CULTURES AND COLLEGES: THE CREATION AND TRANSMISSION OF IDEAS ABOUT TEACHING IN FURTHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper responds to Daniels and Warmington’s (2007, 389) call for learning to be analysed within “a systematic and coherent analysis of the wider structuring of society” and argues for clarity in the conceptualisation of cultural influence on learning in the workplace. The paper applies a restricted definition of culture to sections of teachers working in an English Further Education (FE) college and draws on data from both training and serving teachers to examine cultural influences on their understandings of teaching in the FE sector. Both the placement experience of pre-service trainee teachers in the college and the experience of serving teachers in the same college are considered within the context of the relationship between local and wider cultures and how these shape learning in the workplace. It concludes that wider macro-level cultural influences are most significant in the creation and transmission of ideas about teaching in FE. Relating this to the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC) research project, this paper suggests that TLC’s localised approach focusing on ‘learning sites’ may have understated the significance of wider cultural influences on learning. Clarity in the conceptualisation of culture may avoid overstating localised influences on workplace learning which may obscure more powerful structural influences.

Introduction

This paper considers the relationship between cultures and work-based learning (WBL) by analysing the cultural influences on serving teachers and trainee teachers on placement in the English further education (FE) sector. FE is a heterogeneous sector with over three million students, which has been described as what is not school and not university (Kennedy 1997, 1), though even those boundaries are becoming porous. It remains the sector where the majority of vocational training and adult education take place, as well as academic study between the ages of 16 and 19. Since 2001 all new teachers in FE have been required to have a teaching qualification or to achieve one whilst in post. In each academic year during the period from mid 2005 to early 2008, during which time data was being collected for this study, around 1800 of the 20,000 FE trainee teachers in England were on full-time, one year pre-service courses delivered at a Higher Education Institution. These courses included a substantial element of
WBL during a placement, including at least 120 hours of contact with students, normally in a college.

In order to research how ideas about teaching are created and disseminated, this study located teachers and the college where they work within a broad cultural and structural context in response to Daniels and Warmington’s (2007, 389) call for the “general working hypothesis of learning” to be expanded:

> to include notions of experiencing and identity formation within an account that includes a systematic and coherent analysis of the wider structuring of society as an inseparable part of the analysis.

This effort to locate the development of ideas about teaching within a structural context recognised the interplay between individual and environment and was, above all, informed by Marx’s (Marx and Engels 1968, 96) formulation:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.

### Learning

Despite the plethora of education and training policy, government pronouncements eschew any definition or description of learning (see Coffield 2008) and even some research on WBL evades the issue of how learning may be understood (Boud and Solomon 2003, 331) which may lead to hazy epistemology. Jarvis’s (2007, xi) holistic definition identifies complexity and provides a focus on what learning involves:

> The combination of processes whereby the whole person — body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) — experiences a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person’s individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person.

This usefully comprehends how individuals may differently shape what they learn from a shared social situation, and that learning results in becoming a changed
person. Coffield’s (2008, 7) distilled and pragmatic definition of learning also informed this study:

Learning only refers to significant changes in capability, understanding, knowledge, practices, attitudes or values by individuals, groups, organisations or society.

As with Jarvis, this resonates with the need to keep both the social and the individual within view, which directed the methodology of the study this paper is based upon. Similarly, the idea of significant change helps clarify how the hierarchy of cultural and structural influences differentially affect learning, or in the case of this study, what people understand teaching to be. Attempting to understand how people learn to become teachers in FE demands investigation of how they participate and what they learn from society’s structures as well as from their workplace. Any discussion of cultural influence on learning, however, predicates the existence of a culture.

**Cultures**

Not every social entity or gathering can meaningfully constitute a culture, so not every social entity or gathering can exert cultural influence. Consequently, a study of workplace cultures requires clarity about how the term culture is being employed. For Geertz, the study of culture is a search for contingent meaning; that is, the meanings that humans attach to their world and its processes and actions. He (Geertz 1993, 11) was critical of some misconceptions about culture:

One is to imagine that culture is a self-contained “super-organic” reality with forces and purposes of its own; that is, to reify it. Another is to claim that it consists in the brute pattern of behavioural events we observe in fact to occur in some identifiable community or another; that is to reduce it.

Culture should not be essentialised because it does not exist separate to the group of humans who constructed it. On the other hand, Geertz was critical of the view that culture exists only as a reification of beliefs or understandings, because culture is discernable in how lives are lived through actions and social relationships. Accordingly, what people say about themselves and the meanings
attached to their utterances are important in the study of culture but so is what people do. Jarvis’s (2007, 24) definition of culture is characteristic of an all-encompassing sweep that sees culture as what is shared:

all the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values and emotions that we, as human beings, have added to our biological base. It is a social phenomenon; it is what we as a society, or a people, share and which enables us to live as a society.

This description recognises the complexity of culture, at whatever level, though the explicit separation from biology is moot if the relationship of mind and body is considered, for example, in the light of Bourdieu’s concepts. Such a definition, though, tends to emphasise consensus when domination, tension and conflict may be inherent and even formative of the values in a culture. Richardson’s (2001, 3) formulation that “culture is the material form assumed by humanity’s social activity” that has evolved over a period of time may be more illuminative for the context of WBL. The stress on time is significant because sustainable cultures do not evolve instantly. Richardson’s “material form” can be perceived in language, artefacts or habitual practice, which are both an expression of culture and a means by which people reproduce culture. James and Biesta (2007, 23) put this succinctly:

Cultures … are both structured and structuring, and individuals’ actions are neither totally determined by the confines of a … culture, nor are they totally free.

This conceptualisation describes a dialectical process that accounts for how both cultures and individuals can form and evolve through interaction. James and Biesta were lead researchers in the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC) project, which studied learning in English FE between 2002 and 2005. The project team used the term “learning culture” (James and Biesta 2007, 4) to express the formative interaction between an individual student and the environment of the college. Learning cultures exist:

through the actions, dispositions and interpretations of the participants. They exist through the interaction and communication and are
(re)produced by individuals just as much as individuals are (re)produced by learning cultures. Individuals’ actions are therefore neither totally determined by learning cultures, nor totally free.

The TLC project is further discussed and critiqued below, but its focus on the specific and local learning culture is important. Situating a discussion of culture within defined economic and social formations, as does Bourdieu whose concepts informed TLC, demystifies humanist notions about the inherent, a-temporal, and occasionally almost metaphysical value of culture found in some work. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, 23) stress inequality and competition in culture.

In any given social formation, legitimate culture, i.e. the culture endowed with the dominant legitimacy, is nothing other than the dominant cultural arbitrary insofar as it is misrecognised in its objective truth as a cultural arbitrary and as the dominant cultural arbitrary.

Sometimes this cultural legitimacy through domination is apparent, but more normally the domination is unseen and the imposition of cultural norms may be internalised and become a feature of doxa. Domination and imposition remain important in understanding culture, both generally in an unequal society and in the workplace where, for instance, trainees have a marginal position. An adequate definition of culture which can focus research in the workplace has, therefore, to transcend essentialism to include a situation’s particular relationships, power and social constraints. Moreover, the size of the social group is less significant in defining a culture than the coherence, extent and stability of its common history, because these factors influence whether or not the culture will persist even when individuals leave. The definition of a culture adopted for this study was adapted from Schein (2004, 17):

A dominant pattern of shared basic assumptions held by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has had stability and so can withstand tension and conflict. It, therefore, arbitrarily exists as the correct way for new members to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those
problems and is apparent in the language, behaviour and artefacts used by members.

This complex formulation is applicable at local and societal levels, though it may overstress the deterministic aspect of culture because newcomers can bring about change, as Lave and Wenger (1991) argue. A major focus of this study, however, is on those who enter a culture for a short time on placement and so attempts to bring about change would be difficult and risky (Colley et al 2003, 490). Moreover, this definition stresses the crucial moral aspect of culture; that within a culture there is a right and a wrong way to behave. A methodological issue remains, though, regarding what studies of culture can distinguish especially since this study was considering both micro and macro cultural influences. For a passenger in an aircraft 30,000 feet up in the sky major conurbations can appear well-defined and homogenous with only major routes clearly visible. On the approach to landing the shapes and colours of buildings reveal themselves, as do residential streets, cars and people. Neither of these views is inherently deceptive; but perspective is crucial as to what can be discerned and this pertains also to the scope of methods of research (see also Hodkinson et al 2007a, 418). To comprehend cultural influences on trainee FE teachers there is a need to consider the whole FE sector (from 30,000 feet, as it were), as well as to focus more closely on the college and more closely still on small groups and individual teachers. What the researcher can perceive is partly determined by the scope of the research; if a study’s methodology focuses on the specific, it may miss the significance of the general. This understanding helped to avoid assumptions that superficial differences between groups of teachers in the college necessarily constituted diverse cultures and therefore exerted significant diverse cultural influences. Initially, the precise context of trainees’ placements seemed of overwhelming importance in what the trainees learnt about teaching. At a later stage when the whole college and wider society were taken in to view, the precise context seemed relatively much less important.
The study
The qualitative data on which this paper draws were collected from serving teachers as well as trainee teachers on placement at a large urban FE college in the north of England, referred to here as City College. City College had over six hundred teachers within departments that straddled various sites, and within these departments there were smaller groups of staff, or sections. The art department, for example, had around sixty staff in various buildings on different campuses; within that department the fashion section had around ten staff, all based in one small suite of rooms. The majority of the data came from a series of interviews and observations at City College involving a sample of nine pre-service trainee teachers based in various sections in the art, sports, business and social care departments and eight serving teachers based in the same sections in the same departments as well as in the construction department. This work with serving teachers was to illuminate existing practices and relationships in the college. The study also had access to questionnaires returned by a total of 245 trainees and transcriptions of focus groups of trainee and serving teachers based at various colleges in the north of England during the same period. Applying the adopted definition, various parts of the City College’s workforce were examined to distinguish cultures, local or wider, evident in shared basic assumptions; stability; correct ways for new members to perceive, think, and feel; or a common language, behaviour and artefacts.

Isolation and Distinctiveness
A striking feature from the data was the isolation of both individuals and sections within City College. Mark, a plumbing teacher at the college for four years, referred to the “north and south divide” between his and the main campus, which was only a few hundred metres away. Andrea, a well-established special needs teacher, described how she and her colleagues “are working within a little bubble within a massive bubble” and how even within this group of teachers she felt unable to share resources or discuss students due to the lack of shared space or time. That isolation was apparent throughout the college, but it does not imply
distinctiveness. The experiences described in the sports, construction, business, arts or social care departments were more similar than different: heavy workload; coping with disaffected students; the burden of bureaucracy; the moral value of teaching. This certainly suggests “a pattern of shared basic assumptions” but shared beyond the college section or even beyond the college. Similarly, “the language, behaviour and artefacts” were common across all parts of the sample: for instance, lesson plans; interactive whiteboards; external verifiers; managers. During observations of lessons, similar classroom techniques were apparent throughout the college, though some techniques were more often used in one section than in another. There were, nevertheless, differences between the groups of teachers. The language heard in some staffrooms was coarser than in others and the technical terms used by plumbing teachers were obviously different from those used by art teachers. Their dress was different too, though not as might have been predicted. Each of the construction staff involved in this research wore a shirt and tie every day, while none of those in the business section did. In the latter, open-neck shirts, chinos and jeans were de rigueur among the male staff. Some of these differences may be described as conventions related to a group but they do not meaningfully represent cultural differences. An analogy may illustrate this distinction; if one family regularly eat a meal at six o’clock and another family at seven o’clock, that may be due to their conventional routine. Referring to that meal as tea, dinner or supper may, however, reveal more significant cultural differences.

In all but two of the situations within the sample at City College it would be misleading to argue that small differences of dress or classroom practices existed as ‘the correct way for new members to perceive, think and feel in relation to [problems of external and internal integration]’ except in a rather superficial way. Certainly, dress, language and behaviour are evidence of different socialisation, but this is related to class, gender and race beyond the direct influence of the workplace (Colley et al 2003, 49). On their own these conventions are not evidence of a sustainable local culture that affects ideas
about teaching. Moreover, focusing on these minor differences risks leaving unnoticed much more significant cultural factors in how people become teachers.

Applying the same rigour of definition to the stability or longevity of these groups of college teachers points to similar conclusions. The age and experience of trainees and serving teachers alike are important because a sustainable culture requires history. The study revealed rapid turnover of staff and similarly rapid promotion of new staff to positions of responsibility away from their original sections, which meant that there were limited history and stability within the majority of the parts of the college investigated. Consequently, in the terms of the adopted definition, distinctive cultures relating to specific parts of the college seemed to have barely existed. Arguably, distinctive cultures may evolve if staffing were to remain constant but that is moot, especially given the power of other broader cultural structures.

The significant exceptions to the above generalisations were the fashion and city-centre business sections at City College, both of which had long-term staff and cultural longevity. Furthermore, these sections had a record of integrating new members into a distinctive and apparently sustainable set of practices related to teaching and to patterns of social-interaction. Although these groups were small, each around ten people, there were discernible features in the material form of their culture. These features included a shared pattern of work so that colleagues often co-taught; regular socialising on and away from the college; similar attitudes to students; and a shared bank of resources and common classroom practices. Though both of these groups contained long-serving individuals who were central to the evolution of the culture, each had maintained this set of distinctive characteristics over a period of many years even as staff had come and gone. In the case of the fashion department, the consistency of these characteristics was distinguishable even from sections in the same department with rooms on the same corridor. It is important to stress, though, that the culture of the fashion and business sections was not necessarily the dominant one in
determining what the trainees placed there learnt about being a teacher and teaching. These trainees were as susceptible to wider cultural influence as the trainees placed elsewhere.

**Policy and culture**

City College had completed significant building projects before and during the period of research and policy reforms have shaped the architecture of City College through a well-funded construction programme closely tied to government priorities. The college had a new Skills Zone devoted to Skills for Life (SfL), (basic numeracy and literacy), and an impressive new Higher Education centre to help achieve government widening participation targets; and the college broadly divided adult from 14-19 provision on different campuses following national initiatives. The New Labour government’s discourse that emphasised learning and the learner over teaching was made concrete in these new buildings with huge communal areas for students and, in rather stark contrast, cramped staffrooms for teachers. More than this, locally implemented policy creates the conditions and atmosphere that staff work in (Coffield et al 2008, 37) and for many involved in this research that meant the perception of constant surveillance through audit and inspection, endless flux in work patterns, cuts in provision and increases in workload. This creates what might be called the corporate culture of City College and even of FE more broadly. The majority of serving staff in the sample described the experience of policy as constraint or imposition, even at a time when City College was better funded than in the whole of its history. Policy was not well understood by participants, however, and details of its justification and content were largely absent in responses. Policy was ‘other’ and these teachers defined themselves not with it, but in opposition to it: they felt its impact, even without knowledge of the particularities of policy. Hence, the precise specifications of policy are less important than how it is implemented in describing the culture it helps to form. College managers interpret and mediate national policy, but at City College they made little effort to explain it, merely to impose it.
Data was collected on how senior management consciously transmitted policy across City College. As noted before, the college is very large and covers several major campuses throughout the city and most internal communication was through an email system that included a news section. This section was more likely to contain details of a leaving party than to have information on college or national policies. When there was something of special significance to senior management, therefore, hard copies in the form of a letter from the principal or a newsletter were printed off and centrally circulated. This occurred around eight times in the academic years 2003-2006 and even this paucity of communication with staff suggests its low priority for senior managers. On SfL, however, senior management made a consistent effort to explain its policy through a series of four special newsletters. Elements of these newsletters were written by teachers in an accessible style suggesting, for example, how SfL might be incorporated into lesson planning. Moreover, to explain the need for SfL these very focused newsletters stated the figures for adult literacy and numeracy rates in council wards covered by the college, which were amongst the lowest in the country. Even within these bulletins, however, the dominant language of managerialism frequently sidelined that discourse of education related to social justice. In the introduction to one of these newsletters the college principal wrote:

Skills for Life (SfL) is the national strategy for improving adult literacy, language and numeracy. One of the Government’s targets is for 1.5 million adults to improve their literacy and numeracy skills by 2007. The targets will be achieved through the key goals of quality and consistency of provision through raising standards and achievement. […]

We all need to continue to own and champion the SfL agenda, both in terms of the application of college standards and quality improvement. (Skills for Life Newsletter: p2)

The targets are their own justification. Later (p5), under the puzzling heading “Reflection” is this objective of a local basic skills consortium:

- To co-ordinate market intelligence to ensure that the delivery meets the identified needs of the learners and to advise on its sufficiency.
These newsletters demonstrate the colonisation of education with business language ("own and champion the SfL agenda"; “market intelligence") associated with managerialism. They also demonstrate the prioritisation of targets over explanation. Mather and Seifert (2004, 7) found similar in their work with FE staff again pointing to how policy can shape a college’s culture:

> Government ministers control FE college managers through legislation, audit and performance targets; and in turn the managers control staff through familiar techniques of oppressive appraisal and performance measures, bullying, work intensification, and redefining a ‘good' lecturer in terms of delivering a quality service to ‘customers’ without recourse to the contested nature of the professional definition of education itself.

In City College, this situation shaped by policy constituted a significant part of what serving teachers and trainees experienced. This policy derives from the dominant culture to which all others relate, and even though objectively it had largely been imposed from outside City College, it had been internalised by some staff. John, a middle manager and teacher in the art department, explained “a certain mentality” necessary for new teachers:

> You’ve got to become more business-like; you’ve got to become a manager rather than a teacher; you’ve got to be a salesman and sell courses. ... A tutor’s role isn’t just teaching anymore… and I think City College are really keen to have that kind of culture where tutors don’t just look within the classroom but they look outside the classroom to see what is going on. Like at the moment it’s employability; links with industry etc. etc. Tutors wouldn’t normally think that way but now they are having to think that way.

Though other staff in the art department eschewed this type of language, significantly John was in charge of taking on new part-time staff and he explicitly only employed those he believed to support this ethos: “you have to be a team player. I don’t like individuals who don’t want to be part of the team.” This is indicative of how a broad policy reflecting the culture of the college and beyond can be disseminated.
The general absence of specific references to policy reforms in the teachers’ accounts may be explained by policy forming part of the unnoticed doxa of FE or as Jenkins (1992, 71) wrote, the “subjective expectation of objective probability”. More prosaically, the intense and overwhelming day-to-day pressure of teaching may explain the absence of a coherent understanding of reforms. The raw concerns of coping may have obscured knowledge of policy, which was simply less urgent. Nonetheless, the understanding, experience and influence of policy was general and not local. Like the serving teachers, where the trainee teachers in the sample mentioned policy, it was condemned as malign, though it was again poorly comprehended. Nevertheless, policy had shaped the trainee teachers’ course through, for instance, the requirement to meet a long and complicated set of professional standards. More broadly, government reforms determined many of the mechanisms of compliance that existed in colleges and which promoted performativity (Coffield et al 2007), such as the requirement to meet targets for student retention and achievement. This macro-level influence of policy through performativity may also be observed in a perception of teaching in FE apparent in responses from many of the sample that foregrounds coping with bureaucracy over making pedagogical choices (Orr and Simmons 2010).

Influences on teachers and teaching
This study involved teachers and trainees who came from a wide range of subject and vocational areas and previous analyses have emphasised the continuing influence on FE teachers’ practice of the vocational area from where they came (for example Lucas 2004 and Robson et al 2004). Viskovic and Robson (2001, 234) argued that, “Most vocational teachers do not become fully participating members of a wider teaching community.” However, the evidence from this study suggests that the influence of previous professions can vary widely. After four years working as a teacher, Mark considered himself still a plumber and he stressed the need for continuing vocational expertise. Similarly, some of the fashion teachers retained close links with former employers. By contrast, Andrea no longer considered herself a youth worker and Pat explained
that how he taught woodwork was quite different to how he had himself been taught. Furthermore, he emphasised his developing teaching skills over his former craft. How these people identified themselves does not automatically or directly relate to their former careers and nor do their former careers sustain current cultures. Their sense of identity related to the complexity of their position in society as a whole more than to a single professional community, though this is not to suggest that previous vocational practice is unimportant. There is an associated point to be made about the particular cohorts of trainee teachers investigated who have now gone on to work in colleges. Of the nine trainees, only two had spent significant time working in the vocational area that they were then teaching. Some had come straight from university or only spent a couple of years working in a gym, for example. The trainees’ relative inexperience suggests that any vocational influence will be weak simply because they had spent so little time, if indeed any, in a previous vocational setting.

The messy experiences of finding a mentor; coping with a range of students; keeping up with course work; isolation or integration were all general for the trainees on placement. Moreover, when attention was paid to what the various trainees actually did in class with their students rather than the topic they covered, the evidence for distinct approaches to teaching is thin. As explained above, in the fashion and business sections there were approaches shared by the staff (the open classroom in fashion; case-studies and discussion in business), which indicated how these teachers had been socialised towards a norm of practice. Yet, even in these distinctive departments what the trainee teachers experienced was coherence or frequency of practices, not a set of practices that were distinct in and of themselves from those found elsewhere. Those norms were observable amongst individuals in other sections and they had not specifically derived from the groups of teachers who had adopted them.

In contrast to policy, the generalised perception of teaching seemed to maintain a benevolent and worthy image, as expressed by one trainee placed in the sports
department in hackneyed terms, “Let’s face it. You don’t go into teaching to get rich. You go into teaching because you love it.” This allusion to a shared perception suggests the strongly positive cultural connotations attached to education and being a teacher in English society. Mark, Pat and Rick, all formerly construction workers, each independently described how they had taken a wage cut to work in education precisely because of its perceived higher social status. Rick joked how people at his rugby club treated him differently when he told them he was a teacher, rather than a joiner. This perception of relative cultural status can only be well understood in the macro-context of society’s inequalities. These conceptions of the status of teachers in England as higher than that of construction workers was formed before even deciding to work in education as a result of their lived biography and the broad cultural influences to which they had been exposed. Some teachers in the sample, though, also explained their identity in part by the objective terms and conditions of their employment. Pat, who had been in post for four years and was fully teacher-qualified, still called himself a trainer. “[A]lthough money shouldn’t come into it, the monetary aspect does” because the college paid him not as a teacher, but as a trainer and therefore less. This chimes with Andrea who talked about her role “as a teacher”. She had previously worked at City College in a variety of positions, but would find it hard to return to her former roles because as a teacher she felt “valued an awful lot more [by her] peer group”. Moreover there was an explicit financial aspect to how she felt about herself.

I know it might sound a little bit crude but also by the salary that I’m receiving as well. I mean as a support worker and as a work experience coordinator the money was not great but now I feel as though I’m earning my money … And that makes a difference really – to be valued in that way.

This aspect of identity as a teacher, recognised as important by Pat and Andrea, was not directly related to a group or college culture but in this instance to status related to economic situation and so to the values of wider society.
Similarly, the explanation for the enormous imbalance between men and women on the teacher training course needs to be sought in wider society. This imbalance, almost two women to every one man in the period studied, reflects the statistics for all FE teachers covering the year 2007-2008. These indicate that just under 60% of teachers in FE were female (LLUK 2008). FE teaching in England is now, arguably, perceived as a female occupation. Of course, there are exceptions. For example, all the construction teachers in this study were male. That more men than women choose construction trades and consequently become teachers of those trades cannot be explained by looking at the placement or the ITT course. In the words of Colley et al (2003, 488) “a sense of what makes ‘the right person for the job’” derives from society’s structures and attitudes and that applies to FE teaching, too. The gender imbalance on the teacher training course and in colleges is partly a result of colleges teaching more courses leading to careers considered ‘female’ such as childcare and the concurrent decline of courses in ‘male’ vocations like engineering. Another pertinent structural change is that FE teachers used to be paid more highly than school teachers but the discrepancy between salaries now greatly favours school teachers. So FE teaching may have become more female because in an unequal society it is a less attractive career choice for men. It has not become more female so much as it has become less male. A study that centres on the individual men and women on a WBL placement would ignore many of these important reasons that those men and women were there in the first place.

Conceptions of gender role constitute a specific example of the wider cultural influences on what is learnt about teachers and teaching, another example being that teachers have higher status than construction workers. Similarly, the trainee teachers had learned a great deal about the practice of teaching before their placements. Many of the sample explained how they had reverted to the practice of their own educational experience, most frequently at school, especially where this matched the practice of teachers they encountered while on placement. This influence from schooling strongly echoes the findings of Bathmaker and Avis.
(2007) and once again these pre-existing constructions of teaching practice derive from the previous biography of trainees through wide cultural influences.

**Discussion**

The individual trainees’ experiences of placement differed greatly depending upon with whom and where they were placed. Likewise, the accounts of serving staff were diverse in their detail. These local differences, however, appeared superficial when viewed within a framework of much wider cultural influences including national policy. Distinctive and sustainable cultures by the limited definition adopted above existed in only two of the sections studied in City College and even these were distinguished mainly by their coherence and consistency rather than markedly diverse patterns of behaviour or attitudes. Nor were these two cultures as significant in the mediation of ideas about teaching practice or being a teacher as other broader factors. This suggests that localised or micro influences on teachers’ development are weak or that these localised influences simply reflect wider structural ones. For serving teachers like Pat, Andrea and Rick their altered identity as teachers was less about their relation to a social community at work than being identified by society as being in a certain social position. That is, what they learnt from becoming teachers and the concomitant raised esteem, sense of fulfilment and self-change that made them different people can best be explained at the level of broader English society, not the culture of the workplace. Related to this is the altruism of some respondents in explaining why they had become teachers in FE, which may be considered as expected responses of self-justification. The significance of these responses should not be overstated because enjoyment and accident were also commonly identified as reasons for entering the profession. Nevertheless, such responses of self-justification, for instance the stated desire to “give something back”, are only expected because of the attitudes to teaching held in society. Education is, at least as an unexamined abstract, considered worthwhile. Similar widely held and culturally influenced sentiments may also explain why craft workers would
accept a pay cut to gain the social status of being a teacher. Though society’s notions of teaching mostly relate to school teaching, FE has its own preconceptions. Other writers (see for example Wallace 2002 and Bathmaker and Avis 2005) have mentioned the misconception among trainee FE teachers, including several in this study, that their students would all have chosen to be there in contrast to those at school. These perceptions are not without foundation; even young students are generally treated differently at college than they might be at school. Teachers in FE colleges are usually called by their first name and students in FE have more freedom than at school, for instance. FE’s difference to school, however insignificant or exaggerated, is what distinguishes the sector in popular perception and some respondents, serving and trainee teachers alike, represent people who had appreciated that difference in their own educational experience and sought it out as teachers in FE. For many of the respondents belonging to the wide community of teachers, in FE or elsewhere, was more influential on their developing professional identity than what they learned from the particularities of participation in their narrower workplace community. Over all, wider culture influenced the trainee teachers’ learning more than the particularities of the setting where they were placed.

As noted above, the stated approach of the TLC project to learning echoes that of this paper. James and Biesta (2007, 11), wrote that “teaching and learning cannot be decontextualised from broader social, economic and political forces, both current and historic”. In a list of factors that interact to influence learning they identify (p13) “wider social economic and political contexts, which interpenetrate all of the other points”. Turning to what they refer to as the “elusive concept” of professionalism in FE (James and Gleeson 2007, 126) the TLC project identified that the:

cultural understanding of learning implies that professionalism does not simply occur in a social practice but operates as a social practice and constitutes a highly contested process. This in turn draws attention to the significance of power relations in FE, in wider society and in individual learning sites.
The project’s prodigious output and its findings are insightful of the FE sector, which remains less well researched than its size and importance warrant. Nevertheless, the approach of the TLC team, in their own words, “was in keeping with many other studies of learning as participation, which tend to focus on the localised setting” (Hodkinson et al 2007b, 25). As Avis (2006, 350) recognised, the TLC project was inter-disciplinary and some accounts within the project emphasise structural issues more than others (see Colley et al 2003, for example). Yet, despite the ambition and sophistication of the TLC project’s analysis, the focus on individual learning sites tends to overstate the significance of local differences and displace more powerful wider structural influences on learning. Avis’s (2006, 348) criticism remains cogent, therefore, that some references to class, ethnicity and gender from the TLC project are used “ritualistically”, which is symptomatic of their “focus on the localised setting”. The most powerful influence on learning in FE as elsewhere may not be the particular learning site, but the dominant cultures in which that learning site exists. In the study of trainee FE teachers that this paper draws on, the unequal structures of society and its related cultural influences were pre-eminent among the factors that shape the development of teachers in FE. This comprehension once again resonates with Daniels and Warmington’s (2007, 389) call for the “general working hypothesis of learning” to be expanded to include a “coherent analysis of the wider structuring of society as an inseparable part of the analysis”. In the absence of such a coherent analysis of society’s structures, local differences may seem to exert stronger cultural influence and so assume more importance over workplace learning than those differences merit.

References


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