
Introduction

Rob Peutrell explains the background to *three articles arising from the PSE online discussion, held in April.*

The relationship between teacher professionalism, professional learning and workplace struggle is a crucial one across the whole of post-16 education, although there are differences in how management encroachment into teacher and academic professionalism are experienced in different sectors. The three articles that follow address this important topic. The articles by Janet Farrar and Howard Stevenson are versions edited by their authors of contributions they made to a *PSE* Zoom meeting on Teacher Professionalism and Workplace Activism in April 2021. In their detail, these articles address the situation of teachers in FE and sixth form colleges rather than HE. In these sectors, where teachers lack the protections of even residual academic freedom, managerial control reaches far beyond the aims, content, hours and siting of programmes to methodology and classroom organisation, and even to the minutiae of teachers' work, such as documentation. Janet and Howard make the case powerfully that we need to understand teacher professionalism, professional learning (or CPD) and pedagogy as 'sites of struggle', and legitimate, urgent issues for workplace activists and union branches. Of course, the argument

here is not specific to any particular post-16 sector. The third article, by Jane Lethbridge, picks up on a key theme from the Zoom discussion: what examples are there of trade unions organising around professional learning, and how can these interventions help nurture a different kind of democratic professional identity? As Jane shows, the problem of professional control is not unique to education, and we can learn from workers in other sectors, including social care, where professionalism is also a vital workplace issue.

There are many questions arising from the discussion. *PSE* has, for instance, published articles in previous issues on the co-option of teacher professionalism by the former Institute for Learning, whose top-down, undemocratic model of 'professional representation' continues today in the ETF-run Society for Education and Training. The crucial challenge, however, is how teachers can make their professionalism and pedagogic practice live organising issues and create a bottom-up, democratic practice of activist professional reclamation. As these articles show, this is fundamentally a matter of job control and collective autonomy.

We welcome your thoughts and experiences.

Professionalism and pedagogy are organising issues

Janet Farrar

Let me give a little bit of context about my relationship with FE. I went to an FE college as a student at 16 to do my A-levels, and eventually went back to work in that same college. I decided to train as a teacher at 27 through a university but operating in the same college I'd studied at. I've been working in FE as a lecturer for a decade now. At my previous college, I mostly taught French and German A-levels, with some GCSE and Functional Skills English. I now teach trade union education at a different FE college. I hope I have

a useful dual perspective - as a practitioner and as a union activist with a long association with FE.

What it means to be a professional educator is such an important topic and not something we discuss often enough. I've only been teaching for ten years, and the way that we work now in FE is pretty much the only way that I've ever known it as a teacher. But even I've seen it get worse during my time in the sector. Lecturer workloads are becoming completely unmanageable. Teaching is becoming an admin job

with constant demands for data and targets, and a sea of emails. Planning lessons and engaging with pedagogical theory are the last tasks on a bottomless list of things we have to do. I don't think I need to tell the people in this discussion that the focus is all wrong.

I think we know why it happened. Incorporation brought in a seemingly irreversible marketisation of education. And when you run a college, or any other educational institution, as a business, micromanagement and constant, Kafkaesque target-setting are bound to follow.

One of the worst examples of this for me is the mandatory, corporate, so-called continuous professional development. The mention of CPD will undoubtedly spark an eye roll in any FE lecturer. It's not because lecturers don't want to continuously, professionally develop. Find me a practitioner who doesn't want the time and space to reflect and improve their practice and learn new approaches. Of course they do. But the CPD I've experienced over the last decade has been 90 per cent generic, corporate presentations of the latest teaching and learning fads that you're expected to shoehorn into your classroom. Of course, this won't professionally develop anyone. It switches people off. And that's without the so-called consultants or motivational speakers who are paid thousands of pounds to deliver 30-minute keynotes at all-singing, all-dancing teaching and learning conferences in hotel function rooms in which they talk about their inspiring career as a pilot or whatever and expect us to insert our own educational meaning into their tenuously metaphorical narratives.

Let me move into my experience as a trade union activist and how this links into issues of professionalism. I want members and reps from our movement to see organising opportunities in these curriculum-based, pedagogical issues. Practitioners spending their valuable time transferring one set of data to yet another spreadsheet or filling in a meaningless electronic mark-book are collective, workplace issues and should be recognised as such.

And of course there is the important adage: 'our teaching conditions are our students' learning conditions'. When lecturers and support staff are completely burnt out, the student experience has to be negatively impacted. Students are often in a much better place to organise than we are, with access to social media and the knowledge of how to maximise its potential. There is a lot we could learn from them and from the community organising happening all around us. The more we can work together as a broad collective to recognise and tackle this reality, the more chance we have of developing a meaningful and productive education system.

But one of the reasons people aren't putting together pedagogical issues and everyday organising is workload. We're right to talk about the excitement

of what we do day-to-day and the joy of activism, but the reality is that people are having their energy sapped. As activists and reps, our time is mostly taken up by individual casework. Getting around and engaging with members (and non-members) about what issues matter to them goes to the bottom of the list. Equally, colleges are reliant on goodwill; we should view teaching as a vocation, not done for the money, so therefore it's OK if the employers suck you dry. You're doing it for the love of it, after all . . . But what gets us through are the relationships we form with other staff, other activists and with students. If we can attack the way our work is controlled and structured that would release our energy and creative collaboration in so many ways.

Hopefully, we can use this space, and others like it, to start conversations about how we build the movement using professional and pedagogical issues as a way to engage with new members and activists. The challenge for us is how we get activists and potential union members involved in these discussions. How do we create opportunities for ground-up teacher-led discussion about pedagogy? One thing we have to do is make a determined effort to ensure that people doing the work on the ground are actually involved in the discussion; that they're not just being talked at by experts and consultants.

One way we can create more spaces is through the UCU CPD programme, a space where members with no activist experience can access discussions about pedagogy. Before lockdown, I went to a UCU CPD event about assessment. There is so much more being developed and piloted on lots of different aspects of teaching and learning. A whole bunch of UCU members were talking about pedagogical issues, just like we are now.

In UCU, we have an army of people ready to go into battle over these issues and a raft of knowledge and experience that we can tap into, to both build the union and empower our members. Talking to people is a simple and obvious starting point. What are teachers' most pressing workplace issues? We know that time and space to think, reflect and develop is one; the weight of corporate demands is another. And how do the issues of support staff fit in with these? Empowered support staff are essential to creating the kind of educational institutions we want to see.

We need people to start talking about these issues and how to address them as a collective before they leave the sector in frustration.

