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Universal Teacher Education for the FE Sector: Whatever next?

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Introduction

The Further Education Development Agency's 'occupational and functional mapping' of the further education sector is drawing to a close. At some point recommendations will be made to the Department for Education and Employment, and Ministers will decide whether a lead body should be set up to devise NVQ qualifications for the sector. Ministers and their advisers have more than once indicated that, depending on the progress that is made in FE, similar processes could follow in respect of higher education teaching and even in other sectors such as primary and secondary teaching. In this paper I wish to give brief consideration to the context in which this initiative has come about. I will also make some connections with debates about models of professional development and the implications of concepts of competence for the assessment of learning outcomes in professional education (1).

FE teacher education in context

It is helpful to begin by comparing the education and training of teachers in the Further Education sector with other sectors of education. The practices of initial training of primary and secondary school teachers are both highly regulated and subject to radical centralised change, yet the principle of such training is almost universally accepted. As a complete contrast to this, consider for a moment the situation in higher education, where the initial training of teachers is still a marginal - perhaps marginalised - issue. Of all the many organisations with relevant interests, it is only the National Union of Students that has called for the universal training of university teachers. There is no doubt that systems of quality assessment and (especially) audit are promoting growth in this area, as are various bodies with an interest in educational technology and development (such as the Staff and Educational Development Association). As yet, and despite some very worthwhile exceptions, the construction of a wider framework of accreditation remains the province of enthusiasts, most of them in the 'new' universities.

Further education sits, Cinderella-like, between these two sisters. Approximately 60% of FE teachers hold a teaching qualification (Young *et al* 1995). Amongst new recruits this drops to about 50%. A system of FE teacher education is in place, but it is not rooted in any mandatory requirements like the Qualified Teacher Status of the school sector (and, until recently, sixth form colleges). A system of government sponsorship, via local authority awards, has enabled many FE teachers to become qualified: however, this has never amounted to more than an enabling device. The result is that both provision and uptake have been able to grow unevenly.

This uneven-ness has been a problem for the FE sector for some years, but it may be about to take on a new significance. It now appears that it is being used to justify the introduction of a different structure and philosophy of FE teacher training which, based on the National Vocational Qualifications framework, offers a degree of uniformity. Civil servants have made it absolutely clear that in the government's view, current qualifications are not sufficiently `relevant' or enabling for the Further Education Funding Council in meeting its obligations to promote quality. What is less clear is whether this view is based on any evaluation of the *content* of existing courses, or whether it rests on the argument about *numbers* (ie that existing arrangements have failed to reach almost half of the FE teaching workforce). Given the nature of debates about assessment in other professional fields, we might suspect that ideological disagreements about content are being smuggled in behind objections about numbers and proportions. Whether or not this is the case, the present arrangements for FE teacher education have never had the opportunity to deliver the outcomes now held out as desirable. This is hardly an argument for dispensing with them.

The uneven-ness of provision and uptake mentioned above has produced a number of other problems which do suggest a need for reform. The first of these is the *variety* within the qualifications held by FE teachers, and the second relates to the variety of *meanings* these qualifications have in different parts of the sector.

In addition to the DFEE-recognised Certificate in Education (FE) (hereafter CFE), there is the Further and Adult Education Teachers' Certificate (FAETC). The CFE has long ago lost its equivalence to the school-teaching qualification of the same name, and is an academic qualification with a strong practice-based element, whilst the FAETC is a skills-oriented practice-based qualification with some theoretical elements. Both commonly embrace a reflective practice philosophy of some kind. There is an older version of the FAETC (City and Guilds 7307) and a newer version (7306) which is usually achieved in tandem with D32 and D33 certificates. The FAETC and the CFE differ greatly in terms of the nature, breadth and depth of the curriculum involved. Many regard the CFE as the vehicle for an *extended* professionalism. Both have a number of equivalents, and in the case of the CFE, a number of recent derivatives assessed at various CATS levels. The CFE may be gained through one year of full-time study, or (traditionally) two years of part-time study on day release, or (increasingly) through modular programmes involving mixed modes, particularly evenings and directed study. A large proportion of `initial' CFEs are gained through `in-service' study.

In relation to `meanings', different Local Education Authorities devised and realised their own priorities. Some emulated the school-based system by instituting a probationary year and associated mentoring and assessment. In many the CFE would lead to a salary increment. In some colleges the CFE was effectively a precondition for promotion to course management responsibilities, though recently more dedicated management qualifications have gained in popularity. In many colleges the FAETC functions as an unofficial mechanism for the recruitment of part-time employees or as a filter for those wishing to be considered for full-time posts, offering as it does a back-door opportunity to assess the development of teaching skills and professional commitment. There are considerable personal costs involved for individual candidates in addition to the course fees they have often paid

themselves. Part time teaching-for-free is very common amongst students on both FAETC and CFE courses, and can put inexperienced staff in the somewhat ironic position of demonstrating their potential as professional educators by showing that they are willing to suffer a spell of gross exploitation.

This variety of meanings is unlikely to diminish given the greater autonomy of FE colleges following their April 1993 incorporation. Before incorporation in some areas, LEAs and Regional Advisory Councils were instrumental in persuading FE colleges to see the two parts of the FAETC as joined together with the CFE to make a three-stage model with more or less coherence, and the University of the West of England is amongst many who reconstructed CFE programmes to allow a later entry-point for holders of the FAETC or its equivalent. However, the situation is changing. Most FE employers are likely to find the promise of a lead body and sector-specific NVQs highly attractive, not least because it appears to promise an increase in local control of their staff development using a known framework and a now-familiar technology. There are a number of possible consequences.

The first is that after a long period of disputes in the FE sector, the introduction of sector-specific NVQs might be seen by staff as a further opportunity for the restructuring of the FE teachers' role in circumstances which favour an employer's perspective. Secondly, the redefinition of the FE teacher's role as amounting to an *occupation* rather than a *profession* carries with it a certain denial of autonomy, and recognises the fragmentation of tasks which can be seen in any FE college: many FE teachers now specialise in guidance, IT-based learning, distance learning and so on. Thirdly, the introduction of NVQs will give further credence (albeit spurious) to the view that the pre-existing 'patchy' arrangements were a problem of inadequate provision rather than a problem of a neglect of the sector at the highest level of policy and resources. It is only recently that central government has 'discovered' FE. A fourth possible consequence is a major threat to HE providers of FE teacher education, who may or may not be invited to participate in training endeavours within and between colleges of FE. Do they line themselves up to provide NVQs? Do they counter-attack by marketing the benefits of courses which make the complexity of FE teaching and the professional knowledge entailed a central concern, in the hope that some individual teachers (and perhaps some FE college managements) continue to be persuaded? Do they try to incorporate NVQs within their existing tried and tested models of professional development, much as has happened with sets of competences in the initial training of school teachers? This latter route may not be an option if current developments lead to a new basic qualification for FE teachers which the colleges themselves feel they can comfortably provide in-house, perhaps by readjusting existing FAETC provision.

These are difficult questions, yet they have to be considered by anyone with an interest in the initial and continuing professional development of FE teachers. It is most certainly a time to oppose the reductionism inherent in some of the ideas being put forward. However, it is also a time to be constructive in preparing the ground for how we might wish to work in the future, should a series of sector-specific NVQs come to be introduced. This requires, amongst other things, a consideration of models of professional development and a closer look at the relationship between professional knowledge and learning outcomes.

Models of professional development

Models of professional development are intimately related to definitions of what it is to be a professional. Although there is not the space to go through these here, we might note that the early (functionalist) sociological work listed attributes thought to be common to professions, and that one of these was invariably the application of a specialist body of knowledge to new situations. Later work informed by marxian sociology which saw professions as an occupational (market) strategy (which certain occupations, like medicine, had been able to exploit with great success) also emphasised the role of a specialised body of knowledge in the control of the supply of licensed practitioners.

Both the way in which the specialist body of knowledge is acquired and who controls it are issues at the heart of the various models of professional development that have been suggested. Bines and Watson (1992) propose three models to account for what they see as a broadly historical sweep of change in professional education. The first, called the 'pre-technocratic' or 'apprenticeship' model is described thus:

Professional education takes place largely on the job but some instruction may be given through block and/or day release in an associated training school or institute of further or higher education. The curriculum largely comprises the acquisition of 'cookbook' knowledge embodied in practice manuals and the mastery of practical routines...This is...characterized by a tight and instrumental focus on professional requirements and competences which are not seen as problematic. Such specifications are largely externally determined... (Bines and Watson, 1992, p. 12).

However, a second model which they term the 'technocratic' model is the one that has come to dominate in recent years:

It is characterised by the division of professional education into three main elements. The first comprises the development and transmission of a systematic knowledge base, largely, though not exclusively, based on contributing academic disciplines...The second involves the interpretation and application of the knowledge base to practice, including coverage of the range of professional activities and their contexts, problem-solving principles and processes and socialization into particular values and behaviours...The third element is the supervised practice in selected placements...curriculum content and delivery are largely the responsibility of course providers (*ibid* pp. 12-13).

There are many criticisms of this model, not least of which is about the potential it seems to offer for variety in standards and the way it has sometimes marginalised or lowered the status of the practice element. However, the most damaging criticism is to do with *the model of professional knowledge* embodied within it. As Schon's work has shown, the model is based on a technical rationality which is not in keeping with the nature of professional knowledge and action and which, in its emphasis on theory-into-practice, fails to capture the 'artistry' of practice or the 'knowledge-in-action' which is fundamental to successful professional work. Schon (1987) proposes that professional education should therefore be organised around a 'practicum'.

Criticisms such as these have, according to Bines and Watson, contributed to the beginnings of a third model, which they call 'post-technocratic'. In this model there is an

emphasis on the acquisition of professional competences. Such competences are primarily developed through experience of practice and reflection on practice in a practicum within which students have access to skilled practitioners who act as coaches. Such a practicum may be institution- or employment-based (or both) and provides a bridge between the academic institution and the world of practice and between professional education and subsequent employment (*ibid* p. 16).

Whilst I find their summary of the criticisms of the 'technocratic' model convincing, I think that Bines and Watson rely too heavily on the ambiguity in the term 'competence' in this outline of a third model. Does it mean the successful performance of tightly specified tasks, or does it include the development of professional values and qualities or capabilities in relation to the myriad of novel situations requiring the solving of problems in which the 'competent professional' will need to function effectively? The NCVQ grip on the term 'competence', even though it is ill-defined (Ashworth and Saxton, 1990), puts the onus on others to be quite specific about what they mean when they use it.

But how does FE teacher education look if we hold it up against these three models? Perhaps the one-year full time courses look a little like the second model, with elements of the third being incorporated under the influence of pedagogical reasoning around reflection and experiential learning. But what of the large numbers of initial-as-in-service courses? Here students (often by definition) work in further-, adult-, higher-, nurse- or other educational settings, and are required to scrutinise, reflect upon, experiment with and generally interrogate their everyday work experiences in the light of new conceptual tools or comparisons shared with fellow students. The practicum is central in this, and educationally speaking it becomes the source of raw material *and* the setting for testing and refining new knowledge-in-action. Initial-as-in-service courses are already 'post-technocratic'.

Professional knowledge and learning outcomes

Two assertions appear with monotonous regularity in support of the NVQ style of competence-based assessment. One is that it fosters equality of opportunity by breaking with the 'time-serving' character of many precursor qualifications and by accrediting prior achievements. The other is that as a framework for assessment, NVQs are not about the content and processes of the *curriculum* leading towards assessment. Both assertions are highly questionable, but here I want to focus on the second.

In research about higher education it is increasingly acknowledged that the nature of assessed work is a dominant influence on what students learn and how they learn it (eg Brown and Knight, 1994, p. 12; Employment Department, 1993, pp. 56 and 61; Ramsden, 1992). Both the form and content of assessment do a great deal to shape the curriculum. To say that the assessment tail wags the curriculum dog is probably an understatement: assessment is itself the dog! Assessment is also a *political* issue

at several levels - clearly so in relation to governments and their quangos, but also at the level of the course and the classroom. It is shot through with power relations, and practices of assessment reveal much about the relationships between students and educational institutions (see Boud, 1990; Heron, 1988). To put this another way, a redefinition of the assessment of professional knowledge is a redefinition of the curriculum and of professional work itself.

Hyland has shown how the notions of competence now in widespread use are completely inadequate for the task of assessing the development and acquisition of professional *expertise* (Hyland, 1992; 1994a; 1994b). Hyland cites the work of Chi *et al*, which having drawn on empirical studies of the work of experts in a number of different fields, concluded that experts tended to have common characteristics. They tended

to excel in their own domains, had access to a body of systematically organised specialist knowledge, spent a lot of time analyzing problems qualitatively and displayed strong self-monitoring skills. All of these characteristics need to be connected with the key qualities of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1987) so that professionals may avoid lapsing into the static role of the 'infallible expert' and instead maintain a commitment to the 'continuing reconstruction of...what constitutes relevant and useable knowledge' for 'shared reflection and dialogue with clients' (Elliot, 1991, p. 312). (Hyland, 1994a, pp. 11-12).

Other work has examined FE teacher education in relation to the Training and Development Lead Body standards and shown, just as convincingly, that these do not capture very much of the process of preparing effective professionals (Chown and Last, 1993). However, this current incompatibility should not lead us to the conclusion that there is no place in professional education for the measurement of learning outcomes, or that we cannot call some of them 'competences'. For this reason I want to outline three sets of ideas about the relationship between professional knowledge and competence in assessment before drawing to a close.

The first is from Michael Eraut, whose discussions of the assessment of competence have been perhaps the most illuminating. His term 'performance period' (Eraut, 1990) refers to a proposal for an activity which is required to compliment the now familiar measurement of performance within categories derived from functional task analysis. The assumption here is that to assess the use of knowledge in the performance of a task requires much more than observing performance. It requires insight into how the performer copes with and decides between a series of competing demands; the use of previous experience in deciding between options; and the continual monitoring and modifying which accompanies 'doing'. For Eraut it is the

thinking element in performance, and the more demanding the situation, the more important such thinking becomes, in spite of the greater pressure on thinking time; and the more crucial it is for performers to be aware of their own role and their principal function in the situation (*ibid* pp. 23-25).

We might put it crudely that even the making of a cake requires a great deal more than cookbook knowledge! Eraut goes on to suggest the means whereby such

knowledge can be assessed. Needless to say, this requires something of a departure from the 'fundamentalist' position adopted by Mansfield in the same collection, or more assertively, by Jessup with his insistence that 'there is no justification for assessing knowledge for its own sake but only for its contribution to competent performance' (Jessup, 1991, p. 123).

Secondly, in the field of primary teacher education, Hayes and Hadfield (1994) have examined the scope for 'rapprochement' between what they call the 'competencies camp' and the 'reflective practitioner' camp. This rests on the use of competencies 'naturalistically' as an aid to reflection by focusing on events in teaching. Competencies become a 'linguistic tool which can change the language of reflective dialogue' rather like Habermas' description of Freudian psychoanalysis as a 'critical theorem' (p. 6). A number of constraints are discussed, but it seems to me that the sticking-point is that the authors imply that it requires only an effort of will to shake off the power of assessment to define curriculum:

To carry out this rapprochement one basic assumption both camps have to agree on is that it at least partially holds true: *That competencies are only a description of desired outcomes - they do not specify a particular form of teaching or assessment* (Hayes and Hadfield, 1994: p5. Emphasis in original).

Thirdly, Michael Eraut's more recent publication addresses the nature of professional knowledge in the light of a considerable volume of research. Of immediate interest here is his discussion of the notion of *capability*. This concept has both present and future-oriented connotations, important if we want to maintain a professional *education* which prepares people to habitually reflect, update, experiment, grow, work in teams, critically assess their situation and so on. Eraut argues that there are three good reasons for the systematic gathering of evidence about capability as well as about performance. In the first place it ought to complement and strengthen performance evidence. Secondly, there are situations in which it is more practicable to gather capability evidence than performance evidence. Thirdly (and in my view, most importantly) capability evidence

...may provide some assurance that candidates have sufficient conceptual, perceptual and ethical knowledge to continue to learn, to grow professionally and to respond flexibly to future, yet unforeseen, challenges and circumstances (Eraut, 1994, pp. 210-11)

Conclusions

If uneven-ness in the use of existing arrangements for FE teacher education is used as a justification to sweep these arrangements aside, and new NVQ qualifications come to be regarded as both necessary and sufficient for the preparation of FE teachers, then what follows is a redefinition of their work which undervalues the 'thinking element in performance'. Whilst this is a problem at all levels in the NVQ framework, it is magnified in the case of professional workers for whom knowledge is always more than 'underpinning'.

The Post-16 Committee of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers has recently made clear its opposition to the narrow conception of learning outcomes embodied in NVQ-style competences. Whilst we might wish to welcome with open arms the prospect of a universally certified-as-competent FE teaching force, it is well worth considering the price we are prepared to pay to achieve it, since what seems to be at stake is the definition of professional knowledge itself.

Note

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