity as active and dynamic. Forms of participation are ‘pieces of a puzzle’ rather than the sharp boundaries between disconnected aspects of our Selves (Wenger, 1998: 158). An understanding of identity formation as being fundamentally social in character, with identity itself a learning process (Wenger 1998), moves away from the idea of identity as fixed or unitary. Identity work is not confined to one period of our lives as theories of socialisation suggest, nor to particular settings: ‘we define who we are by where we have been and where we are going’ (Robson, 2006: 72). Identity is a trajectory in time, incorporating our past, our present and our future (Wenger, 1998).

**Practitioner Case Studies**

Below, I draw upon three narratives from adult educators working in the Learning and Skills sector; Simon, a numeracy tutor in a voluntary and community education centre; Kate, a teacher trainer based in a local FE college;
Susan, a curriculum manager for a County Community Learning Service with extensive experience as a basic skills tutor/organiser as well as curriculum coordinator.

Simon
Simon works for a local adult and community education provider and teaches both Numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). He indicates the value to his own professional development of recent subject-specific training (the City and Guilds certificate 9486 in teaching adult numeracy):

"I didn’t like it straight off, but as the course went on I actually found it [...] did broaden and strengthen my views as to what good numeracy teaching was about... beyond just the subject matter but what it means in terms of people’s lives [...] what I was able to take [...] and put into practice in the classroom [...] making me more aware of [...] their circumstances [...]"

Simon registers a significant change in his own professional teaching expertise, and signals a sense of illumination and enabling as he views his students and his practice anew. This trope is repeated at intervals throughout his narrative as Simon returns to his experience on the City and Guilds course, thus indicating the significance of his participation for his developing sense of identity as an adult educator. The threading of this story element throughout Simon’s narrative underlines the potentially transformational nature of well-considered professional training programmes for practitioners. However, he also indicates an underlying note of discord at the new requirement for LS practitioners to maintain their training profile annually: "I suppose I have mixed feelings about that. While he reiterates the value and need to continually learn and develop:

"...I quite like the idea that people carry on taking an interest in things and developing [...] and evolving, changing, growing... So [...] you know, why stop? [...]"

he qualifies this enthusiasm and critiques the manner in which training programmes had been offered, indicating a sense of imposition that has removed his personal agency from the process of learning and developing, in language contrasting sharply with his earlier rejoicing in the possibility of life-long learning:

"So, let’s think about the training courses... to some extent, as you go along through the work you become aware of areas where you could do with [...] further development and it might not be when the time is proscribed for you from above, [...] my fear, as these courses were being built in, that we’d be made to do them one after another like on a conveyor belt system..."

His narrative suggests a general sense of embattlement, within a process of change viewed as problematic, and is experienced by practitioners as disempowerment and anger:

"I think there’s something about the [...] way changes were communicated to people working in the field [...] there were a lot of people who thought,
‘well, I’m already doing my hardest to do reasonably well in my job [...] and all of a sudden I’m being told I have to do this and this and this’ [...] I think to some extent it was demoralising, [...] it rather undermined [...] their capacity to do their work…

This extract indicates the complexity underlying Simon’s unease at the new training frameworks that impact upon his professional practice. Simon’s learning trajectory reflects fluctuating tensions as he has sought to balance and retain a sense of agency in his life overall. In an essay exploring the effects of restructuring in the US school system on one dedicated high school teacher, Ivor Goodson argues that ‘implicit in the reforms is a notion that many teachers are inadequate and need to be put to work in a more targeted and rigorous way’ (Goodson, 2006: 258). Simon’s narrative echoes this as he indicates the complex pressures on practitioners to deliver within an outcome-focused learning programme and the apparent dismissal of experience that is unaccredited or that has older, vocational accreditation.

Kate

Kate, a teacher-trainer in a local further education (FE) college with significant experience as a subject learning coach, runs informal weekly resource sessions for maths and numeracy tutors in her college:

…if anyone can’t make that time I plan individual sessions…so within our college there are opportunities for anybody teaching maths […] who’s just having to teach key skills or just suddenly having to teach basic skills and they think ‘I haven’t done this before, help!’…

Practitioners within the LS sector have, traditionally, a wide range of formal qualifications and informal experience and knowledge, and significant sections of the sector workforce could arguably be characterised as non-traditional learners. The rapid changes and formalisation of the professional development practices associated with the SfL strategy within the LS sector could also be viewed as ‘wounding learning practices’ (Wojecki, 2007: 169), which have turned some adult education practitioners into ‘reluctant learners’ themselves. Kate indicated such a possibility in her account of one of her numeracy trainees:

when she phoned me she said, ‘I’ve got my Cert Ed, I don’t know why I have to get this! My students are passing their tests, why do I need to do it? […] part of that was anxiety […] many of these teachers have got … barely an O Level […] but possibly when you get down to the core, it could be … their own lack of confidence in their personal maths[…] I’ve had people […] they’ve been teaching numeracy for some time and when I give them a self-assessment sheet I could sense this… ‘Oh my god! Can I do that?’ […] I think that can be quite a barrier

Teacher educators can find themselves dealing with other educators whose sense of professional identity has been fractured by the speed of change in the sector. As teacher trainers they also who have to interpret and deliver new and unfamiliar qualifications:

… but […] they’ve completely changed how the whole thing is assessed so that its much more difficult to … to map it across… to work out how I’m
going to deliver it ...the Level 4 was straightforward... it's a list of contents... I can see... 'I know how to do this, this and this' and fit it all in [...] but then you look at something else...[the Level 5 element], 'wait a minute... a whole year's work has got to go into that....how am I going to put it together?'... and that's going to be the big challenge ...trying to work it out...

Kate's enthusiastic response suggests the isolating and pressured experience of working at the interface between practitioners and the implementation of new professional qualification frameworks:

there's going to be some free professional support, so I emailed a split second back to say 'yes please!' .... So that's where I'm going to get my support from as it's certainly ... I don't know where else to go...

Kate is concerned about her own struggle to encourage engagement with training and with the SfL strategy by practitioners within her FE College. In the current regulatory framework, as Zukas and Malcolm note: 'teachers may experience a real and isolating dissonance in their pedagogic identity' (Zukas and Malcolm, 2002: 232).

Susan

Susan's reflections, from the vantage point of experience, offer a commentary upon how the strategy has impacted upon provision as a result of 8 years of '[e]ndless change' (Edward et al, 2007). A curriculum manager for a County Community Learning Service, Susan signposts the anticipation experienced by many in the field at the potential for change:

I remember being quite inspired by Helena Kennedy... widening participation, [...] and Moser too, because that was about entitlement, wasn't it... and it was about a proper curriculum, and proper training...

She also values the resulting transformation in attitudes:

I think the publicity campaign, definitely [...] you didn't actually admit to anybody [...] and people are saying 'yea, I really need to get my level 2, I can see that and I'll come along and do it' [...] So, I think a lot of people are more up-front about it...

Lack of training has long been an issue with tutors, while the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2003; 2006) have been critical of the variability in provision of initial teacher training across the sector. Susan's narrative suggests that, while training has been welcome, the frameworks dictating content and form are problematic:

our students deserve trained teachers ... just would like the training to be a bit more... a lot more, empowering of the teachers and developing of creativity....[...] I'm finding tutors now ...because we're saying 'right, you've got to do this, you've got to have it like this', probably more because of inspection and Ofsted, [...] they're sick to death of writing every single thing down on a lesson plan and reviewing it all [...] I think because we're counting everything, we've actually lost the quality of some
Identity is formed in social interaction and tutor responses are indicative of the contexts in which they practice (Zukas, 2006). The standards and verification framework that underpin all training in the LS sector is threaded with a discourse of competence; it is therefore unsurprising that practitioners identify training with the acquisition of their individual professional competencies and only attend training events required of them. This contrasts sharply with the more social and collective experiences Susan recalls from her own early days as a tutor trainer: it was hugely empowering [...] your professional development really was fantastic in that environment [...] you were with your colleagues [...] looking at ... the latest developments and training your tutors [...] there was just something [...] motivating and inspirational... It was very person-centred ... and I think we’ve lost that...

While elements of Susan’s narrative suggest a sense of embattlement:

mentally, you get stressed out[...] because you don’t have time to reflect, you’re continually responding to demands and initiatives and changes.... she seeks to integrate her earlier empowering experiences into her current practice whenever possible.

Some final thoughts
Kathryn Ecclestone signals the importance of engaging critically with the implications of policy pressures within post-compulsory education and the necessity to:

[...]counter the instrumental way in which policies turn agency into choice and decision-making where individuals ‘maximise’ use and calculate costs and benefits. Not only does this not reflect choice, action and outcomes; it enables policy makers to recast agency as responding ‘appropriately’ to opportunities ‘offered’ by policy (Ecclestone, 2007: 129).

Change in the LS sector has been experienced by many practitioners as non-deliberative and top down, and the training framework as an imposed structure. It is therefore important to interrogate public discourses and the policy narratives that are created in the sector and to track how stakeholders have been conceptualised and positioned under developing policy frameworks. In a critical analysis of development narratives, Roe (1991) likens the narrative structure of development policies to that of the folktale, in which a crisis summons forth a hero, who battles against a series of obstacles, emerges triumphant, and everyone lives happily ever after. The ‘situated practices’ threading through respondents’ accounts produce a fractured, contradictory and messy narrative at odds with the re-shaped tales presented in official policy. By identifying points of tension in the field, as revealed through practitioner accounts, we can consider where the ‘embryonic deliberative spaces’ could be developed as both informal networks and more formal consultative practices (Hamilton, 2007). Research with
practitioners to identify the impact of education reform has the potential to facilitate an identification and reclaiming of ‘deliberative spaces’ for reflection and creative thinking to re-invigorate practice.

Bibliography


**Endnote**

i. The ‘learning and skills sector’ in the UK encompasses further education colleges (FE), adult and community learning settings (ACL) that may be city- or country-based, work-based learning (WBL) and training in the voluntary sector. Practitioners in the sector may also work as trainers and tutors in prisons, hospitals, the armed forces and in local government. [With thanks to Mike Tedder].

ii. Extracts from the interview transcripts: I use pseudonyms throughout having asked participants whether they wished to be anonymised, which all requested. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and participants given a copy for comment and clarification. While the narratives were offered in the knowledge of my researcher objectives, the analysis and conclusions are my responsibility alone.

iii. All quotes from interview transcripts are in italics with […] used to indicate my editing.

*This document was added to the Education-Line database on 23 June 2009*