Chapter 3: Fresh directions for teaching and learning in Further Education

Over the past decade, Further Education (FE) has developed a pivotal status in the UK's education system. Participation rates, quality of provision, learner satisfaction and attainment rates have all improved with significant increases in funding, and FE has emerged as a distinctive sector. However, in relative terms the Foster report (2005) still saw further education as the 'neglected middle child', as it still lacks the resources and status of schools and universities, even though it plays a key role in helping upskill and reskill learners, including many whose encounter with the school system was less than satisfactory. FE is resilient and innovative, with its staff acting as a unique resource for learners who are often lacking in confidence. Tutors are at the forefront of developing students' existing skills as well as teaching them new ones. They often recognise and nurture abilities which students undervalue or do not realise they possess. Recent research from the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) shows that relations between tutors and students are at the heart of successful FE (Nash *et al.*, 2008). It is vital for FE to continue improving how it provides for the needs of learners, employers and the wider economy and to build upon those aspects that have underpinned effective teaching and learning in the sector across time.

Nash *et al.* (2008) identified how a renewed focus on teaching and learning should lie at the heart of future developments in FE and how effective teaching and learning: equipped learners for life in its broadest sense; engaged with valued forms of knowledge; recognised the importance of prior experience and learning; requires tutors to support learners as they move forward, not just intellectually but also socially and emotionally, so that the learning is secure even after the supports are removed; needs assessment to be congruent with learning; promotes the active engagement of the learner; fosters individual and social processes and outcomes; recognises the significance of informal learning; depends on teachers continuing to learn; and demands consistent policy frameworks with support for teaching and learning as their primary focus.

Within that broad frame of continuing to support effective teaching and learning, what emphases should teaching and learning have in order to promote a broad range of learner outcomes in response to changes in the nature of the interface between FE and employment; changes in the relationship between FE, HE and learning across the life-course; greater diversity in the student body; and changes in technology. It would seem presumptive to suggest that there are completely new ways of teaching and learning in FE, so attention will be focused upon changed emphases which could be interpreted as providing fresh directions for teaching and learning in FE. The first change in direction should be away from a focus upon competence development based upon a hierarchy of skills levels towards a developmental perspective on skill development across the life-course. The second shift would be from looking at how to use the innovation potential of information and communication technologies (ICT) in FE, per se, to thinking about how to use technology to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning to achieve a broad range of learning outcomes. The third reorientation would be to be recognise the importance of the social and affective dimension of learning in FE and to acknowledge that tutor-student and peer relationships are central to many aspects of learning and development in a way that an individualist learner-centred rhetoric does scant justice. The need for these fresh

directions for teaching and learning are grounded in evidence arising from recent TLRP research on policy and practice in FE (Nash *et al.*, 2008).

Fresh Direction 1: use of reflection and review can help learners develop a commitment to lifelong learning within a developmental approach to skill development

It has been recognised for some time that formative assessment and critical reflection can facilitate learning and help learners develop a commitment to lifelong learning. On the other hand, insofar as such methods become embedded in many teaching and learning activities the activities themselves can become routinised with only superficial engagement from students (Ecclestone, 2007). One common method to get learners to make an assessment or critical reflection on their own learning and development is through the use of personal development portfolios. The use of reflection upon learning can be a powerful formative assessment process, especially if it has a strong dialogical component, including through discussions with peers, and can highlight not only what was learned but also the nature of the learning process. One outcome of a reflective formative assessment process might be the production of a portfolio that couples 'hard' achievements with development of 'soft' processes that provide examples of experience and achievement. Portfolios can help learners pull their learning together; provide supporting evidence of learning and development; help learning become more shareable, portable and transferable; and provide evidence of the ability to perform effectively in a range of contexts (Brown, forthcoming).

This type of assessment does not have to remain formative, as it should be possible to authenticate any particularly striking examples of experience and achievement through formalising the process, such that it could form the basis of a claim for credit against vocational or academic qualifications at a future date. This type of approach to assessment is primarily, rather than exclusively, formative, with the goal being encouraging learners to engage in further learning and skill development, and the use of mediating artefacts (portfolios; diaries; records; photographs etc.) can encourage active reflection and review. The assessment process thereby adds value to the learning process in recognising the achievements of the learner and the context in which the learning took place. One key aspect of this approach to assessment is that it increases the likelihood that learners would value the process and outcomes of assessment as supportive of their learning and further development (Brown, forthcoming).

Processes of reflection and review can be powerful ways of engaging students and in helping learners establish a clear sense of direction, but they do not sit well with a view of education and training as a series of discrete activities that are completed by passing exams and attestations of competence. Exams are likely to remain important in a number of contexts because of the selection function of education and training, but there seems no reason why competence-based education and training could not be underpinned by a more developmental view of skills development. This change would imply rather than the focus being on individuals being viewed as competent to perform current tasks at a particular level, it would recognise that people could still develop in a number of ways (at a range of 'levels') in order to improve their own performance, contribute to a team or enhance the effectiveness of the organisation.

From this perspective it would be helpful if national policy also stopped thinking in terms of levels as being indicative of some overall level of skills, knowledge and understanding of individuals (as when an individual is regarded as having achieved a Level 3 qualification and only learning for a higher level qualification is recognised as valid, irrespective of context or content) (Brown, forthcoming).

The use of reflection, review and peer assessment and support could help individuals recognise that they need to continue to develop a range of skills and have a broad conception of expertise. This approach also offers, at a societal level, some possibility of moving towards a more knowledge-based society, if coupled with a more expansive view of the nature of skills, knowledge and competence development, which could address issues of transfer of skills, knowledge and experience between different settings; how to support individuals in developing a frame of mind whereby they continually look to improve their own performance through learning and development and to support the learning and development of others; and to recognise that in any organisation a commitment to continuing growth and development of its members is strategically important (Brown, forthcoming).

This broader view could also help deal with a perennial problem: in many occupations the types of knowledge developed through education and work differ, and it is the combination and integration of these different types of knowledge that is often the major challenge. From this perspective processes of formative assessment and critical reflection in the workplace could play a key role in the immediate post-qualifying period by recognising that this is a time in which a great deal of learning takes place and support offered to individuals for their learning and development could have significance for establishing themselves in their career. Formative assessment and critical reflection in FE could therefore be an excellent preparation for subsequent learning and development at work. People early in their careers learn a great deal from challenges at work, and provided that they receive support as required to facilitate processes of formative assessment and critical reflection, then a virtuous circle of confidence, support and challenge can be created (Eraut *et al.*, 2004).

Overall then, the contention is that the way to move towards a more knowledge-based society is for as many people as possible, whatever their supposed highest overall 'level' of skills, knowledge and competence, to believe that they should seek to develop their skills, knowledge and competence at a number of levels (including those below as well as above their current highest 'level'). Additionally, rather than having an essentially binary conception of competence at the heart of the levels, where it has either been reached or not, it would be far more beneficial in inducing an expansive frame of mind to have a developmental view of expertise. Interestingly, this approach has already been adopted by many companies, as when companies distinguish between employees who:

- Are technically able to perform a task but have very limited practical experience of actually doing so;
- have successfully performed the task on a number of occasions;
- have performed the task many times and under a variety of conditions (i.e. experienced worker standard);
- have substantial experience but are also able to support the learning of others (i.e. can perform a coaching or mentoring role);
- could be considered 'world class', those who are able to think through and, if

necessary, bring about changes in the ways that tasks are tackled.

Adopting such an approach in FE would help alignment between education and work, as crucially under this model everyone would expect individuals completing their initial vocational education and training to be still some way from 'experienced worker standard'. This approach could also provide the conditions in which a commitment to continuous improvement could flourish, as not only would most people believe that they needed to develop in a number of ways (at a range of 'levels') in order to improve their performance, but also the 'working coaches' so critical to supporting the learning of others would increasingly be in place (Brown, forthcoming).

In summary, in alignment with moves towards a more knowledge-based society we need to support processes of learning and development by adopting a more expansive view of the nature of skills, knowledge and competence than that enshrined in the current manifestation of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels. This more expansive view will pay particular attention to the need to address issues of transfer of skills, knowledge and experience between different settings; how to support individuals in developing a frame of mind whereby they continually look to improve their own performance through learning and development and to support the learning and development of others; and to recognise that in any organisation a commitment to continuing growth and development of its members is strategically important. In this view vocational education and training (VET) programmes based in FE, including those with a substantive amount of work-related learning, should seek to help individuals move in the direction of the chosen learning outcomes but their achievement should be regarded as partial – the value of VET can probably only be properly judged some time after individuals have been applying their skills, knowledge and experience in work settings over time and ideally across a range of contexts.

Fresh Direction 2: using technology to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning

Advocates of technology enhanced learning (TEL) sometimes approach education from a technicist perspective of how to utilise more fully the innovation potential of information and communication technologies (ICT) in learning systems rather from an educational perspective of how might technology enhance teaching and learning in order to produce learning outcomes that are valued. Those adopting the former perspective often see personalised learning as the 'killer application' for technology enhanced learning, as this goal is so hard to achieve in mass education systems. However, this ignores the fact that much learning has a strong social dimension, whereby quite often an individual might rather study the same topic area as others precisely because it brings access to a peer group and a tutor, even if the topic is of less interest to her or him than another topic that he or she would largely have to study on their own. To achieve the highest ambitions for education and lifelong learning we need to exploit fully what technology offers in support of our goals, but not to set the goals simply to get the maximum use from technology. Overuse of technology might narrow the range of learning outcomes in ways that may be unhelpful for an individual – some large IT employers, for example, prefer to recruit non-specialists with good communication skills as network consultants in preference

to IT specialists on the grounds that it was easier to teach the former IT skills than it was to teach the latter communication skills (Brown, 2009).

So providing there is recognition that personalising learning can be more useful in some contexts than others, then using TEL to personalise learning in order to improve learning outcomes (broadly defined) is an important challenge. Learning outcomes broadly defined should include both the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society, so in order to achieve effective personalisation, we need a more explicit understanding of the nature of learning itself, both formal and informal, and the way it is responding to changes in society and the opportunities created by new technologies (TLRP e-team, 2006). The Association of Learning Technology (ALT) Research Strategy (ALT, 2005) points out the major challenge is 'how do we deliver a personalised experience within a mass system? Unless an educational system is capable of scaling up it will inevitably be too expensive and become moribund as soon as initial enthusiasm wanes. A lot of what currently passes for personalisation is only 'skin deep', and does not really help the learner beyond a psychological feel-good factor. There are two conflicting paradigms: mass education and the user expectation of a personalised learning experience. Research into how technology can continue to help resolve this conflict is required' (ALT 2005, para 18).

So, once the principle is established that we are looking for ways technology can enhance teaching and learning, then other avenues worth exploring could include: how digital technologies can help match the needs, abilities, aspirations, and circumstances of learners and learning communities through personalised technology and services; how technologies can connect learners to networks providing social support in learning processes and enable learners to make informed choices about their own learning and to learn where, when and with whom they want, in ways that suit their approaches to learning and their learning identities; and how to provide learners with easy access to a personal learning environment that offers culturally, educationally and psychologically appropriate tools, resources, and support for their learning; the application of learning strategies and other approaches to learning, user profiling, recommender systems, learner modelling, and personal development planning, to support effective tools and services that are capable of matching individual needs, abilities, interests, dispositions and identities, and of yielding a higher level of personal performance; how to develop ways of networking individuals and groups of learners to achieve new, socially appropriate forms of challenge and support in learning; the use of an understanding of the implications of personalised learning to investigate innovative solutions for new areas of curriculum development, and for new and more challenging forms of assessment (TLRP e-team, 2006).

Education should be about the development of character as well as the intellect; helping individuals develop the emotional, social and intellectual capacities to participate fully in society. If this leads to a sense that we need to reform aspects of our learning systems then this reform should be driven by clear purposes. Reform could be influenced by objectives such as young people feeling connected with the world; engaged with learning; valuing and respecting difference; and wanting to be active citizens. Once we are clearer on educational purposes, then we can look to the pedagogic means to achieve those goals – for example, strategies might be put in place to develop greater resilience (Dweck, 1999); improve informal reasoning (Perkins, 1985); or help individuals develop a wider range of approaches to learning, as these are all things we do not do very well in many current approaches to education. Technology enhanced learning can play a role in this, but it is a second

order issue – being clearer about educational purposes and devising a pedagogy to achieve those goals should be the drivers of innovation in learning systems.

TEL can clearly play a role in the development of FE but that role should be circumscribed rather than being seen as the principal driver of reform. Educational reform that seeks to promote learning that is values driven, pedagogically sound, technologically enhanced and underpinned by research and development looks like a balanced and sustainable approach to educational development. In such a strategy the innovation potential of ICT in order to enhance teaching and learning in FE could be harnessed for a clear purpose rather than as an end in itself.

Example: how to promote technology-enhanced collaborative learning

One example of a clear learning purpose could be to introduce or reinforce for students the value of technology-enhanced collaborative learning for their continuing (vocational) learning and development. The use of social software can enrich collaborative learning and development and one challenge for FE staff may be to engage with these technologies in order to enrich further collaborative learning of themselves and their students. Vocational education and training in FE is engaging with a growing emphasis on the need to support learners in developing the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding that underpin their chosen vocational area and facilitate their ability to continue learning throughout the rest of their lives. In this respect the ability of those learning for and working in a range of developing occupations to access information and engage with the resources available on the web is important, but vital too is the ability to engage with particular communities of work-related interest and participate in the development and use of resources to support occupational practice. Indeed from this perspective what is important is that individuals are able to come together to learn, collaborate and build their work-related knowledge, and social software can play a role in facilitating these outcomes (Brown *et al.*, 2009).

Owen *et al.* (2006) argue that patterns of engagement 'with multiple and overlapping knowledge streams', 'communities of practice' and communities of interest are evolving in ways whereby knowledge combination, reflection and feedback are becoming increasingly significant because of the development and potential of web-based collaborative learning processes. One response within VET has been to consider how to support learners to create and utilise both personalised and collaborative knowledge spaces, where learners can access resources (including people, knowledge and tools) in ways that encourage active, collaborative and reflective learning, and, importantly, extend their learning beyond the boundaries of formal VET. The use of social software to support vocational leaning is already helping learners who might otherwise be rather isolated. Social software, or 'software that supports group interaction', includes discussion forums; social networking; blogs, wikis and social bookmarking. Other web-based tools can also support learning in these contexts, such as syndication systems, that can bring together information in an organised way from a number of sources, and other collaboration tools that facilitate people working together on documents, audio or video material that support collaborative learning. However, an explosion of the resources available brings with it new problems for learners, and FE tutors may need to offer learners support in finding different ways through the mass of material available (Brown *et al.*, 2009). Indeed Brown (1999) argues that key skills now concern information navigation, relating to knowing how to

navigate through confusing and complex information spaces, and the ability to find resources and use these in new ways or in new contexts.

The use of digital technologies, and in particular social software, enables learners to collaborate, reflect, review, create, combine and use knowledge in ways that make sense for them individually and allow for the development of a community of interest with a strong practitioner 'voice'. This series of 'Web 2.0' developments linked to the emergence of tools, resources and practices that are intended to facilitate collaboration and social interaction make it easier to assemble resources of particular personal interest but also facilitate access to other people in the broader community of interest. The software also means it is possible for members of the community to make connections between topics and people in ways that are meaningful to them. Indeed once you have specified the parameters that are of interest to you then appropriate content can be delivered to you, through the use of syndication facilities.

Owen *et al*. (2006) point to how the range of social software is growing and supports tools for multimedia publishing, research and resource collection that allow users to communicate, collaborate and publish in a number of ways, in a variety of media, and act together to build knowledge bases that fit their specific needs. The technological affordances of social software are amplifying both changes in how knowledge is created and organised and the trend to make increasing use of ICT to support learning. While such changes lead to an increasing emphasis within VET on equipping people to learn in a digitally rich environment, it is important also to recognise the importance of trying to achieve a balance between learning content and focusing on process. There will still be the need within VET for structure and a focus on content, not least because the ability to master a substantive knowledge base is itself as an important skill that can transfer between contexts and may be important in gaining access to and progression in employment and/or continuing education and training. Collaborative practitioner-focused work-related learning in networks and communities of interest are transforming continuing professional development, but FE staff with VET expertise can still have an important role in supporting, widening and deepening the learning experience of participants.

Fresh Direction 3: recognise the importance of the social and affective dimension to teaching and learning in Further Education

TLRP research has highlighted the importance of the social and affective dimension to learning in FE and how tutor-student and peer relationships were central to many aspects of learning and development (Nash *et al*., 2008). Coffield (2008) points to how individualist learner-centred rhetoric does scant justice to this evidence-based finding and has produced a powerful argument about the consequences that would flow from an attempt to put teaching and learning at the heart of what happens in FE. Some of the consequences would include the following:

Learning is enriched by tapping into the everyday literacies of students

As participation in FE has widened, the student body has diversified. It now includes more people whose previous experience of education has been discouraging, who regard themselves as academically less able or who have had limited access to the English language. These students are thought to have difficulties with the literacy requirements of courses at all levels. However, these perceived deficits hide skills

that could be used as resources for improving learning. Both students and tutors typically talk of literacy in terms of what students cannot do, and yet in their everyday lives these apparently disadvantaged students use a wide range of literacies to deal with hobbies and interests, culture, shopping, modern technology and the complexities of modern life. Ivanic *et al*. (2007) mapped students' literacy practices and the literacy requirements of their courses and discovered there was an overlap, a set of 'border literacies' that could be harnessed and adapted to help students in their learning and development.

Acknowledge there is an emotional dimension to teaching as well as learning

Teachers with vocational expertise can find that one of the most challenging aspects of teaching in FE concerns personal development in handling emotions; building and sustaining relationships; and the disposition to attend to other perspectives. Jephcote and Salisbury (2007) found that teachers in FE invested heavily in emotional labour as a coping strategy to deal with the pressure and stresses they faced from 'challenging' and 'reluctant' learners. In their dealings with these students and to diffuse difficult classroom situations, teachers displayed tolerance, often feigned amusement and acted in ways which belied their real feelings. The emotional struggles and range of emotions they experienced provided evidence of the complex relationship of teaching and caring: irritation and frustration with students who did not engage through to joy at how individuals responded to encouragement and demonstrated progress. The majority of teachers in FE worked with students well beyond the allotted course timetabled hours and made extensive use of one-on-one teaching within timetabled classes and beyond them. Teachers established nurturing relationships, chased up missing students via texts and phone calls and generally felt that the emotional labour they undertook, although draining, was part of being an FE professional.

The research of Jephcote and Salisbury (2007) also revealed a complex picture of students' 'learning journeys', the interplay between college and their wider lives and how post-compulsory education and training also contributed to the 'wider benefits of learning'. Learning is influenced by social and economic factors beyond the classroom. Students gain more benefits from college life than qualifications, important though these are. Gallacher *et al*. (2007) also point to the significance of social relationships in learning cultures in community-based FE and practices that increase students' re-engagement with learning. The small-scale and informal nature of Community Learning Centres (CLCs) makes them attractive to reluctant learners. Students value their tutors, who treat them more equally and whose style is not didactic or hierarchical, and support staff who can act as key points of contact. Paradoxically, the very success of CLCs raises the issue of progression, because having succeeded in a supportive and informal atmosphere students can find it difficult to progress into more formal situations, such as employment or further courses on the main campus. Learners in CLCs are therefore likely to need additional guidance, mentoring and bridging courses to help them progress.

Increase the scope for professional judgement: tutors need more room to decide 'what works' in further education

Classrooms reflect the surrounding society and each has its own complex set of relationships as part of a learning culture. James and Biesta (2007) argue that, at its best, education builds on these learning cultures to encourage and challenge students to go beyond their existing dispositions and undergo personal change as well as

acquiring knowledge. But such change is rarely recognised by a system in which success is measured by qualifications. Treating education as a simple mechanical process risks diminishing, its transformative power, as teachers and managers need room to manoeuvre and exercise their professional judgement if they are to get the best out of the situation to benefit their students.

Learning cultures in FE derive from the interactions of complex sets of relationships, with students and tutors contributing varying sets of beliefs, attitudes and experiences. They work together in changing groups, in different buildings, within differing institutions, and are affected by different local management policies and by national central policy. Tutors are a key feature of any learning culture. Although many factors are outside their control, they have a central significance in learning. They act as mediators of meaning of courses for students and often work to ameliorate harmful effects on the students of college reorganisations, inflexible assessment systems and funding cuts, and they must cope with the effects of training people for low-status occupations. James and Biesta (2007) argue that the sector needs to be managed on a more flexible basis that allows room for professionals to act according to their own judgement of the local situations, within a set of national principles. These principles are that learning is about more than gaining qualifications; professionals should be able to choose systems and procedures that work together and support each other rather than undermining learning; they should also be able to decide 'what works' for their own situation and not be confined to rigid procedures; there needs to be space for more localised judgment and creativity; and improvement in learning requires critical refection at all levels; government, college, tutor and student.

FE is about exploring possibilities and offering new starts, new directions, and changes of identity. A variety of teaching and learning approaches is essential. Finlay *et al*. (2007) also emphasise that there needs to be fewer constraints upon the scope of teachers to exercise their professional judgement. FE is entrepreneurial, and deals with issues and groups that schools and universities do not tackle, but the audit culture is distorting the priorities of people working in FE. Local community links and second-chance education are being replaced as priorities by cost-effective recruitment, retention and achievement, almost irrespective of the quality of the learning taking place. There is also too much emphasis on assessment, at the expense of real learning. In some vocational areas, the focus on assessment overwhelms curriculum and pedagogy, and an over-emphasis on qualifications acts as an inadequate proxy for learning. This thinking centres on the completion of 'units' and not on the course as a whole, nor on progression (Ecclestone, 2007).

More recently, the problems associated with targets and the audit culture have been recognised by policy makers, yet considerable changes are still needed to give tutors the intellectual space, capacity and freedom to do a wider job of educating the whole person. Finlay *et al*. (2007) point to a limited understanding of learning by government agencies and policy makers, who often see it simply as a process of acquisition of knowledge and skills. This narrow approach does not link with our knowledge of effective pedagogy nor to the idea that learners are often engaged in a process of constructing identities for learning and work. The question is whether FE is about acquiring knowledge and skills alone, or is also about learning which changes the learner by engaging them in the process. From this perspective, FE is about learning how to become a learner and how to develop an identity across education,

training and employment. It is about learners changing aspects of their lives and also the way they relate to the world.

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