Beyond compliance: lessons from a reflexive and critical perspective on teacher education practices in further education

Michael Tedder and Robert Lawy, University of Exeter, UK

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

Introduction
For two decades there have been attempts to create structured and formalised programmes of initial training for teachers in further education (FE) colleges based on statements of ‘standards’. This trend was apparent in the articulation of the FE National Training Organisation standards (FENTO, 1999) and was reiterated more recently in the Further Education Workforce Reforms (LLUK 2007a). In the foreword to the latter, Bill Rammell (Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education) emphasised the need for a workforce in FE that is ‘thoroughly professional and highly skilled’. To the extent that such policies are ‘evidence-based’, the most significant source of ‘evidence’ during the last decade has been the Office for Standards in Education (e.g. Ofsted 2003; 2006). Their annual reports highlighted perceived inadequacies in the practices of initial teacher training that have led to the latest reforms in the field.

The White Paper, Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances (DfES 2006) outlined a new licentiate qualification of Qualified Teacher in Learning and Skills (QTLS) that was intended to become a mandatory requirement for teachers in the sector. Subsequently there has been the introduction of a raft of new qualifications (PTLLS, CTLLS and DTLLSii that are ostensibly designed to meet the various professional needs of teachers in different teaching or training situations throughout further education and the lifelong learning sector (DIUS 2007). The assumption of these qualifications is that workforce problems can be resolved through the introduction of differentiated training linked with a prescriptive set of standards enforced by a robust regulatory and inspection framework. Lifelong Learning UKiii was charged with constructing the set of revised standards (LLUK 2007b) while Ofsted continued to undertake inspections. The reforms inevitably have consequences for higher education institutions that offer courses for teachers in the sector.

This paper reflects on findings from research completed in January 2009 into the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and mentoring in the reformed
initial teacher training. Whilst there is broad agreement about the potential benefits of the innovations to programmes of teacher training, the auditable and assessment-led model of practice needs to be contested. In this paper we argue for an approach that moves beyond compliance and the performative criteria that underpin it, to an approach where the training of teachers engages trainees and their trainers in a critical and reflexive way with the assumptions, grammars and standards that underpin practice.

**Context**
The number of people attending FE colleges has steadily risen over the last decade, particularly within the 16-18 age range. Figures from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) indicate that by 2005, there were more than 100,000 additional 16- to 18-year-olds in full-time education compared to 1997, the numbers of young people on Apprenticeships had tripled and over a million adults had registered for basic skills courses (LSC 2005). Yet despite this intensification the FE sector remains very much the ‘Cinderella’ of the education sector and, with the whole of the public sector, subject to many of the same pressures to reduce costs and increase accountability and efficiency (Clarke & Newman 1997).

In reviewing change in the FE sector overall, Edward & Coffield (2007) rather laconically comment that ‘charting the impact of government policy on practice in any sector is … not a matter of recording linear, evolutionary, coherent or cumulative progress’. In the twelve years from 1993, when FE colleges were incorporated, until 2005, Steer et al (2007) identify three periods during which there were different ‘configurations of policy levers’ governing the managerial framework of funding agencies, quality assurance systems and inspection regimes. They conclude that ‘policy appears to be being steering with ever more precision and increasing central control’ (p 188). More recently, further changes to the framework has dispersed responsibility for funding from the LSC to three different agencies, quality development has been assigned to the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) while quality inspection continues to be within the remit of Ofsted.

Edward & Coffield (2007) observe that policy ‘helps create the conditions and atmosphere within which professionals and those who administer and implement policy must work’ (op cit, p 122) and, of course, it is the teachers and managers in colleges who need to respond to the requirements of policy changes. Several researchers during the period in question have shown how professionals have constituted or reconstructed their professional identity. The post-war settlement that lasted until the 1970s meant that teachers were generally trusted to manage and determine their professional practices and the idea of professionalism was founded upon notions of autonomy and independence (for example, Grace, 1987). According to Stronach et al (2002), contemporary professionalism is not a single identity but is associated
with multiple identities and identifications that can be contradictory and ambivalent. Hayes (2003) draws attention to one important strand in observing that ideas of professionalism in colleges have turned ‘from a consensus about independence, to seeking control through the market, to fostering forms of self-regulation that are open to a therapeutic orientation’ (p.33). The allusion here is to what Hayes sees as a proliferation of counselling and mentoring processes in the FE sector.

Other researchers have analysed the strategies used by FE staff to retain some control within processes of change. Shain & Gleeson (1999) described teacher responses to the increasingly managerial culture of the 1990s, characterising them as showing rejection and resistance, compliance or strategic compliance. In a parallel work, Gleeson & Shain (1999) commented on the responses of middle managers to their increasing responsibilities and the way they mediate the managerial pressures on them in the interests of their staff and may show willing or unwilling compliance with the direction of policy change (see also Colley et al, 2007; Steer et al, 2007).

However, opportunities for new and innovative approaches are possible (Stronach et al, 2002). Elsewhere, we have demonstrated (Lawy & Tedder, in press) some of the impact of the changes on the understanding and agency of teacher trainers. FE colleges are heterogeneous rather than homogeneous and different staffroom practices and cultures are the norm rather than the exception. Staff interact with the organisation, their colleagues and with students in different ways. We see for example, contradictory tales of long-standing lecturing staff who are uncomfortable when caught up in a morass of welfare issues that they now feel obliged to address to avoid regulatory glare (Gleeson et al, 2005).

The performative criteria and judgements that are increasingly being used to measure the effectiveness and efficacy of practice are part of a broader managerialist discourse where managers assert the right to manage and where professional judgements are subject to surveillance and where practitioners are continuously called to account. Avis (2005) draws attention to the contradiction between performative demands and the expectation of broader policies that further education should respond effectively to contemporary economic conditions:

**Performativity, through its chain of targets and accountability operates within a ‘blame culture’ where accountability becomes a means by which the institution can call to account its members. In many respects performativity is reminiscent of Fordist work relations in as much as the worker is tightly surveilled, with attempts to render transparent the details of practice. Performance management sits well with low trust … [and] is at odds with current strictures surrounding the knowledge economy, which emphasise fluidity, non-hierarchical team work and high**
trust relations linked to the ongoing development of human, intellectual and social capital (Avis 2005, p. 212).

There is little doubt that FE teacher training stood to benefit from greater government support and resources, particularly given the recent sustained increase over the last 20 years in demand for courses and programmes. However, rather than addressing structural questions and issues of resourcing which arise from that – including the systematic erosion of the conditions of service and pay of lecturers – the emphasis has been focused upon teachers themselves and the quality of managers in the sector. It was our interest in such issues that underpinned our empirical research.

**The Research**

The research project was part of a series funded by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) via Centres for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETTs). The research comprised a study of the impact of mentoring and Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) within the reformed teacher training programmes in the further education sector in the South West of England (for details, see Lawy & Tedder 2009).

The principal data collection method comprised semi-structured interviews and 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/or mentors in programmes and also from nine managers, some working in FE colleges and some in other community organisations. The interviews lasted anywhere between 45 minutes and two hours and all were fully transcribed. We used a life history or biographical methodology in order to locate the narratives of interviewees within a wide personal and social context (e.g. Alheit 2005; Tedder & Biesta 2007). From our research we identified two underlying tensions about professional formation and highlighted some of the ways in which practices of individual planning and mentoring are contested.

The first of the two tensions was evident between developmental and summative aspirations in mentoring and the use of ILPs. *Mentoring towards Excellence* (AoC & FENTO 2001) was produced after the publication of the original FENTO (1999) standards and formed part of the LSC’s quality improvement agenda of the time. Produced after extensive consultation with college staff, it adopts a developmental approach to mentoring (and, by implication, to the use of ILPs) where the process is formative and focused upon the needs of the mentee. Yet, a short time later, *Equipping our Teachers for the Future* (DfES 2004) shifted the emphasis towards an essentially ‘off the shelf’ school-based and judgemental Ofsted model of practice where the emphasis is upon assessment and accountability in relation to a set of standards (for further discussion, see Tedder & Lawy 2008).
The second tension to emerge from our interviews with managers and tutors was more of an ethical concern and was particularly evident in those cases where teacher educators saw their role as encompassing the development of a value system, and a commitment to public duty and service. In such circumstances the emphasis is upon the professional formation and identity of the practitioner within a community of practice (see for example, Harrison et al, 2003; Gleeson et al 2005). Julia Evetts (2005) identifies two ideal types of professionalism: *organizational professionalism* is a discourse of control that imposes standardized work procedures and practices and relies on externalized forms of regulation and accountability measures such as target-setting and performance review. This she contrasts with *occupational professionalism* as a discourse constructed within professional groups based on autonomy and discretionary judgment by practitioners in complex cases. Practitioners are guided by codes of professional ethics monitored by professional institutes and associations. Crucially, she notes that such professionalism depends on common and lengthy systems of education and vocational training and the development of strong occupational identities and work cultures (see also Colley 2007, p. 175).

With respect to the use of ILPs, we found that most trainees recognised that they have become a standard component of the training package for aspiring teachers and simply accepted that completing an ILP was part of what they had to do to achieve the qualification. Most were aware of the national standards and made ‘appropriate’ connections between their work and the standards. However, many regarded the process as a chore and not a priority in their professional training. Their immediate commitments to teaching and assessing students, together with the demands of writing assignments and maintaining integrity in their classroom practices, took priority over maintaining the ILP. The trainees showed little interest, perhaps because they were unaware of the possibility, in engaging in a critical dialogue and exchange about their teaching or about the expectations and outcomes associated with the role. They were more concerned with ‘doing the necessary’ to meet the formal requirements of the programme.

We found that tutors were generally familiar with practices such as undertaking initial assessment, SWOT analysis, action planning, target setting but they varied in the importance they attached to these processes. One tutor was critical of the emphasis placed on self-evaluation and action planning during the initial stages of ILP development when the trainees ‘don’t have the faintest idea what their strengths and weaknesses are in teaching.’ For her there were other priorities to address in the early stages of teacher training, such as the development of a skill set and the development of an understanding of what teacher practice meant.
The ILP model favoured by Ofsted is one where trainees engage in a series of planning exercises where their planned ‘learning’ would be based on defining targets based on the achievement of LLUK standards. However, in their interviews, several tutors spoke primarily about a retrospective function for ILPs, of the importance of tracking and recording achievements, and said relatively little about an anticipatory, planning function.

The managers we interviewed drew attention to a lack of clarity about matters such as the ownership and responsibility for an ILP and with procedural issues over quality assurance, assessment and inspection.

With respect to mentoring, we found that where a good personal relationship was established, a mentor could make a valued contribution to a trainee’s personal and professional development. Trainees expressed particular appreciation of others in the workplace – colleagues and line-managers - who were supportive of their professional development. Several remarked how important it had been for them to work with others who have a ‘passion’ for teaching or are ‘passionate’ about their subject. It was this enthusiasm that mattered rather than technical proficiency. Subject expertise was a contributory factor to the success of mentoring relationships but so were availability and flexibility, seniority and experience and most important was that the mentor showed a genuine enthusiasm or passion for their work.

All our interviewees reported a range of ways in which mentoring types of support for professional formation can occur very successfully informally (for example, in ‘buddy’ arrangements) and also occurs regularly in formal systems (led by team leaders within course meetings) even though such experiences may not be termed ‘mentoring’. What emerged as important mentor qualities from our interviewees’ accounts was a mentor’s availability and responsiveness to the needs of the mentee. The managers were in a position to be able to locate the issues of mentoring within the broader organisational context: they recognised how mentoring is positioned within many other systems that fulfil similar or complementary functions.

Some of our interviewees commented on the importance of standards – but usually in the sense of the challenge that was set by a respected colleague setting high standards rather than the printed statements devised by an external agency.

It seems that Ofsted expects mentoring to be capable of ensuring that new teachers acquire subject-specific expertise. We found that being a subject expert mattered to trainees rather less than we expected. Nevertheless, we found little consideration, either in the literature or in our empirical research that a ‘subject’ is a problematic concept or that subject pedagogies should be subject to rigorous and critical examination (see Tedder & Lawy 2008).
Conclusions

One of the aspirations for the research was to find a ‘model of best practice’ in the use of ILPs and mentoring and to apply that to teacher training. We uncovered a variety of models of practice in the public and private sectors but did not find a simple solution transferable to the FE sector. Nor did we find a model in one college that was necessarily transferable to a second. Different models of provision are appropriate for different work-place contexts and for different purposes. There is a danger with national standards that they close down opportunities for a critical engagement with literature or with alternative models of practice. ‘Best’ practice can be regarded as, by definition, incontestable and so encouraging trainees to critique standards or models of ‘best practice’ becomes discouraged. Instead trainees concentrate on the compliant acquisition of skills and the completion of checklists.

We found that experienced managers and tutors bemoaned the closing off of the curriculum with the insistence of the new regime on meeting externally imposed standards and addressing subject pedagogical concerns. One experienced and committed tutor said at our last meeting that she had decided to give up her teacher training role and concentrate on her subject teaching because she had become so demoralised by the new schemes. Existing notions of compliance may not fully characterise the professional identity of the remaining tutors; they show a quality that could be described as ‘pragmatic compliance’. Getting the job done has become their main concern, fending off the multifarious demands of managers and inspectors has become the goal, and there is little of the reflection and critical evaluation that traditionally marked the professional teacher.

We would argue that the FE sector is ‘best’ served by a holistic and broader approach that is not simply focused on the development of job-specific skills but is concerned with the development of trainees’ capabilities and pedagogical knowledge and awareness in the widest sense. Trainees are ‘best’ supported when empowered to work with mentors of their own choosing within a community of practice utilising ILPs that serve negotiated purposes rather than the purposes of an outside body or agency. Such conditions would foster the development of critical and evaluative skills that many see as central to the professionalism of teacher education.

There are important challenges facing the sector in years to come and we end by suggesting that it is time that the emphasis was shifted away from the sterility of arguments about standards and away from the leaden bureaucracy of writing plans, records and policies. Trainees should be encouraged to be creative, imaginative, to take risks and engage their students in critical dialogue rather than simply conforming to a set of externally imposed measures, systems and procedures. We would argue for an approach to teacher education that recognises and celebrates the sometimes intangible
qualities of commitment, enthusiasm and risk taking that make for good teaching and learning.

References


Lawy R and Tedder M (2009) *Initial Teacher Education in the Learning and Skills Sector in the South West: ILPs, Mentors and Mentor Training*. Exeter, University of Exeter


Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (2005) *Priorities for success: funding for learning and skills*, Coventry, LSC.


Further education colleges represent the largest and most substantial component of the further education (FE) sector in the UK. In different contexts the FE sector is known as the ‘learning and skills sector’ or the ‘lifelong learning’ sector and embraces adult and community learning (ACL), work-based learning (WBL), and the voluntary sector.

PTLLS: Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector; CTLLS: Certificate in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector; DTLLS: Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning sector.

As a ‘sector skills council’, Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) is responsible for setting the standards. Responsibility for quality assurance has been delegated to another body, Standards Verification UK (SVUK).

The 11 Centres for Excellence in Teacher Training (CETTs) were established by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) as a means for targeting resources and funding into the Learning and Skills sector. The funding for our study came from the Switch CETT. The QIA has been replaced by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS).

*This document was added to the Education-Line database on 26 June 2009*