

## The times they are a-changing: some thoughts on the historical and contemporary tensions in Initial Teacher Education for the lifelong learning sector in the UK at this pivotal moment in time

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### Abstract

This argument will explore the tensions and ambiguities for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) situated within the lifelong learning or further education (FE) context in the UK. In doing so the discussion will focus upon the structural and policy context (macro) which shapes the lived experience of teachers, trainee teachers and teacher educators (micro) in the FE system and how these policy narratives are 'worked out' in the day-to-day pedagogic practice of teacher education and within placement institutions (meso).

**Keywords:** lifelong learning; initial teacher education; policy reform; teacher education pedagogy.

### Introduction: the changing political and pedagogic landscape of lifelong learning

In exploring how and where lifelong learning fits into neo-liberal policy agendas, and the policy *levers* (Kooiman 2003), *drivers* and *narratives* used to 'transport' discourses to those who act them out (Steer et al. 2007), I will be arguing that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for the further education (FE) sector has had an uneasy role within and relationship with teacher education policy reform over the past decade in the UK (notwithstanding the current 'reform' and 'removal' of the mandate for compulsory teacher qualification in this sector) and that this very same uneasy relationship is further echoed in the existing research literature; echoed within the literature, that is, when the sector is explored at all.

This uneasy relationship has been in the past perhaps most succinctly characterised by Coffield et al. (2008) as a '*turbulent world*' – and it is a policy sector and political stage within which successive New Labour

governments of the past decade have engaged in a '*discourse of derision*' (Ball 1990: 18).

Fast-forward to the events of the past 24 months and we now see the removal of the requirement for teachers to be 'qualified' in this sector in the UK. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the sector has been under review and reform for the past decade. Change and renewal are not new aspects of how the system has operated (they have arguably been the 'norm') and how the professional lives of those in the system have been contextualised for some time now. Echoing the spirit of the literature – with its focus on change as an overriding factor in shaping the FE sector – Avis and Bathmaker see current FE reform as a 'significant conjunctural moment in FE' (Avis and Bathmaker, 2009: 204).

The landscape of FE is being redrawn, and with this, practices and opportunities are being reconceptualised, reframed and spaces are opening up for practitioners to redefine what they do (Rikowski 2001). With the changes taking place from 1 September 2013 in the sector, it is now of course even more true that the boundaries around vocational education and training (VET) in FE are under more public scrutiny and policy attention than ever before, but does this necessarily mean that the policy outcomes are any more fixed and rigid? Indeed, I shall argue here that recent FE 'policy attention' opens up more ambiguity than it closes down.

To start, it is important for this argument that we recognise that notwithstanding the 'unsettling boundaries' in and around the FE sector itself (Edwards & Fowler 2007), teacher education in general, and ITE within FE in particular are also contested and enacted by the professionals who 'profess' to practise them, and are equally constructed as a 'subject' in policy narratives and discourses. In this shifting field, ITE makes many claims: it is seen by some as the means by which teachers better know their 'craft' (Hagger & McIntyre 2006), and for many commentators, better know their 'selves' (Atkinson 2004).

While a new field, or, at least, a marginal contribution to a larger and more established field, teacher education literature points to the need for teacher educators to articulate their pedagogies as a meaningful and collegiate way forward within a professional research community (Murray et. al. 2009). There is also recognition that within the ambiguity that surrounds the field, it is impossible to make certain knowledge claims about teachers' own practices as a professional body, let alone teacher educators' own practice. The particular location for teacher educators – the double hermeneutical location of being both teacher and a teacher of teachers – seems to sit easily with notions of a pedagogy built upon 'modelling' (Loughran 1996; Hagger & McIntyre 2006; Kane 2007; Kroll 2007; Malderez and Wedell 2007), although the modelling of *what* is unsure.

### Understanding the FE and training context in the UK

While not negating the application of post-structural analytical tools, nor the realities of problematic conditions, neo-Fordist working regimes and anxious, unconstructed, fragmented postmodern identities when describing the FE context in the UK, is it possible to see change within lifelong learning as a space for *possibility* not pessimism? – the possibility of identity change and also the possibility for newly formed identities. The fluidity of FE, as characterised in the writings of Avis (1999, 2002), has pointed at times to *shifting identities* as global policy agendas shape the reality of the FE sector but, more importantly, are in turn adopted, managed, maintained and subverted by the lived experience of trainees, teachers and teacher educators in the FE sector.

Avis (1999) offers an interpretation of the FE sector where previous notions of 'proletarianisation' or 'deskilling' are seen as lacking and limited. For Avis (as for Bathmaker & Avis 2007), FE is witnessing a transformation process – of both teaching and learning and of identity. The transformation of teaching and learning itself opens up a space within which it is possible for VET professionals to explore new professional knowledge, re-evaluate practice and construct new identities. This is a positive interpretation of the workplace reforms undertaken by the sector over the past decade, but one that owes as much to post-structuralism as nihilistic interpretations of 'risk' and the onset of control and compliance: both recognise that discourses produce subjects under their gaze, but the interpretation placed upon this subjectification process by Avis suggests that agents within policy settlements and ideologies are able

to carve out and negotiate futures and identities for themselves (Avis, et al. 2002; Avis 2002).

### Losing control?

For Avis (1999), FE literature through these key moments has spoken of the loss of control; the intensification of labour; increase in administration; marginalisation of teachers' autonomy; the stress of 'accountability'. In doing so, the FE literature – in this respect at least – echoes literature in the schools sector (Bottery 2003; Sachs 2001) and to a certain extent in nurse education as well (Stronach, et al. 2002). For the FE sector, we can make the case that despite obvious managerialism and neo-Fordist discourses, and the adoption of globalisation themes within policy rhetoric and narratives (such as the call for 'world-class' skills and competition and the rise of the 'knowledge economy'), it is nonetheless possible to see FE teachers and trainee teachers as navigating identities situated within the institutions in which they work and compounded by the learners they teach (Avis & Bathmaker 2009; Avis, et al. 2009; Bathmaker & Avis 2007).

For Avis et al., much FE literature is concerned with 'the parameters and contradictions of the competitiveness education settlement' (Avis et. al. 2003: 192). By 'settlement' herein, I refer to the ideology that shapes the policy landscape. For the world of FE teaching and education, this ideological rhetoric is the claim that the FE sector has a crucial role in 'world-class' competition: 'by developing the knowledge and skills of the workforce a vibrant and dynamic economy will be created, able to compete successfully in the global marketplace' (Avis et, al. 2003: 192). There is an 'education myth' (Wolf 2002) at play here within this settlement – that the rise of the 'knowledge economy' creates demands for increased performativity and 'standards' compliance in the FE sector. As Rikowski (2001) illustrates, there are genuine differences between government, colleges' and employers' understandings of how these global agendas are interpreted, framed and played out. It is true that the FE sector is experiencing a 'renewed' focus of political attention due to the rhetoric of lifelong learning within the global narratives as above (Wallace 2002), but this does not mean that on a local stage all global forces play out the same.

### 'Standards', performativity and FE

In looking at the recent UK lifelong learning/FE/post-compulsory education and training (PCET) context,

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Yandell & Turvey (2007) offer a discussion on the nature of workplace learning by questioning notions of training 'standards' or 'competences' within teacher education which they see as a discursive practice designed to limit and control – a discourse to bring into being its own subject through defining the 'standards' that trainees need to meet. For Yandell & Turvey (2007), the national 'standards' model of ITE can be seen as the counterpoint to the '*situated model*' of workplace learning (Lave & Wenger 1991). Literature suggests that the 'standards model' has found hegemonic favour as the dominant discourse by which to judge teacher education and training in the UK, Australia, Portugal, Thailand, Brazil, China and the USA (Beyer 2002; Yandell & Turvey 2007). Within this dominant standards orthodoxy, the teacher is 'conceptualised as a list of competences' (Yandell & Turvey 2007: 534) to be 'acted out' and assessed. However, this fails to recognise the highly context-bound and *situated* nature of teaching and of all professional learning.

The standards model is itself contested. Some literature favours the standards model, claiming that standards are a positive basis for teacher education (Yinger & Hendricks-Lee 2000), and others suggest that standards help to (re)professionalise teaching (Wise & Leibbrand 2001). On the other hand, Yandell & Turvey (2007) argue that the standards model operates in the UK FE sector with a facile and unrealistic image of the teacher-as-technicist: 'The new teacher's professional identity, then, is conceptualised as being both as stable and as portable as the portfolio that they carry with them to their first teaching post' (Yandell & Turvey 2007: 534). Beyer (2002) has argued that the standards model is an example of a 'technical-rational-behaviourist' approach and it gives no attention to how teachers actually learn and apply their learning. Equally, Blake & Lansdell suggest that the standards model loses sight 'of the wholeness of teaching performance' (Blake & Lansdell 2000: 64).

The FE context of ITE adds a further and ambivalent layer to this discussion. The 'standards' for PCET VET professionals-in-the-making, and their role in formulating 'objective' measurements, are not as clear cut as they might seem. Standards set previously by Lifelong Learning UK represent the professional values and standards for *qualified* teachers – not those in training. Equally, unlike the processes for secondary and primary ITE in the UK, FE professions have not been awarded '*Qualified Teacher Status*' (QTS) on the passing of their Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). For the FE sector, the award of '*Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills*' (QTLS) has

been made by the sector's professional body, the *Institute for Learning* (IfL), after a period described as '*professional formation*' – which could last between one and five years. Equally, under the new 'common inspection framework', Ofsted inspections of FE ITE in the UK also apply 'standards' and 'competency frameworks' originally designed to measure qualified teachers. The recognition that 'professional formation' is now voluntary and that qualification is not a requirement but left to employers to decide adds further complexity to a situation that has been fluid for a significant number of years. To draw upon the language of post-structuralism, this ambivalent space could be both enabling and constraining for teacher educators working in this UK context. It might mean that the ITE curriculum can be developed with a flair and imagination often perhaps not felt in the rest of the sector. It also might result in a sector left in some confusion as to what constitutes professionalism.

For Bullough et al., when applying a so-called 'objective' competency list to teacher learning, 'complexity in the education of teachers is denied in an ill-fated quest for certainty and uniformity of outcomes' (Bullough et al. 2003: 49). And for Yandell & Turvey (2007), these standards deny the importance of situation in making the complexity of teacher learning meaningful – a sentiment echoed from Freebody, claiming the 'overwhelming significance of localized experience' (Freebody 2003: 81). My contention is that policy narratives and discourses within the FE sector have – for trainees at least – opened up a space for ITE to respond to these very localized experiences and to enable teacher educators to support trainees with sense-making and recontextualising local experience as a means of learning and therefore as a means to establish a part of an identifiable teacher education pedagogy.

### Where does this leave our practice as teacher educators in the FE field?

If contradictory policy agendas and fluid and global policy narratives have enabled a degree of autonomy of practice for the FE sector (Avis et. al. 2003), where does this leave ITE in FE? And how will new policy contexts and recent change shape this? What are the pedagogic choices on offer, if practice is as fluid and open as I have argued above? I assert (as above) that post-structural readings of the current FE political ennuï are such that we can see practitioners as able to cut across and step through boundaries of practice, identity and pedagogy, reforming themselves and their professional work in doing so. I also suggest that with the confusion and unclear 'settlement' around

'qualifying' and maintaining professionalism in FE and ITE within the sector, teacher educators are able to exercise a large degree of choice in framing and reforming their curriculum and pedagogies of practice.

### Teaching teachers

The notion of 'modelling' and of making explicit the mechanics of practice are often seen to be at the heart of notions of teacher education (see Loughran 2006, 2007), although they are as problematic, often ambiguous and contested as the very educational sectors and policy settlements they 'train' and 'educate' for. Nonetheless, the expression of this meta-process – reflecting, making explicit otherwise tacit knowledge, modelling and making visible hidden structures and craft practices and techniques – finds illustration in a number of writings in the field (Loughran 1996; Hagger & McIntyre 2006; Kane 2007; Kroll 2007; Malderez & Wedell 2007). As Loughran notes, 'Enacting a pedagogy of teacher education is enmeshed in the ways in which teacher educators knowingly and purposefully create opportunities for students of teaching to see into teaching' (Loughran 2007: 1).

For Loughran the 'modelling' process of teacher education pedagogy is intimately bound up with the articulation of *'thinking aloud'* (Loughran 1996: 28) decisions, strategies, reflections by the teacher educator themselves. As lessons and learning ebb and flow, teachers need to be adaptive and reflective – they need to change strategies and develop a sensitive reading of the classroom situation. Teacher educators need to find meta-conversational mechanisms to expose their own trainees to their own decision-making and flexible choices. As Loughran says, 'It is fundamental to my view of modelling that this thinking during teaching is overtly demonstrated for my students if they are to fully appreciate the complex nature of learning about teaching; even more so if they are to seriously consider their own practice in relation to my modelling' (Loughran 1996: 28–9).

### A contested and problematic field?

Despite the focus of some literature on a process we can describe as 'modelling' (Berliner 1986; MacKinnon 1989; Valli 1993), this does not mean that teacher education is homogeneous or stable. The field is problematic and contested. For example, teacher education is seen by some as a 'young field' (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner 2006) and with its youth come issues of struggling to find both its identity and

voice within the wider and more established field of educational research in general.

In the UK experience, this youthfulness is further compounded when we note that the largest concentration of teacher education (in terms of student numbers) is within post-1992 university provision, and with this might potentially come issues of low research activity and scholarly enquiry (Murray et al. 2009) – partly due to distribution of research funding and partly due to slowly emerging research cultures among some of these providers and the time it takes for meaningful professional growth and emersion into new fields and professional tribes and identities. Finally, it is important to note (Murray et al. 2009) how many newcomers to the field come not from academic backgrounds but from practitioner ones. While this might support and imply notions of the pedagogy of ITE being firmly rooted in 'modelling', it does pose issues for the field and its community in how to develop and 'bring on' new teacher educators and how to support them in their enquiry work and 'research informed practice' (Jenkins et al. 2007).

### Teaching and learning issues for teacher education and its pedagogy

The vocational relevance for UK VET professionals of ITE locates not just teacher educators within double hermeneutical processes, but their students/trainees too. As Malderez & Wedell (2007) suggest, learning how to teach is itself an ambiguous role – neither 'student' nor 'teacher' and yet both at the same time. Thus, teachers are learners too, and professionals-in-the-making are asked to both behave and 'think' as professionals and as trainees. It is the role of 'experience' in learning professional practice and how lived experience interplays with knowledge and ITE curriculum that locates the learning for trainee teachers. For example, Malderez & Wedell (2007) identify three types of 'teacher knowledge' – knowing *about*, knowing *how* and knowing *to*. Within this, they suggest that far from being homogeneous, ITE can be perceived as having five possible goals: producing 'good teachers'; producing people who are 'good at teaching'; developing professionals; creating reflective practitioners; creating technicians. This largely depends upon how policy-makers, the academy and the professional community perceive teaching and the discourses they construct to frame and shape it. It depends upon whether one sees teaching as 'art', 'craft', 'science' or 'complex skill' (Malderez & Wedell 2007: 5).

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For Loughran, drawing upon Schon (1987), the key pedagogic problem for teaching teachers is what is referred to as the '*Meno paradox*' (Loughran 1996: 15). This locates reflection and practice as problematic for those learning to teach for the first time since it suggests that reflection can only take place once one 'knows what to look for'. Thus, the learning of trainee teachers, and professional education/training/learning in general, is framed by an initial 'uncertainty of practice' whereby learning lags behind experience until experience helps contextualise what one has been merely 'told'. Meaning that 'being told' and 'learning' are not the same thing; the difference being the interplay of action, interaction and lived experience in making knowledge knowable and meaningful.

### Mundane practices

For the mundane practices of FE trainees, teachers and teacher educators what have workplace reform and global policy narratives left as they attempt to redraw the boundaries of the sector? It is true that FE practices are more 'observed' in policy narratives than before (Wallace 2002) and equally, that the ideological settlement of FE reform locates its discourse within a wider one of the need for lifelong learning and flexibility at a time of global competition (Avis 2002). However, following Avis (1999) and Rikowski (2001), I argue that there is an alternative to postmodern and post-structural anxiety and nihilism: to recognise that, within the interplay between the global and the local, 'knowledgeable agents' – trainees, teachers and teacher educators within the FE sector – are able to (re)negotiate and subvert policy narratives; they are able to mould their own identities and practices as the landscape transforms around them; but to recognise also that the landscape transforms due to them and their sustaining ontological and hermeneutical practices.

The claim being made, therefore, is that 'reflective practice' is also a 'reflexive process' – thinking about action involves, ultimately, thinking about one's self and the role of our identity in our actions. For Forde et al. (2006) the emphasis within both teaching and teacher education on reflection and reflective practice suggests that reflection re-professionalises a profession at times in danger from media hegemony and policy narrative and discourses of being perceived as common-sense. Equally, Forde et al. (2006) suggest that reflection can provide a mechanism wherein unstable teacher and teacher-in-the-making identities can become stable. I contend that the emphasis upon reflection within the ITE literature poses the danger of potentially making

identity even less stable since it might operate with a model that professional identity is something to be 'worked on' and 'worked up' – always something to be sought, less concrete to be found. Indeed Atkinson (2004) questions the degree to which reflective practice can help to understand our thoughts and behaviours, given the highly subjective basis for a great deal of social action. Equally, for all the talk of reflective practice, as Greenwood (1993) notes (in a nursing educational context), there exist fundamental discrepancies and contradictions, at times, between practitioners' beliefs about good practice and what they actually do.

### Conclusion

In framing this discussion of teaching, teaching knowledge base and teacher education I argue that it makes sense to see the complex and context-dependent practice of teaching as an identity-forming/supporting/transforming process (Buchmann 1987; Fenstermacher 1994; Feldman 1997; Turner-Bisset 1999). This is as true for the FE sector as elsewhere – and as true for teacher educators training VET professionals to work in the FE sector as elsewhere. Feldman articulates this clearly in describing 'teaching as a way of being' (Feldman 1997: 757). In this 'teaching as a way of being perspective' it is not so much that one 'does' teaching, but they are '*being*' a teacher. Part of this conceptualisation suggests that teaching is a social practice made up of innumerable social encounters; that teaching 'is highly contextualized and is situated socially, spatially, and temporally in teachers' practice' (Feldman 1997: 757). If nothing else, the social enterprise that is teaching means that teachers come into contact, daily, routinely, with other knowledgeable social agents – students/learners – and their agency requires newcomers to the profession to often rethink their learning and practice – a vital part of the localised context and how this shapes the learning experience of FE trainees (Yandell & Turvey 2007).

Within this 'way of being' – this 'acting out' and 'feeling within' the teacher role and identity – Grimmett & MacKinnon (1992) talk of the 'crafty teacher': the dexterous manipulation of a variety of knowledges and their application to localised contexts. I suggest that this is the true goal of all teacher education and of its pedagogy – to develop '*craft-y trainees*' who go on to become '*craft-y teachers*'. In a sector shaped by global policy rhetoric and increased managerialism, FE trainee teachers, perhaps, manipulating both a VET background and a 'college' pedagogy, might need

to be the 'craftiest' of all, to negotiate both 'being a vocational professional' and 'being a teacher'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Variouly referred to within the literature and policy as post-compulsory education and training (PCET), further education (FE), lifelong learning, the learning and skills sector, adult and community education.

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