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‘Effective’, ‘excellent’, ‘outstanding’: unravelling the lexicon of ‘good practice’.

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Abstract
Despite the high priority given in England to the identification and dissemination of ‘good practice’ there is a lack of consensus about what it means. Indeed, terms to describe teachers as: ‘good’, ‘outstanding’, ‘excellent’, ‘advanced skills’ are often used interchangeably. This paper builds on Coffield and Edward’s (2009) contestable notion of ‘good practice’ within Further Education. We review this against a range of perspectives drawn from all phases of education and identify different solutions for teacher development. We suggest ways in which teacher educators can support the emergence of sustained good practice through professional development and empowerment of teacher identity.

lexicon

• noun 1 the vocabulary of a person, language, or branch of knowledge. 2 a dictionary.

— ORIGIN from Greek lexikon biblion ‘book of words’, from lexis ‘word’.
Introduction

In spite of the fact that one of the pre-requisites of an educator is the ability to communicate complex ideas in simple language, the vocabulary used by our profession to describe their practice is inconsistent, confusing and complex. In this paper we are looking at one particular aspect of professionalism: the words and narrative that are used to describe “good practice”. Whilst commencing from a critical perspective we offer a constructive description of what it means to be an advanced, well developed, and experienced practitioner.

As providers of Master’s accredited continuous professional development (CPD) in an English university we are naturally preoccupied with the nature and practice of teacher development. Previous papers have offered a model for teacher development (Sorensen & Coombs, 2007) and a suggested theoretical framework for long-term teacher development (Sorensen and Coombs, 2009). We argue that teacher development is best conceptualised as a journey that starts (for many teachers but not all) with the adoption of a transmission-based pedagogy within a teacher-centred classroom. A systematic, phased development leads towards the facilitation of learning in a learner-centric classroom, which represents a professional paradigm shift from low-level to higher-order pedagogic practice.

We view the relationship between the teacher and the learner in a learner-centric culture with particular interest. The appropriate pedagogy for this culture is the concern of one of the author’s doctoral research. The role of the teacher in a learner-centric culture is seen as a problematic area that raises questions about what a teacher does and does not do, the benefits of open-ended learning as opposed to a defined curriculum, the ways in which independent learning can be developed and, last but by no means least, the different relationship that exists between teacher and learners in this context. We do not believe that a learner-centric culture negates or reduces the importance or status of the teacher. Far from it; like Coffield (2008) we recognise the vital importance of the teacher–pupils’ relationship. However it is the behaviours and roles that the teacher uses that are of critical importance. Moving towards a learner-centred culture makes teaching a more complex activity and this raises questions about what we mean when we talk about ‘effective’ teaching and what is ‘excellent’ or ‘outstanding’. Given the political imperative to raise standards, a prevailing view of education as a commodity measured in examination certificates and managerialist approaches being imposed on schools it is hardly surprising that there are conflicting views...
as to what constitutes good or outstanding practice. In the midst of all this the professional voice of the teacher is disregarded and generally unheard.

Coffield and Edward (2009) have offered a critical perspective on current attempts in the Further Education sector (FE) to define and disseminate ‘good practice’. We critique this paper in order to find out whether their arguments are ‘transferable’ and can be applied to other phases of education. We then broaden their argument by looking at the views of ‘outstanding’ practitioners through reporting on unpublished research that was undertaken in 2006 on behalf of CfBT Education Trust - previously known as the Centre for British Teachers (Sorensen 2006). This was an evaluation of the Excellent Teachers Scheme in England prior to the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) introduction of the Advanced Skills Teacher role in September 2006.

Coffield and Edward’s (ibid) conclude their critique of current educational policy in the FE sector with a constructive response that draws on Robin Alexander (1997) who considers the dissemination of ‘good practice’ in relation to primary education. They maintain that:

_Finally, ‘good practice’ is not just a professional concern of individual tutors, ‘communities of practice’ or 14-19 partnerships: a vibrant democracy needs an open-ended approach to ‘good practice’, which remains within the control of reflective and learning professionals, which remains sensitive to constantly changing local contexts, and which provides the resources to deal appropriately with the complexities involved in its identification and dissemination. In sum, the political emphasis on momentum, increasing pressure for improved performance and innovation needs to be matched by continuity of institutions, stability for students, professional autonomy (our emphasis) and adequate funding._

(Coffield and Edwards, 2009, p.388)

We wish to build on these conclusions in two ways:

1. Considering the role that CPD practitioners, located in HE institutions, can play in nurturing “an open-ended approach to ‘good practice’ which remains in the control of reflective and learning professionals” (ibid).
2. Recognising the problematic nature of the process of identifying and disseminating good practice by drawing on developments in the natural sciences of complexity.
Our contribution to this debate is the concept of the ‘authorised teacher’, which describes an advanced level of professional practice derived through critical reflection.

**Responding to Coffield and Edward**

Coffield and Edward (2009) raise a number of significant critical points in their paper that the present authors would agree with. The points of agreement can be grouped under four main headings.

Firstly, there is the relationship between policy and practice. The political determination to have an impact on the quality of education has lead to a situation whereby policy determines practice. Coffield and Edward, in the light of the research that they have undertaken, suggest that this should be reversed and that practice should determine policy. We agree with this viewpoint. Furthermore, through our engagement with Master’s level professional development, we recognise that this point of view has resonance with the purposes and outcomes of educational action research (Elliot, 1991). We can see the potential for realising this idea through Master’s level programmes, but it does raise the issue of the audience for action research and the dissemination of findings. There is the local issue that Master’s level action research may not even find its way to the headteacher’s desk. A far more fundamental and far reaching issue is the role of organisations such as BERA in supporting the national collation and dissemination of practitioner research. The logical conclusion of the current situation, where policy has dictated practice, is that it has engendered a compliance culture. This is acknowledged as a rational response to policy initiatives.

Secondly, there is an acknowledgement of the complexities of teaching and learning and that these complexities are localised.

*Our first task is to appreciate the implications of the complexities of teaching and learning in specific locations.*

(Coffield and Edward, 2009, p372)

Because good practice is situated there is an acceptance that it cannot be generalised, decontextualised and disseminated. They also note that it is time to restore to policy discussion and documents recognition of the complexities involved in teaching.
Thirdly, Coffield and Edward challenge the Government’s attitude towards improvement where institutions are expected to be consistently good and continually improving. The linear, straight, upward progression is compared with a psychological view of learning, which includes curves, plateaus and drops, i.e. moving from a first order to higher order approach towards the understanding of educational organisations.

Fourthly, they state that in their unequivocal view, based on research findings formed from studying 24 FE learning sites, the relationship between the tutor (teacher) and student should be at the heart of the sector.

*The emphasis should be placed neither on learning alone, nor on teaching by itself, but on the interactive processes of teaching and learning, which should be viewed as the two inseparable sides of the same coin.* (their emphasis)

(Coffield and Edward, 2009, p 373)

Such a view is problematic for centralised education policy makers. Whilst you can prescribe what the teacher should do, you cannot determine how learners will respond.

Finally, they explore the lexicon of good practice noting the difference between ‘best’ (only one approach) and ‘good’ (a general term implying many approaches). They raise the issue of the criteria used to determine what is good or best...

Consequently, we would argue that it is inappropriate to talk about best practice on the basis that good practice is contingent on context, complexity and the general inability for good practice to be disseminated to other contexts.

The argument presented by Coffield and Edward is not unique to FE. They have articulated generic issues that are applicable to all phases of education. In taking their argument further we have drawn on authentic views from practitioners.
Talking to Excellent Teachers: the practitioner’s perspective

What do practitioners have to say about ‘effective’, ‘excellent’ and ‘outstanding’ practice? How do they approach the process of disseminating what works well and developing other teachers? One way of finding this out is to consider the views of those teachers that have been identified as excellent through the Training and Development Agency for schools’ (TDA’s) professional standards framework for England. We have drawn upon earlier unpublished research that involved interviewing Advanced Skills Teachers (Sorensen, 2006).

This fieldwork was commissioned by CfBT in response to the government’s intention to introduce a new grade of teacher in State schools in England and Wales, known as the Excellent Teacher, with effect from 1st September 2006. This raised the question of how excellent practitioners can transform themselves into coaches of others. Previous research indicated that little systematic thought had been given to the professional development needs of the previous Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) initiative. Consequently, it was seen that there was an opportunity for CfBT to create some influential knowledge about the actions needed if this initiative was to be successful.

The project was designed to identify the factors that account for and promote successful in-reach work that genuinely helps to improve the practice of others. The methodology combined a literature review and fieldwork that was undertaken between November 2005 and March 2006. For the fieldwork the project team identified 10 teachers who were recognised to have undertaken successful in reach work in support of colleagues in their own schools. Most of these teachers were ASTs whose work had been brought to the attention to members of the project team, or their professional contacts; two were successful teaching coaches without AST status. The sample of 10 teachers included 4 such teachers from primary schools and 6 from secondary schools. This reflected the national distribution of ASTs at that time: 40% of whom were working in the Primary sector and 60% were in the Secondary sector.

The fieldwork consisted of structured interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, with:

- The teachers.
- Their headteachers or other senior managers who direct their work.
• One or more of their colleagues whose practice had benefited as a result of their in-reach work.

Each teacher was interviewed using an informal and open-ended approach. After a brief biographical conversation, the teacher was asked to identify and expand on the factors that they thought accounted for the success of their in-reach work. The interviews explored, *inter alia*, the importance the teachers attached to:

• Their understanding of the teacher-developer role and the approaches they adopt to working in this mode.
• Training and induction into the teacher-developer role.
• The ways in which they are deployed and the quality with which their in-reach work is managed within the school.
• Their school’s ethos, its climate for learning and its approach to the professional development of its staff.
• The management of their performance in their in-reach role.
• The support they receive from sources external to the school.

The interviews also gave careful attention to those factors that the teachers believed would improve their practice further. Whilst not all the teachers were actually Advanced Skills Teachers we shall, for the purposes of clarity, refer to them as ‘the ASTs’ in this paper.

Interviews with headteachers or other managers and with other teachers in the school covered essentially the same ground, but from the particular perspective of each. The overall aim of the fieldwork was to establish some common characteristics derived from the narrative of teachers’ self-identity that are agreed to be influential in determining successful in-reach work.

This ‘teacher identity’ research does provide some illumination into what it is to be an “excellent” teacher from the teacher’s own perspective, as well as the teachers that they work with. The qualities that marked them out as successful Advanced Skills Teachers were focussed on the interpersonal skills that they had. These included being able to communicate effectively, being able to build relationships, being a good listener and responding to the needs of others.

The ASTs recognised that one of the most important qualities that they needed was credibility and respect in the eyes of those that they were working with. Credibility was achieved not by being seen as “better” than other teachers but by being the same as other teachers, having to cope with the same day to day issues that all staff need to deal with. Several of the interviewed teachers spoke about wanting to demonstrate that they were not “perfect” teachers and that they too
had difficult classes, and did not have all the answers. Their credibility was gained through sharing the difficulties that they too faced. Consequently, the skills that distinguished them from other teachers were not related to overall levels of performance (being the best, good or outstanding), but to their ability to generate creative responses to other teachers needs. They would want to demonstrate that they were still learning, willing to take risks and learn from their failures.

A significant factor that characterised the ASTs was that they demonstrated a greater resilience. If something didn’t work with a particular class or student they would try something else, and then something else if that failed. They were valued for their tenacity in finding new solutions to difficult problems and being able to generate new ideas that could transform existing practice.

Many of the beneficiaries who had worked with the ASTs did comment on the fact that they modelled good practice, had strong subject knowledge, and lead by example. However, further comments recognised that modelling good practice was most effectively done when the AST explicitly models themselves as a learner. The AST/teacher relationship appears to be at its most powerful when it is based on a sense of equality, sharing and learning from each other, and exploring new approaches to teaching.

A common feature of the ways in which the ASTs were deployed was that they all had considerable autonomy to select and shape their work with other teachers. In many schools their work was not aligned to an overall plan or strategy for school improvement. This was important to developing a sense of trust with other teachers and not wanting them to appear to be ‘targeted’ or selected to work with the AST. The line managers of the ASTs also recognised that it was important that they were given the space in which to exercise their creativity. So, broad targets with some milestones were considered to be more effective than a detailed action plan. Typical comments elicited included: “we don’t want mavericks, but we don’t want to tie them down”, and: “my job is to remove obstacles so that the AST can be effective”.

The importance placed on professional autonomy as an essential aspect of developing and sharing good practice is an interesting one. In order for this to happen in practice there is the need for a great deal of trust. The AST is given the authority to use their expertise in the manner that they determine to be most effective. They effectively determine “good practice” through a process of experimentation and trial and error. “Good practice” is deemed to be what works in a particular context at a particular time. It is this concept of authorisation that
we turn to in offering an alternative or maybe an additional, term to our lexicon of what it means to be a good practitioner.

The perspective of complexity theory

One of the key points made by Coffield and Edward (ibid) is that any notion of what teaching is about, let alone what constitutes good teaching, needs to take into account the complexity of the activity. Their critical perspective identifies five ways in which teaching could be termed complex:

1. It is a complex activity because it is based in relationships, teaching cannot be separated from learning
2. it is dependent on the unique factors of each individual setting,
3. learning does not take place as a linear upward progression
4. the criteria determining good practice are problematical
5. good practice cannot be transferred from one setting to another.

Government education policy is based on the principle of causality: a particular policy is designed to have a particular impact, often described in measurable outcomes. The notion of transferring “good practice” is derived from the idea that there is a blueprint that can be applied to all schools in all situations. The concept of continual improvement is based on an unrealistic, and inaccurate view of how learning and development actually happens.

We therefore argue that there is a need for an appropriate theoretical perspective to help us to gain a fuller understanding of how teaching is a complex activity and how we can talk about ‘good practice’. In order to gain further insights into this issue we look to developments in the natural sciences of complexity and how these ideas have been applied to human organizations. This approach is presented as an alternative paradigm to a mechanistic view of the world that has its origins in Newtonian mechanics. The ‘new science’ of complexity looks to the natural world for a holistic, non-linear perspective. How does this help us to understand the nature of organizations?

It seems to us that life in organizations is essentially paradoxical. Managers are supposed to be in charge and yet they find it difficult to stay in control. The future is recognisable when it comes but in many important respects not predictable before it does.

(Stacey et al, 2000, p5)
How does this viewpoint help us to understand how people learn and develop within organizations?

Complexity theory acknowledges that biological, cognitive and social organizations all operate on the same principles (Capra 2002). These principles are based on the core process of emergence that sees

*the possibility of order emerging through disorder through spontaneous self-organisation in the absence of any blueprint*  

(Stacey et al, 200, p1)

all organizations as spontaneously creative and developmental. Creativity, learning, change and development are inherent in all living systems. Complexity theory, as applied to organisations, emphasises the self-referential, reflexive nature of humans and the participative nature of the processes of relating. The outcomes of these processes are unpredictable.

In place of a linear model of ‘continuous self improvement’, complexity theory offers a more dynamic process that acknowledges disorder as an essential aspect of development

"The phenomenon of emergence takes place at critical points of instability that arise from fluctuation in the environment, amplified by feedback loops. The constant generation of novelty – ‘nature's creative advance', as the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called it – is a key property of all living systems" (Capra, 2002, p102).

The process of emergence goes through four stages:

1. The process of emergence is precipitated by a trigger, which causes a degree of disturbance.

2. This results in a sequence of feedback loops – information that is circulated through the active networks. These amplify the trigger events possibly to the point that the information gets expanded and amplified to an extent that the organisation can no longer absorb it in its present state.

3. This leads to a point of critical instability – a state of uncertainty, loss of control, chaos and doubt.
4. Out of this state, two possible courses of action occur. Either, there is a break down in the existing system, or a new form of order emerges organised around new meaning. The emergence of new meaning is thoroughly non-linear, involving multiple feedback loops. This means that it is difficult to fully analyse this process with conventional linear ways of reasoning. Consequently, we see creativity as being an unpredictable and complex process of individual and social psychology.

Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985) link complex meaning-making to human learning, which they define as:

“The construction, reconstruction, negotiation and exchange of personally significant, relevant and viable meaning” (p.xxiv).

From this epistemological assumption they define their conversational learning paradigm and consider that both individuals and social ‘organisations’ have the capability to become self-organised learners (S-o-L) and propose a system thinking model of pedagogy linked to humanistic psychology.

**How is this seen in human organizations?**

The creative event triggering the process of emergence of new meaning may be a deliberate strategy, or it may be an offhand comment that might not even seem important to the person who made it, but has significance to some people in a community of practice. Because it has significance to them they choose to be disturbed and motivated into circulating the information rapidly through the organization’s networks.

As it circulates through the system it expands and may reach a point where the organisation can no longer absorb it in its present state. This can produce a state of chaos. Out of this chaos, a new form of order, organised around new meaning and understanding emerges. The new order is not designed by any one individual, but emerged as a result of the organization’s collective creativity and internal communication processes. Senge (1990) describes this organisational learning process as a ‘creative tension’ and sees any resulting change as a significant paradigm shift towards a new way of doing things, which we argue is an emergent process of knowledge production.
Designed and emergent structures

One of the characteristics of human life noted by Capra is the capacity to form mental images. This enables humans to envision and design structures. These structures are created for a purpose and have meaning and value; they are intentional structures. A feature of knowledge emergence in human organisations is that there is the potential to shape and direct creativity through the impact that Capra’s designed structures can have. The designed or intended organisational structures provide both a balance and platform to support the emergent structures; that is, both are inter-related and equally important. We have seen from our previous discussion of improvisation (Sorensen & Coombs, 2007) that fixed structures are vital to creativity of any kind.

Human organizations will always contain both designed structures and emergent structures and there is a dynamic, and often spontaneous or “real time” interaction between these two related elements. We consider that knowing and understanding the difference and the functional relationship between design and emergent structures is a key factor in developing powerful learning organizations. Thus, we postulate that a structure can be understood of as an organisational social process and critical thinking policy that determines its capacity to operate as a learning organisation. Such a systems thinking approach also accords with the five disciplines that Senge (1990a) argues as the foundation for any successful learning organisation.

We summarise designed and emergent structures as having the following features:

**Designed structures**

- Are the formal structures of the organization as described in official documentation and policies.
- Provide social rules and routines that are necessary for the efficient functioning of the organization.
- They enable the core purpose of the organization to be carried out effectively and influence the creative capacity and potential for change thru’ learning.
Emergent structures

- Are created by the organizations informal learning networks and communities of practice.
- Provide novelty, creativity and flexibility.
- Are capable of enabling the organisation to meaningfully change and evolve.

Every organization needs both kinds of structures and a key role for leaders of learning organizations is to understand and orchestrate a productive creative tension between the designed and the emergent structures, so as to ensure the right balance between the creativity of emergence and the stability of design. Senge (1990) argues that the new emergent structures from creative tension output become the future accepted design structures and, thus, becomes a permanent paradigm shift for the learning organisation and represent’s the leader’s significant work and contribution towards the production of knowledge.

The authorised teacher

An understanding of the principles of creativity and knowledge emergence has many implications for the way that we understand the practice of teaching. By recognising that teaching is a complex activity we have to go beyond the mechanistic Newtonian worldview that has dominated our thinking since the 17th century. The idea of simplistic cause and effect can clearly be seen in the ways in which successive UK Governments have sought to bring about school improvement, teacher development and the drive for excellence. The idea being that such educational policy will determine what best practice is. This policy, in turn, will bring about school, teacher and pupil improvements.

We would wish to challenge this notion and put forward an alternative model that recognises the importance of professional teacher feedback and how this relates to the generative nature of meaningful change and development as outlined in the process of knowledge emergence. We wish to acknowledge the centrality of a democratic approach to the development of good practice.
Furthermore we are responding to the needs identified earlier by Coffield and Edward.

*a vibrant democracy needs an open-ended approach to ‘good practice’, which remains within the control of reflective and learning professionals, which remains sensitive to constantly changing local contexts, and which provides the resources to deal appropriately with the complexities involved in its identification and dissemination. In sum, the political emphasis on momentum, increasing pressure for improved performance and innovation needs to be matched by continuity of institutions, stability for students, professional autonomy (our emphasis) and adequate funding.*

(Coffield and Edwards, 2009, p.388)

Central to our thinking around teacher development is the importance of generating critical professional learning. This notion is promoted by the Critical Advisory Support Partnership (CASP), an organisation formed in England to offer a unified response and critical engagement with government proposals and consultations. Membership of CASP comprised representatives from SCETT (the Standing Committee for the Education and Training of Teachers), IPDA (the International Professional Development Association) and the UK’s UCET (the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers) (Clark, 2007).

From the perspective of these teacher education support organisations critical professional learning is a prerequisite for a democratic and critical engagement with policy and the problems it aims to solve. Teachers, supported by teacher educators, are therefore encouraged to maximise and make sense of the learning that can come from experimenting and evaluating their own practice.

“it provides an opportunity for teachers to understand their professional values, attitudes and beliefs and make sense of how they impact upon their conceptual understanding and knowledge of learners and pedagogy. It also enables teachers to research and validate their practice so that development is informed and so that the rationale for practice can be clearly articulated to a range of stakeholder audiences”

(Clark, 2007, p8)

We consider that this approach is in keeping with the critical point raise by Coffield and Edward in that it counters a centrally ‘top-down’ controlled view of teaching and offers instead an alternative perspective of professionals to be
empowered through their own ‘bottom-up’ actions. This desired outcome of teacher empowerment matches the intentions of the learning-to-learn agenda; that is concerned with empowering pupils as independent learners. We cannot do that until teachers’ are also empowered as professional learners of their own practice working in schools operating as learning organisations.

We would therefore add to the lexicon of good practice the concept of the ‘authorised’ teacher that would replace notions of excellence, outstanding, good or better. The notion of the ‘authorised’ teacher is ontologically derived from two powerful concepts:

Firstly, there is the concept of ‘authorisation’; that of a confirmed professional identity derived from a situated community of learning. This acknowledges the potential professional knowledge that the teacher has about her/his educational setting as well as the particular self-knowledge that they have gained through their own unique career pattern.

Secondly, there is the concept of ‘authoring’; in which teachers ‘write’ or create their own professional identity within a critical framework. We see the role that Master’s level CPD can play in supporting the authoring of teachers experience, in order to shape and define their professional identity. Such situated and personalized knowledge can be related to a critical and theoretical perspective in order to provide “authority” for the practices that they construe to be ‘good practice’. As critical professional learners they are able to articulate the rationale for what they do and become the authority for their own pedagogic practice and potentially pass on that professional knowledge to their peers. However, such a community of practice needs to be properly led within a learning organization that both operates and lever continual change through such professional learning.

Our conclusion is that the use concepts such as ‘effective’, ‘excellent’ and ‘outstanding’ as applied to teaching need to be revised. We see advanced practice emerging from self-referential, reflexive practice and moderated through interaction with other professionals. Notions of advanced practice are, of necessity jointly, constructed as part of an ongoing process of emergent, creative responses to the everyday complex reality that teachers are engaged with.
References

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